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### **Citation**

Adebanwi, W. (2007). Necrophilia and elite politics: the case of Nigeria. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/11561>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Leiden, The Netherlands

# **Necrophilia and Elite Politics: The Case of Nigeria**

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ASC Working Paper 71 / 2007

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## Abstract

This work examines the political instrumentalization of culture and history as embodied in a ‘Big Man’, an Ur-agent that over-represents the cultural whole. I examine how the elites within a specific ethno-cultural group represent and re-present themselves as agents, using the specific instance of the ‘Cult of Awo (Obafemi Awolowo)’, the late politician regarded as the modern ‘avatar’ of the Yoruba. It focuses primarily on how the burial and the statue of the late leader were used to emphasize his centrality in Yoruba politics, by exploring ‘the form and meaning of the aura around a dead’ hero. The work examines the monumentalization of Awo, how his life and death are interpreted, and used to articulate Yoruba collective political vision and future - both materially and symbolically. While the death of Awo in 1987 provided a platform for a struggle by the elite associated with him to project themselves in his image as worthy successors – thereby creating internal struggles for supremacy – the controversy surrounding the destruction of his statue in 2003, happening at a point when those opposed to Awo were canvassing the ‘end of (the Awo) era’, also provides a context for examining the agency of Awo, in material and symbolic terms, in Yoruba politics.

### *End of an Era?*

*I owe a longer allegiance to the dead than to the living: in that world I shall abide for ever*

– Antigone (*Antigone*, Sophocles)

In April 2003, what some saw as a major political ‘transformation’, was witnessed in the west of Nigeria, home to more than 30 million Yoruba. The political party and the socio-cultural and political group, Alliance for Democracy/*Afenifere*<sup>1</sup>, associated with the late leader of the Yoruba and nationalist politician, Chief Obafemi Awolowo (popularly called Awo), and his followers - a political persuasion that has more or less dominated Yoruba politics for about 50 years - was routed in the general elections. Five of the six Alliance for Democracy (AD) incumbent governors were defeated by the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), a party which, even though its presidential candidate, Olusegun Obasanjo, was Yoruba, was associated more with the

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the socio-cultural and political caucus-group, *Afenifere*, was coined as a Yoruba translation of the motto of the political party formed by members of the group in the 1950s: “life more abundant for all”. It translates to “one who loves good for all”.

conservative (Hausa-Fulani) power elite of the north of Nigeria – who members of the dominant, ‘mainstream’ Yoruba power elite have always opposed. Respected essayist and university professor, Adebayo Williams (2004), captured the ‘loss of Awo’s patrimony’ and the turn of events in Yorubaland thus:

It may seem like yesterday but it is already half a century ago that Chief Awolowo embarked on his seminal, trail-blazing tenure as the premier of the old western region. The momentum so generated by this, in combination with other historical factors, carried the Yoruba nation forward through strife and stress, through tragedy and triumph for the next 45 years, all culminating in the historic elections of 1999. Yet five years after, the victors appear to have been transformed into the vanquished.

Another newspaper columnist averred that the victory of the PDP represented the dethroning of the ‘unquestioned kings of Yoruba politics, inheritors of the Awolowo mantle, the oracles that every wise politician in the South west had to make regular sacrifices’:<sup>2</sup>

AD has been decimated in the Yoruba (states) and Afenifere, the conclave of elders that exercises more control over its affairs than its elected executives, has suddenly lost the initiative in South West politics<sup>3</sup>

On 27 May, 2003, two days before the swearing-in of the new PDP governor in the Yoruba state of Oyo, the defeated, out-going AD-Afenifere governor, Lam Adesina, unveiled the statue of the remarkable Awolowo - with his two fingers raised and parted in the famous ‘victory’ sign - which was erected in the gardens outside of the Government House in Ibadan, the political capital of the Yoruba nation. However, in the night of the swearing-in of the new PDP governor, Rasheed Ladoja, on May 29, the 12 foot statue, weighing 13, 000 kilograms (13 tons), and one which, weight by weight with an Egyptian statue, was estimated to cost £150, 000:00<sup>4</sup>, was destroyed.

An interesting political controversy was raised in the aftermath of this attempt to *dramatize* the end of the hegemony of ‘Awoism’<sup>5</sup> in Yoruba politics and the ‘transformation’ of Yoruba

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Adebayo Faleti, ‘The Making of Awo’s Statue’, *Nigerian Tribune*, 2 July, 2003: 12.

<sup>5</sup> This was the name for the political philosophy and corpus of ideas propounded by Obafemi Awolowo. See, Akin Omoboriowo, *Awoism: Select Themes on the Complex Ideology of Chief Obafemi Awolowo*, Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 1982. Awo’s ardent followers see this as best possible ‘ism’. Argues one: ‘Within scientific analysis, Awo

politics. The destruction of the statue of the man – who, to use Michael Herzfeld (2002:232) phrase, has gained a ‘toehold in eternity’ among the Yoruba – who died sixteen years earlier, was described as ‘heinous’<sup>6</sup> and ‘a sacrilege’.<sup>7</sup> Accusations and counter-accusations were traded. President Olusegun Obasanjo reportedly expressed anger at the demolition<sup>8</sup>, while the new governor declared ‘war’ on the destroyers of the statue of the late oracular leader.<sup>9</sup> National deputy leader of the PDP, himself a Yoruba, Olabode George, predicted that Oduduwa (the mythical progenitor of the Yoruba) would punish the destroyers of the statue.<sup>10</sup> An Ibadan-based newspaper owned by the Awo family, *Nigerian Tribune*, reported a few weeks later, first, that the leader of the demolition team was down with a ‘strange ailment’<sup>11</sup> and then, that he had died<sup>12</sup>, ostensibly for committing a ‘sacrilege’ – against a ‘god’<sup>13</sup> as Awo is regarded. George’s statement was however, at least symbolically, contrary to his own assertion later that the routing of ‘Awo’s party’ and lieutenants by the PDP was a victory that forced the Yoruba into the

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symbolized a harmony between thought and action, an almost flawless harmony, the depth of which may be difficult for imbeciles to comprehend’. For further elaboration of ‘Awoism’, see, Femi Ade Ogbontiba, *Nigeria: The Awolowo Factor*, Lagos: Delafare Nigeria Ltd., 1994, pp. 81-82.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> ‘Obasanjo angry over Awo’s Statue... Demolition a sacrilege – *Afenifere*’, *Nigerian Tribune*, 8, June 2003:1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> ‘Ladoja declares war on destroyers of Awo’s statue’, *Sunday Tribune*, 1 June 2003: 5.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Oduduwa’ll punish destroyers of Awo’s statue – Bode George’, *Nigerian Tribune*, 2 July 2003: 1.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Awo Statue: Demolition leader down with strange ailment’, *Nigerian Tribune*, 1 August 2003: 1. The paper further reports that ‘investigations revealed that the gang leader was attacked by a terminal illness shortly after the demolition of the statue of the sage (Awolowo).’

<sup>12</sup> The paper elaborates that ‘Before his death, (Lai) Ajakaye was taken to numerous spiritualists home (sic) by family members who had become jittery that he might not survive the strange ailment.... (I)nvestigations revealed that though Lai was warned before he got involved in the act of demolishing the statue of the sage, he still allowed himself to be used.’ ‘Awo’s Statue: Demolition Leader Dies’, *Nigerian Tribune*, 25 August, 2003: 6. However, the same paper was later to reveal that the dead man had nothing to do with the act, as those two of those who carried out the act confessed in interviews with the paper. They indicated that they were acting on the orders of the man called ‘the strong man of Ibadan politics’ who after being a political thug of Awo’s party in the 1950s, later fell out with Awo. ‘The day we destroyed Awo’s statue’, *Nigerian Tribune*, 27 July 2004; ‘Awo’s Statue destroyers’ leader opens up’, *Nigerian Tribune*, 30 July 2004.

<sup>13</sup> The late popular Yoruba dramatist, Hubert Ogunde, in one of his many songs in praise of Awolowo, sang that, ‘There is no god/oracle like Ogun (the Yoruba god of Iron) at the smith; there is no god/oracle like the fish in the waters; a god/oracle like you, Awolowo, does not exist among the Yoruba’. The Kaduna-based pro-Hausa-Fulani, virulently anti-Yoruba periodical, *Hotline*, attests to this: ‘Granted that some of Awo’s followers have virtually elevated him to the rank of a “god”, his enemies have also never ceased to blame him for everything that went wrong – from power failures and food shortages to draught and coup attempts’. Sanusi Abubakar, ‘Past Leaders, Future Challenges’ (cover story), *Hotline*, July 15, 1987, p. 8. Anti-Awo elements, groups and institutions are also often eager to denounce and attack his ‘saintly’ status. For instance, Yakubu Abdulazeez writes in the *Hotline*, ‘There is no doubting the command followership (sic) over the vast majority of Yorubas that Chief Awolowo had in his lifetime (was) consolidated at his death... But he is no god. The time and place are just not right for Jesus’ second coming’. ‘Chief Awolowo: Neither a Satan Nor a Saint’ (cover story), *Hotline*, July 15, 1987, pp. 16 & 17.

‘mainstream’ of Nigerian politics from which they had been excluded by the dominant (Awo-centred) Yoruba power elite.<sup>14</sup> Marshall Sahlins instructs that an event is not simply a phenomenal happening outside of the given symbolic scheme (Sahlins, 1985: xiv); an event *is* its interpretation, in that ‘only as it is appropriated in and through the cultural scheme does it acquire an historical *significance* (*Ibid*, italics in original). As Jeffrey (1980: 484) suggests, social scientists can wring a good deal of significance from political statues and the circumstances in which they are raised and destroyed. Anthropological approach to the study of the elite involves the analysis of the language and practices through which the elites represent themselves and are represented and the techniques they use to legitimise their position (Shore, 2002: 13). One of the ways in which the elite maintain power and authority over the present is by, to use Herzfeld’s (2000: 234) words, ‘monumentalizing the past’ (Shore, 2002: 13).

### Signifying Awo

Obafemi Awolowo (1909-1987) was no doubt a political colossus in Yorubaland in particular and Nigeria in general, and one of the great nationalists in Africa’s colonial and post-colonial history. Many words and phrases have been used to capture what is assumed to be his essential greatness: ‘Titan’, ‘Legend’, ‘Sage’, ‘Colossus’, ‘Awo, the Great’, ‘Mystic’, ‘Patriarch’, ‘Papa’, ‘Immortal Awo’, ‘Nigeria’s Man of the 29<sup>th</sup> Century’, even the blasphemous, ‘Eternal Spirit’<sup>15</sup>, etc. Indeed, he was such an unusually capable administrator in Africa’s unenviable history that former British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, said during Awo’s life time that he (Awo), ‘could lead the United States or Britain; he came too soon for Nigeria’.<sup>16</sup> Awo has been described by admirers as ‘Jesus Christ of our Time’<sup>17</sup>, who ‘during his lifetime...was treated by friends and foe alike with the kind of fear reserved for deities’,<sup>18</sup> and one who, even in death – though he

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<sup>14</sup> Said one the leaders of PDP in Yoruba land, ‘I want to tell you that this is the first time in the historical development of Nigeria when the Yoruba will be in the mainstream politics and voted en-masse for the party at the centre, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)... (W)ith the winning of the PDP in the South-west, the zone has moved to mainstream politics...the idea of staying out from the national politics over a period of years has not brought any positive development to the zone.’ ‘Mainstreaming Perfidy’, (‘Home-Away’), *Sunday Tribune*, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Remembering The Sage’, ‘Polity’, *Sunday Tribune*, March 10, 1996: 5.

<sup>16</sup> ‘He lived Long Enough, But...’ (cover story) *African Concord*, 26 May 1987, p. 22. See also, Odia Ofeimun, ‘Nigeria’s Man of the Century’, *People in The News*, ??, p. 120.

<sup>17</sup> Awo was so described by a traditional ruler. ‘Jesus Christ of our time – Elejigbo’, *Nigerian Tribune*, May 12 1987, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> SOURCE: The mercurial and politically astute Babangida had called the Secretary to the Federal Government,

would reincarnate<sup>19</sup> - would continue to 'fight for (the) masses in Heaven'.<sup>20</sup> General Ibrahim Babangida, the military president, in his message to Awolowo on his 77<sup>th</sup> birthday, which was his last but one, attested to Awo's centrality in Nigerian politics and history. Stated Babangida: 'It can be truly said that Chief Obafemi Awolowo has been the main issue in Nigerian politics during the last 35 years: The main political question has been whether you are with Chief Awolowo or against him'.<sup>21</sup> As former national deputy chairman of Awo's UPN, said, the man was 'the most practical and hardworking leader Nigeria ever had', a man who was 'incomprehensible – simply...too much!'<sup>22</sup>

Odia Ofeimun (1995: 14), Awo's former private secretary and poet, argues that:

Awolowo is so central to modern Yoruba, as to modern Nigerian history, that his personage offers a most useful cursor for tracing the outlines of contemporary Yoruba nationalism. To pull Awolowo to service is in my view the least problematic of all options. In the end he acquired the starred status of the avatar inducing Oba Okunade Sijuade [Ooni of Ife, the king of Yoruba ancestral city] to threaten to add his name to the pantheons of 401 Yoruba gods.

As President Ibrahim Babangida affirmed, Awo, when alive, was for 35 years, the 'main issue' in Nigerian politics, about whom it was impossible to be indifferent. When he died in 1987, there was a divisive debate on whether, given that he was the first premier of the defunct Western Region and Federal Minister of Finance and Deputy Chairman of the Federal Executive Council, under the military regime of General Yakubu Gowon (1966-1975), he deserved a national (or) state, or federal, burial.<sup>23</sup> Some said he was, at best, a 'tribal leader', while others said he was a 'nationalist and federalist'. At the lying-in-state of Awo's body, the then military governor of

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Chief Olu Falae, a Yoruba and Awo's admirer, to help compose a 'love letter' to Awo on his birthday. Interview with Olu Falae, Akure, Nigeria. 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Awo's reincarnation was credited to the Grand Regional Administrator of the Rosicrucian Order (AMORC). 'Awo'll reincarnate', *Nigerian Tribune*, 6 June 1987. A member of the Order even asked that rather than preserve Awo's body through the planned embalment, cremation or internment should be considered since either would 'hasten the process of reincarnation in which the chief (Awo) strongly believed'. 'Cremate body to Hasten Reincarnation', *Nigerian Tribune*, 14 May 1987, front page.

<sup>20</sup> 'Awo'll fight for masses in Heaven – Akinloye', *Nigerian Tribune*, Friday, 5 June 1987, p. 1. Awo himself had said that 'he will continue his service to humanity in the life after this life'. Yemi Farounbi, 'Awo's triumphant end', *Nigerian Tribune*, May 13 1987, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Oyinbo E. Odunamadu, former national vice-president of Awo's UPN, 'Reminiscences of an accomplished individual', *The Guardian*, June 6, 1987.

<sup>23</sup> 'The Politics of Awo's Burial', *THISWEEK*, June 1, 1987, pp. 16-25; 'A Federal Burial for Awolowo' (editorial), *The Guardian*, May 15, 1987; 'What Awo is Due' (editorial), *Sunday Times*, May 17, 1987.



Oyo State, Col. Adetunji Olurin, in his funeral oration said: 'Here lies the legendary Awo, here lies a great compatriot, here lies the prophetic Jeremiah of Africa, here lies the end of an era'.<sup>24</sup>

Did Awo's death mark the end of an era and the beginning of a new one in Yoruba and national politics? Awolowo was strongly reviled by many and passionately loved, revered, and even apotheosized, by yet many more, in life as well as in death; 'for there is no political figure so mysterious, so prone to controversies, around whom strings of rumours have gathered more in Nigerian politics than' Awo.<sup>25</sup> Almost two decades after his death, Awo has not stopped being the main issue in Nigerian politics, as the controversies over his death, burial, statue and continued political life indicate. The man 'who had a telepathic understanding of the historical forces at play and an elective affinity with their great unstable dynamics' (Williams 2004) and 'something of the Old Testament prophet about (him)'<sup>26</sup>, who was met everywhere he went – even his dead body - with thunderous roars of 'Awoooooo', and whose natural gifts were so immense as to have constituted a 'genetic scandal' (Williams 2004), has survived himself - as politics in Yorubaland, and by extension, Nigeria, remain bound to the real and symbolic divide between those who were with, and/or, are for, Awo and those who stood, and/or, are standing, against Awo. As Edwin Arlington Robinson croons in his poem, Awo seems to have more to say after his death!

What do the dynamics of his death and burial signify in the politics of Yorubaland, in particular, and Nigeria, in general? What does the controversy over Awo's statue signify? What is the meaning and import of this political life of a dead leader? How can the meaning or in fact, meanings, of such social act as death and burial and the erection and destruction of a statue, illuminate our understanding of *the political*, the sociology and cosmology of power in contemporary Africa?

In this essay, I argue that - and point to ways in which - death, burial and statue, are useful in the analysis of the social history of Africa. I also attempt to explain why students of African politics should focus more on such simultaneously political, cultural and well as social, phenomenon as death, burial and statue, given that they provoke new thoughts and

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<sup>24</sup> Col. Adetunji Olurin, 'Funeral Oration', *Nigerian Tribune*, 2 June 1987, p. 2. The Kenya's leading newspaper, the *Kenyan Times*, also described Awo's death as 'the end of an era'. 'He lived Long Enough, But...', (cover story) *African Concord*, 26 May 1987, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> 'Who is Awo', *THISWEEK*, March 23, 1987, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Olatunji Dare, 'The man who spoke truth to power', *The Guardian*, Tuesday, May 19, 1987, p. 9.

interpretations and fresh perspectives in understanding the ebb and flows of contemporary African politics as it feeds off ‘tradition’, ‘culture’ and the cosmology of the African peoples. This is so given that the politics - and the politicization - of death and the dead involves, (i) the ‘struggles to endow authority and politics with sacrality or a “sacred” dimension... competing politicizations of space and time; and reassessments of identities... and social relations’ (Verdery, 1999: 36); (ii) the struggle over meanings in society and elite competition; and, (iii) the struggles for power and prominence. All these are particularly interesting in the Yoruba case because they happened in transitional moments in Nigeria’s national politics, and also because they constitute often ignored, but enchanting and illuminating, dimensions of elite politics.

What makes Awo’s death, burial, statue, his physical absence and symbolic *presence*, so unusually effective in the politics of Yorubaland and Nigeria? I suggest that a primary, but general, reason can be found in the fact that death, burial and statue are ‘resources for creating meanings and legitimacy in moments of contention’ (Verdery, 1999) all over the world. But, in the specific case of Awo, the Yoruba and Nigeria, the local dynamics that predetermine and condition the continued political life of a late hero can be explicated by examining the form and meaning of the Awo aura, Awo’s place in Yoruba, and by extension, Nigeria’s, history and politics - and the understanding of all these by the people, particularly the elite.

## **The Cult of Awo**

The cult of the dead in Africa in general, and Yorubaland in particular, is one of the key traditional institutions in society. Great personages are believed to pass into the ethereal realm as gods, therefore becoming oracles or deities. Indeed, virtually every Yoruba god, from Sàngó, the god of thunder, through Ògún, the god of iron and war, to Òsun, the water goddess, was once a great man or woman whose life was exemplary<sup>27</sup>. In Yoruba traditional religion, the way of life is determined by a ‘covenant-relationship’, as Idowu (1969: 244) describes it, with the divinities first, and then ultimately with the Supreme Deity (God). This explains why the paramount Yoruba king, the *Oòni* of Ife, ‘threatened’ to declare Awo as the 402<sup>nd</sup> Yoruba divinity, given

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<sup>27</sup>Alhaji Lateef Jakande, one of Awo’s closest disciples and former governor of Lagos State confirmed this when he said that, ‘It is the nature of the Yoruba culture to deify their leaders. Obatala, Oranmiyan, Sango and Ogun were all great leaders who were deified.’ ‘Awo irreplaceable, says Jankande’, *The Guardian*, May 13, 1987, front page.

that the Yoruba have ‘four hundred and one divinities’ (*Òkàn-lé-nírinwó imolè*).

Ancestor worship is predicated on the belief that the dead can influence, and be influenced by, the living (Wadley, 1999: 595). One major way through which the living follow or practice ‘tradition’, is by worshipping (or literally ‘demonstrating the worth of’) dead ancestors, communicating to one another, through this, the importance of ancestors, and functionally, the value of the ‘traditions’ and social (kin) relationships created by the ancestors (*Ibid*). Anthropological literature contains several instances of such practices.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, as Sawyer (1970) pointed out, in many of the religions in West Africa, God is the Great Ancestor (Goody, 1974: 449).

Across cultures and time, dead people and dead bodies have enjoyed political lives from immemorial times, as Katherine Verdery (1999:1) reminds us, in her important study of the phenomenon in Eastern Europe, after the collapse of communism. Death reveals the most fundamental sociocultural structures and dynamics in any society (Kearl and Rinaldi, 1983: 694). In a specific sense, there is a form and meaning to the aura that surrounds dead political leaders and heroes, as Yeal Navaro-Yashin (2002) for instance, shows in the case of Atatürk in Turkey. Antigone exemplifies this in Sophocles’s classic play, *Antigone*, when she declares that ‘I owe a longer allegiance to the dead than to the living: in that world I shall abide forever’.

In contemporary Africa, there are secular, semi-occult and outright occult forms of monumentalization of leaders that key into or feed off the ‘traditional’ need and passion for gods and great personages in society, although in ways that give them a new (‘modern’) lease of life in tune with contemporary political interests (See for some examples from Cameroon, Geschiere, 1997). Such need and passion are central to the construction of politics and the ways and manners in which these leaders are encountered while alive and in history. To take one example from Ghana - where the genre reaches its apex (Kirk-Greene, 1991: 178), the immediate post-independent president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, was assumed to have possessed the influence of pre-colonial Ashanti kings in addition to the rational bureaucratic powers which the modern office of the president invested in him. Nkrumah encouraged this kind of belief by adopting one of the titles of an Ashanti chief, *Osagyefo* (‘Redeemer’) and became officially known as

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<sup>28</sup> M. Bloch & J Parry (eds.), *Death and the Regeneration of Life*; S. Cederroth, C Corlin & J Lindstrom (eds.), *On the Meaning of Death*; F. H. Damon & R Wagner, *Death Rituals and Life in the Societies of the Kula Ring*; J. Parry, *Death in Banaras*; N. Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping*; J. Watson & E S Rawski (eds.), *Death Ritual in Later Imperial and Modern China*.

President Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, or simply Osagyefo.<sup>29</sup> More than that, he also encouraged a personality cult, like many of such leaders in Africa, in which he was regarded as Christ<sup>30</sup>, so much so that when he was toppled in a military coup in February 1966, the soldiers accused him of ‘having pressed religion into his service and come to believe he was a god’ (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004: 91; Kirk-Greene, 1991, 177-181).

The process by which Awolowo came to have such a powerful hold on the political imagination of the Yoruba and the rest of Nigeria has been chronicled by many (Arifalo, 2001; Otegbeye, 1991; Sklar, 1963; Coleman, Babatope, 1984, 1989, Babarinsa, 2003, etc.). Awolowo was not just pushed into this central role by the natural order of things in Nigeria. It was a combination of the reality of the moment in time and his own willed sense of agency. He worked hard to earn his primacy among his people. When he started out, he identified *the problem* historically and then politically, located it first among his Yoruba constituents and then enlarged it to the national (Nigeria) space. But, he was never allowed to ‘federalize’ this ethos as he was embroiled in the consequences of his awesome political success among his people, which trapped him in the politics and allegations of ‘tribalism’ and ‘parochialism’, from which he has not been absorbed even in death. But as Falola (1999: 14) notes about that era in which Awo emerged, ‘The emphasis on the Yoruba as a nation was due largely to the increasing role of ethnicity in Nigerian politics... Major groups discovered the prominent role of ethnicity, and each began to promote those cultures and histories that could strengthen ethnic identities and promote ethnic loyalties’. It was a context in which corporate agency became dual; first, through interaction with other collectivities, ‘it expanded the array of available positions, (and simultaneously) through interaction with others in the collectivity, agents became more articulate about their interests and thus better able to reflect upon the role positions which will further their realisation’ (Archer 2000: 284).

‘The Yoruba’, Awo concluded at the start of his political career, (are) a highly progressive but a badly disunited group. They paid lip service to a spiritual union and affinity in a common ancestor – Oduduwa. But in all their long history they waged wars against one another. Furthermore, the

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<sup>29</sup> Nkrumah assumed other Akan titles, such as ‘Oyeadiyeye’ (‘The one who puts things right’), ‘Kantamento’ (‘He who is never guilty’), and ‘Kasapreko’ (‘A man of his word’). For such other titles assumed by African leaders see A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, ‘His Eternity, His Eccentricity, or His Exemplarity? A Further Contribution to the Study of H.E. The African Head of State’, *African Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 359, April, 1991: 178.

<sup>30</sup> During my field trips to Nigeria between 2004 and 2005, I was told by some informants that Awo was once quoted to have said that he had more following while alive than Jesus Christ had while in the world.

propaganda of Dr. Azikiwe [rival Igbo leader and, in the colonial period, more prominent nationalist] was already having a deleterious effect on a once dynamic group. The Yoruba now indulged in mutual recrimination and condemnation. The younger elements thought that the Yoruba were inferior to the go-ahead Ibo people, and that whatever might be their past glories they had become effete and decadent. To cap it, it was freely bandied about that the Yorubas were no longer capable of leadership in any sphere of life (Awolowo, 1960: 166).

This constitutes what Alexander (1988) conceives as *interpretation*, the first of the two dimensions of action (Mustafa and Mische, 1998: 967) For a people who had had a head start in Western education and *òlàjù*<sup>31</sup> (civilization, modernity and development) for which they considered themselves superior to other Africans, this was unacceptable. The next step for Awo, infused with a historic sense of mission and agency, or what Kenneth Dike calls ‘historico-cultural legitimacy’ that ‘underpins political aspirations’, (1991: 177) was to do something about this:

I thought that it was in the best interests of Nigeria that the Yorubas should not be reduced to a state of impotence, into which they were fast degenerating... I decided, therefore, *to do all in my power to infuse solidarity into the disjointed tribes that constitute the Yoruba ethnic group, to raise their morale, to rehabilitate their self-respect, and to imbue them with the confidence that they are an important factor in the forging of the federal unity of Nigeria* (*Ibid*, emphasis added).

This can be said to constitute *strategization*, the second dimension of action, as conceived by Alexander (Mustafa and Mische, 1998: 967)<sup>32</sup>. It can be argued, against this backdrop, that Awo perceived the (Yoruba) social structure ‘as a complex of stages or arenas wherein (he could) perform (his) heroics... and the vehicle by which (his) cosmic dependency can be expressed and the temporal transcendence can be accomplished’ (Kearl and Rinaldi, 1983: 696). Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1998) in their exhaustive study of the concept of agency have theoretically explicated such a situation as this, in which the structural environment of action is ‘both dynamically sustained by and also altered through human agency’ – by actors, such as Awo, who are ‘capable of formulating projects for the future and realizing them, even if only in small parts, and with unforeseen outcomes, in the present’. In appropriating the Oduduwa legend, Awo boasted that his election as the ‘Leader of the Yoruba’ identified ‘a reality which I

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<sup>31</sup> For a scholarly exposition on the concept of *òlàjù* among the Yoruba, see, J.D.Y. Peel, ‘*Olaju*: A Yoruba concept of development’, *Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1978: 135-165.

<sup>32</sup> Though his categorization is highly useful, Mustafa and Mische, however, criticizes Alexander for having little to say about ‘invention’s constitutive features and, specifically, its pragmatic and experiential dimensions’. Mustafa and Mische, 1996: 967.

personify' because, 'For the first time since Oduduwa, the Yoruba have one leader!'<sup>33</sup>

It was in the United Kingdom while studying for a law degree that Awo began to translate his resolve into reality by founding a Yoruba organization in London called *Egbe Omo Oduduwa* (Society for the Descendants of Oduduwa). The group laid out its aims and methods which, when transferred to the political party, which later evolved from the *Egbe*, the Action Group, made the latter the best organized political party in black Africa. Awo became the secretary of the *Egbe* when he returned to Nigeria, and later the leader of the Action Group which won elections into the Western Regional House of Assembly - thereby making Awo the Premier of the Region in 1955. By this time, it was evident that Awo's activation of a new political elite in the west of Nigeria had followed Meisel's dictum, involving the development of three C's: Consciousness, Cohesion and Conspiracy (Shore 2002: 3).

Awo, as an agent, it can be argued, first achieved 'distinction' - in Bourdieu's (1986) sense of the term - personally, by going to England to study law and 'make some money' (Awolowo, 1960: 168) and then publicly, through organization, first of the *Egbe* and later the AG, through which he won power. He then established a welfarist regional government (1955-1959) that has been described as nonpareil in terms of its level of discipline and achievements. The achievements included free education, free health services, planned (rural and urban) economic development, etc. which have leveraged the Yoruba people in Nigeria in the last 50 years, by producing both an industrial class and a middle-class that surpassed those of other ethnic groups in Nigeria. He became a pace-setter not only for Nigeria, but for the rest of Black Africa (Babarinsa, 2003: 39). Awo himself said of this 'feat':

I make bold to say that I am proud of my service as premier of the former Western Region. People of that area today enjoy the highest standard of living in the country. This is because I started a revolution in education and social services which no rascal can reverse (quoted in Babarinsa, 2003: 211).

Awo consequently became an active agent and carrier of historical forces (*cf.* Law, 1994: 53). Through his free and compulsory education programme, a common Yoruba dialect was legitimized and popularized across Yorubaland where tens of dialects - some of which were mutually unintelligible - were spoken<sup>34</sup>. This 'brilliant strategy' as Falola (1999: 14) describes it,

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<sup>33</sup> 'Awo: The issues and the Answers', Interview with Obafemi Awolowo, *The Guardian*, Tuesday May 12, 1987: 11.

<sup>34</sup> An elaboration of how Awo 're-defined' and 're-constructed' the Yoruba is taken up in my 'Elite Agency:

saw ‘the transformation of Awolowo himself into the “modern Oduduwa” – the inheritor of ancient traditions and the most outstanding hero of the twentieth century’. His subsequent monumentalization through songs, poetry, music and other literary works,<sup>35</sup> the fact that several Awoists dressed like him – in *sokoto* and *buba* – and wore his famed fez (Awo) cap or his horn-rimmed glasses, in worshipping at his altar, and his over-representation of the fate and fortune of the Yoruba nation, are therefore understandable.

Both friends and foes, before and particularly, after his death, acknowledged Awolowo’s administrative genius. A newspaper columnist Olatunji Dare, argues that,

Admirers invested (Awolowo) with omni-competence. After all, they had witnessed or learnt of his spectacular record as Premier of Western Nigeria and leader of opposition in the federal legislature, vice-chairman of the Federal Executive Council and Commissioner for Finance in the civil war years, and of his consummate forensic skills. His adversaries saw him as some kind of evil genius.

His arrest, prosecution and imprisonment (1962-1966) more or less consecrated Awo’s image and name among the Yoruba who came to see his travails as the height of injustice perpetrated against their leader by the Hausa-Fulani power-holders and their local collaborators. Yakubu Abdulazeed has noted ‘the Yoruba cultural trait of sympathy for the persecuted and their abhorrence of treachery’ (*Hotline*, July 15, 1987: 16). This elevated him to living martyrdom (Babarinsa, 2003: 39). His physical absence from the political scene produced dramatic political gains for the man, suffused with spiritual dimensions. Many Yoruba swore that he had so much spiritual power that he often disappeared from prison and appeared in his home to meet with his wife, children and associates. Indeed, it was said that when assassins visited him in jail, they could not find him in his cell, because, aware of what was in store for him, Awo had ‘disappeared’. This rumour only fed off a particular incident when one would-be Awo assailant was apprehended in the Calabar prison where Awo served his term. But, for many people, it was not the temporal authorities who saved Awo, it was his inherent spiritual powers; Awo was too ‘powerful’ to be helped by temporal authorities who, at any rate, had unjustly jailed him, his teeming admirers reckoned. Awo himself had reportedly described the bungled assassination attempts as an attempt ‘to shoot at the moon’ (*African Guardian*, June 11, 1987: 14). As if to fuel

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Awolowo and the Re-Making of the Yoruba of Nigeria’, unpublished typescript, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> See, Wale Adebani, ‘Lyricising the Leader: Songs, Poetry and the Social Construction of Ethnic Destiny’, unpublished typescript, 2006.

such speculations in latter years, Awo had stated in his famous allocutus speech in 1963 that ‘the spirit of man knows no barriers, never dies and can be projected to any part of the world’ (Ofeimun, June 7, 1987: B5). The man, throughout most of his political life exhibited, what Ernest Becker (1973)) would call ‘the desire to be special and unique, to merge oneself within the greater whole, within the cosmic order’ (Kearl and Rinaldi, 1983: 696). Against the backdrop of examples similar to that of Awo from Zaire and Zimbabwe, Ellis and Ter Haar conclude that, ‘Some people believe not just that powerful individuals are capable of extraordinary transformations, but that the essence of their power is by definition mysterious’ (2004: 84).

His mystique increased tremendously when, after a state pardon and release from jail, the military government implored him to intervene in an uprising of farmers (*Agbekoya*) in the west of Nigeria (Babarinsa, 2003: 27). The farmers, who were believed to be protected by the most potent fetish, had faced down a contingent of the police and the army. Awo walked many kilometres on foot to meet the farmers in the countryside, and secured a pact with them which ended the uprising. By the Second Republic (1979-1983), Awo had achieved almost total primacy in Yoruba politics as the leader of the Yoruba-dominated Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). By this time, a cult, stronger and more potent than the earlier one in the 1950s and 1960s, had been built around Awo. Many people believe(d) that he was a member of several unnamed, and perhaps unnameable, secret cults, even though he was a professed Christian, attesting to the fact that, in Africa, ‘magic and political power are virtually one and the same thing’ - as Ahmadou Kourouma argues (in Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004: 81).

Awo himself fuelled such speculations, even if vicariously, through such encounters as when he reportedly turned down a request to join a secret cult by stating that his own personal cult was stronger. It can be argued that given his pre-occupation with spiritual matters, as a member of the Rosicrucian Order, Awo also sought assiduously to *sacralize* himself. For many Yoruba, there is often little or no contradiction in mixing ‘traditional’, occult practices with ‘modern’ Christian or Islamic ethics. His popular name, **Áwò**, when properly inflected in the tonal Yoruba language is **Awo** (cult, or spiritually-endowed person) from his full name **Awólówò** (‘Cult has reference’). In fact, Hubert Ogunde, pioneer Yoruba playwright, dramatist, poet, musician and Awo’s friend, released a remarkable record in the 1960s, in which he couched Awo’s life in cosmic imagery, dubbing the man, *Awo mímó* (‘Holy Cult’ or ‘Saintly Figure’), *Olúwo àwa* (‘Our High Priest’), *Òrìsà* (deity/oracle/god) and *Ìmólè, Baba Òkùnkùn* (‘Light, Father over Darkness’ – *Ìmólè* when



otherwise inflected can also be *Imolè*, meaning ‘divinity’)<sup>36</sup> with heavy chants in praise of the leader. All of these pointing to what a journalist and author, Dare Babanrinsa (2003), describes as Awo’s ‘cosmic halo’.

His famed ‘supernatural’ powers even verged on the ridiculous, which Odia Ofeimun describes as ‘myth and mysticism (that could) drown the secular import of his life’ (Ofeimun, 1987: B5). During his presidential campaign in 1979, many cities, towns and villages in the Yoruba west were gripped differently with panic and delight as thousands reportedly ‘saw’ Awo in the moon in the dead of night with his famous victory sign. [As I child, I too was woken up by my parents and siblings to ‘see Papa (Awo)’ in the moon; I must confess that I did *see* him; there was no way I *couldn’t* have! I risked been pronounced an ‘infant’ or been confirmed blind.] It was, for admirers, the proof of Awo’s omni-competence, potency and cosmic influence, and for his opponents, it was proof of his evil genius and perfidy. One of the latter took a half-page advert in a northern newspaper to castigate Awo for desecrating the moon!<sup>37</sup> (Dare 1987: 9; Ofeimun, 1987: B5).

To add to Awo’s assumed cosmic power even in death, when Awo’s remains, which had earlier been embalmed – supposedly for life – was interred in 1996, nine years after his death and embalmment, in a small ceremony involving family members and close associates, one of his associates told an informant that the ground of the whole house was shaking ‘like in the beginning an earth tremor’. This associate found it also significant that Awo’s former political rival and Nigeria’s first president, Dr, Nnamdi Azikiwe (Zik), ‘refused to die’ until the day Awo’s body was interred<sup>38</sup> - confirming, for him, long-held suspicion that ‘the reason why Zik stayed so long in politics was to make sure Awo did not emerge as president’ (Babarinsa, 2003: 179-180). Geschiere has argued that, ‘recent democratization process (in Africa) is accompanied by a blossoming of rumors on the role of the occult’ (1997: 6), while Ellis and Ter Haar (2004:

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<sup>36</sup> For an exposition of Ogunde’s songs on Awo and the Yoruba, among others, see, Wale Adebani, ‘Lyricizing the Leader: Songs, Poetry and the Social Construction of Ethnic Destiny’, unpublished typescript, 2006.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Awo’s Cosmic Influence’, *THISWEEK*, June 1, 1987, p. 23. In her study of the Kako in Cameroon, Élisabeth Copet-Rougier (1986) notes a cultural conception of ‘strong men’ as ‘absolute transgressors’. See, Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft*, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1997: 132.

<sup>38</sup> My informant said Chief Bola Ige, former governor of Oyo State and Awo’s close associate, who was assassinated in December 2001 while serving as the Federal Attorney General and Minister of Justice, told him this story. Indeed, Azikiwe died in the morning, while Awo’s body was interred in the evening of May 11, 1996. Field work notes, Ibadan, Nigeria, March 2005. See also, ‘Awo’s remains to be interred today’, *Tribune on Saturday*, May 11, 1996, front page; ‘Awo Interred ... HID gives reasons’, *Sunday Tribune*, 12 May 1996, front page. Two people who were also present at the occasion, Sir Olanihun Ajayi and Wale Oshun denied that any ‘tremor’ happened during the internment.

85) note that, ‘Stories like these indicate the astonishing power, often of a mystical or superhuman nature, that people frequently ascribe to their political leaders’.

While alive, Awo was both an active agent and a carrier of historical forces (Law, 1994: 53). In death, Awo’s *absence* and his *presence* even in the absence, his *immortality*, has provided great opportunities for people seeking power, and generally for the political elite involved in a fierce competition. ‘Immortality’, Frank Rooney says, ‘is to keep others moving when you have stopped moving’.<sup>39</sup>

### **Necrophilia and Elite Politics**

Secularist and modernist assumptions are often trapped in their derivative self-referential terms of ‘modernity’, ‘rationality’ and ‘democracy’, (Navaro-Yashin, 2002: 189) in which several other manifestations in society that do not conform to the trappings of these terms, or what they are supposed to embody or include, are consequently termed ‘irrational’, ‘superstitious’ and/or ‘traditional’. Indeed, modernization assumes the ‘emancipation of the living from the control of the dead’, such that practices such as ancestral worship are presumed to belong to the *Weltanschauung* of traditional, past-oriented and not progressive, future-oriented societies (Kearl and Rinaldi, 1983: 694). However, tradition and modernity, rationality and irrationality, are binaries that are hardly ever useful in understanding contemporary social dynamics, particularly in the African post colony. There is a lot of ‘rationality’ in the ‘irrational’ and a lot of ‘tradition’ in ‘modernity’, and vice versa. Such intertwining and interfacing of the ‘rational’ and the ‘irrational’, the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’, especially the ways in which they mobilise or immobilise power in society, are crucial in the analysis of death, burial and related dynamics. Indeed, as Kearl and Rinaldi (1983: 698) have argued, ‘the dead are so remote from everyday life that their potency as political symbols actually increases with modernization’.

Thus, I am concerned with how power is enacted and pursued through legitimation ‘in less rationalistic but more suitably “cosmic” terms’, showing it as rich, complex and disputatious processes of political meaning-creation – that is, as ‘politics animated’ (Verdery, 1999: 52). Given the fact that death and statues yoke the past, present and future, they are useful and effective symbols for affirming and celebrating the past *in the present*, as well of revising and

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<sup>39</sup> ‘He lived Long Enough, But...’ (cover story) *African Concord*, 26 May 1987, p. 22.

contesting that past (cf. Verdery, 1999: 52). The dead, as Verdery (*Ibid.*: 22) instructs, animate the study of politics - and power and social relations too. Because 'human activity nearly always has effective and meaningful dimensions and takes place through complex symbolic processes', Verdery also correctly views 'politics as a realm of continual struggles over meaning, or signification' (*Ibid.*: 24). Following her, I argue here that the dead, burial and statue are good vehicles for viewing politics and the attendant elite struggle for power. By monumentalizing the past, and even the *present* in the past, through the dead, the authority and status of particular elite are announced, confirmed or even contested. Therefore, such sites and instances of the celebration of the dead become 'fundamental (albeit contested) resources for both established and emerging national elites' (Shore, 2002: 13).

Transition of a Leader and Transition politics  
 Ah! The elephant has fallen  
 A gigantic emptiness has gripped  
 The kernel of our striving forests...  
 You were the light which undresses the shade  
 The answer which came before the question  
 Niyi Osundare, 'Chief Obafemi Awolowo' (poem)<sup>40</sup>

The death of Awo – though so 'shocking and sad'<sup>41</sup> (*The Guardian*, May 10, 1987: 1) that even church services were disrupted as the 'heat wave' spread the next morning of his death<sup>42</sup> (*The Guardian*, May 12, 1987) - and his burial were converted to political and cultural resources, generating actions that were disposed towards the gaining, affirmation or confirmation of power and prominence by Awo's followers, his political adversaries and the military government, in ways that would make Bourdieu describe them all as strategic improvisers who respond dispositionally to the opportunities and constraints offered by' (Swartz, 1997: 100) Awo's death.

Once Awo's death was announced in the evening of May 9, 1987, his country home in Ikenne became a political Mecca as not only the mass of his admirers and followers trooped there to sign the condolence registers<sup>43</sup>, but virtually every important member of the political, social and

<sup>40</sup> *Sunday Tribune*, 24 May 1987, p. 15

<sup>41</sup> 'Reactions to news of Awo's death', *The Guardian*, Sunday, May 10, 1987.

<sup>42</sup> 'Awo's death disrupts church services', *The Guardian*, May 12, 1987, backpage; 'Awo's death heat-wave still spreading', *The Guardian*, May 12, 1987: 3.

<sup>43</sup> Condolence registers were opened in many places including Lagos and Ibadan. See, '7, 000 sign condolence register in Lagos', *New Nigerian*, May 13, 1987, front page. The masses did more than sign condolence registers, traders they wept, market women closed shops in his honour, and even donated food and other items to the family

economic elite in Nigeria proclaimed their membership of the upper echelon of the Nigerian society by visiting Ikenne or speaking on Awo's transition. A newspaper commentator described this as a 'motley crowd of people engaged in a break-neck scramble for a piece of Awo'<sup>44</sup> (Izeze, 1987: 9); a scramble in which they deployed what Kirk-Greene (1991: 178) would describe as their 'verbal technology apparatus'. Also, because Awo died at a point when the ban placed by the military on party politics was still in force - even though the military had announced a return to democratic rule by 1990 - it was an opportunity for politicians to associate and organize under the guise of planning a 'befitting burial' for a 'Big Man' – a man for whom, even the military president, had a special affection. Indeed, a commentator states that Awo's death 'lifted the ban on politics'<sup>45</sup> (Offoaro, 1987), as the burial plans became 'the subject of tension-laden manoeuvres' (*THISWEEK*, June 1, 1987: 16). Whatever were the motivations for the national excitement that Awo's death and burial provoked, it was a further confirmation that the man was so remarkable that he could still excite even in death. A commentator states:

For in death, the man (Awo) has gained more followers than he ever had in his life time, considering the outpour of sympathy and encomiums showered on the man from all parts of the country. The consensus that Awolowo lived and in fact died for the ideals of a greater Nigeria is also not in dispute.... If Awolowo lived for the dream of a greater Nigeria, and people were so overwhelmingly aware of his unparalleled leadership qualities and impeccable achievements while on earth, why was he denied thrice the opportunity to lead, nay serve his fatherland<sup>46</sup> (Onuk, 1987: 9)

While the nation was generally believed to have been gripped with grief, the political elite were gripped by the passion to gain maximally from the death and burial of Awo. Emeka Ojukwu, the leader of the secessionist Biafra Republic, an Igbo, who had opposed Awo strongly, was to make, perhaps the most widely cited statement on Awo after his death. Ojukwu said Awo was 'The Best President Nigeria Never Had'<sup>47</sup> adding that with his death, 'Nigeria will never be (the)

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for the burial. 'Traders Weep', *Daily Times*, May 11, 1987; 'Akure Market close in honour of Awo', *The Guardian*, June 2, 1987, back page; 'Markets empty in Ibadan', *Sunday New Nigerian*, June 7, 1987, front page; 'Market women call at Ikenne with food items', *The Guardian*, May 21, 1987, front page.

<sup>44</sup> Eluem Emeka Izeze, 'All for Awo' (opinion), *The Guardian*, June 6, 1987: 9.

<sup>45</sup> Godson Offoaro, 'Awo's death lifts the ban', *The Guardian*, June 5, 1987.

<sup>46</sup> Abasi Onuk, 'Awolowo's death and the unfinished quest', (opinion), *The Guardian*, Saturday, June 6, 1987, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> See, 'A Statesman's Swan Song', *The African Guardian*, May 21, 1987, p. 13. Even though Ojukwu was parroting a leading journalist in *Newswatch*, Dan Agbese, who had predicted about two months (*Newswatch*, March 27, 1987) before Awo died that when the man eventually died, he would be remembered in this terms, not many people cared about Ojukwu's 'plagiarism', given that his status and opposition to Awo made the statement a great

same again'<sup>48</sup> (*Daily Times*, May 11, 1987: 1). General Olusegun Obasanjo, who Awo's admirers believed 'conspired' as head of the military regime in 1979 to 'rob' Awo of the presidency, and who in fact, had never hidden his dislike of Awo's politics, said the death was 'the end of an era'<sup>49</sup> (*Daily Times*, May 12, 1987:1). The Federal Military Government in its reaction to Awo's passing described him as 'one of the greatest Nigerians who in his lifetime made enormous contributions to the development of our nation' and therefore changed the name of the University of Ife, one of Nigeria's best universities, to Obafemi Awolowo University<sup>50</sup> (*New Nigerian*, May 11, 1987:1; *New Nigerian*, May 13, 1987:1). Uba Ahmed, former national secretary of the NPN that who personally delighted in attacking Awo, said Awo's death was 'a national blow at this time of the country's economic, political crisis' (*Daily Times*, May 11, 1987: 9). The *New Nigerian*, a newspaper, which, though owned by the federal government, was the voice of the (Hausa-Fulani) ruling elite - which most regarded as the most powerful stumbling block to Awo's ambition - in an editorial that was essentially an eulogy (*African Guardian*, May 21, 1987: 15), said Awo's accomplishments 'dwarf the accomplishments of virtually all his peers', adding that despite his sterling qualities, Awo was denied the presidency which 'would have been his for the asking owing to his perhaps erroneous perception as a tribalist' (*New Nigerian*, May 11, 1987: 1).<sup>51</sup> But, the paper, which was the first to write an editorial on Awo's death, could not resist comparing Awo to the late leader of the north and the all-time cultural and political hero of the Hausa-Fulani, the Sardauna of Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello, perhaps so that it would not be 'mistaken' that Awo was greater than their own leader, who was involved in a political, and almost personal, duel with Awo until he was killed by the soldiers in 1966. Stated the paper:

Chief Awolowo is dead. Chief Awolowo is alive. Like the Sardauna, he may be larger and mightier in death than in life.... An Awolowo never dies. His footsteps remain on the sands of time.

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proof of Awo's vision and abilities. It also pointed to the fact that Awo was stopped from ruling Nigeria by what Abasi Onuk calls 'facts of sabotage', and what Alex Fom, the secretary general of the defunct NPP, describes as 'the rigging and rascality of the civilian era'. 'Awolowo's death and the unfinished quest', *The Guardian*, June 6, 1987: 9; 'Awo's death heat-wave still spreading', *The Guardian*, May 12, 1987: 3.

<sup>48</sup> 'Best President Nigeria never had - Ikemba', *Daily Times*, May 11, 1987, front page.

<sup>49</sup> 'The end of an era - Obaanjo', *Daily Times*, May 12, 1987, front page.

<sup>50</sup> 'FG Mourns, says - AWO: A Great Nigeria', *New Nigerian*, May 11, 1987, front page; 'UNIFE Renamed Awo Varsity', *New Nigerian*, May 13, 1987, front page.

<sup>51</sup> 'A Nation's Loss', (editorial), *New Nigerian*, May 11, 1987, front page.

Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's first ceremonial president, and Awo's great political adversary said he was 'upset beyond description' by Awo's death, adding that, 'It is an incontrovertible fact of history that (Awo)... contributions to the history of Nigeria in particular, and Africa in general, shall be a landmark and inspiration to guard our people in our holy crusade for a place in the sun'<sup>52</sup> (*The Guardian*, May 13, 1987: 1). Balarabe Musa, former governor of Kaduna State said Awo, in death, 'would continue to remain with us and guide us spiritually'<sup>53</sup> (*Sunday New Nigerian*, May 17, 1987: 16). Dare says, '... this man who combined personal authority with great ability... (who) shone brilliantly in practically all his endeavours and ... departed in a blaze of glory (would) ...in another country... have been pressed into national service' (May 19, 1987: 9). Wole Soyinka, who had won the Nobel Prize in Literature the year before, expressed anger that the skills and special talents of Awo were wasted by an unappreciative nation (Ofeimun, May 29, 1987: 11). *The Guardian* (Lagos) described Awo's death as 'the passing of a colossus... a founding father with whom the whole country has been having a permanent debate for over 40 years' (June 4, 1987: 10). This 'debate', the paper predicted correctly, 'does not promise to end with his death':

Its continuance is assured by the mystique he had exercised over political arguments in the country... For a man whose quiet strength has been the thunder of controversies, it is deeply arguable that the initial stop-shop at the announcement of his death, was due to the fact that he had built up a stature that was too politically alive to die (*Ibid*)

The federal government-owned *Daily Times* stated:

The question then is what does Nigeria owe this extra-ordinary leader? Ordinarily, immortalising his name would be considered ideal. But, Awo fully immortalised himself before his transition (*Daily Times*, 13 May, 1987).<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps, in realisation of the above fact, apart from the reactions to his death, the plans for, and planning of, Awo's burial presented another opportunity for the elite, particularly Awo's associates, in their struggles for saliency, visibility, credibility, popularity and succession. As Robert Hertz (1960) argues, 'Burials... serve both to create and to reorder community... (they) re-affirm the political community of those who orient them' (Verdery, 1990: 108). Also, as Jack

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<sup>52</sup> 'Zik very upset by Awo's death', *The Guardian*, May 13, 1987, front page.

<sup>53</sup> 'Awo'll continue to guide us – Balarabe', *Sunday New Nigeria*, May 17, 1987: 16.

<sup>54</sup> More tributes – and orations - across board in *Awo Souvenir*, A Nigerian Tribune Publication, n.d.

Goody (1974: 452) has argued, a funeral is often the occasion for revealing ‘the generalized attitudes, both positive and negative, characteristic of the actors in the funeral drama’ including the transmission of ‘relatively exclusive rights’ such as roles and offices. Within a few days of Awo’s death, plans for his burial ‘became the subject of tension-laden manoeuvres between Lagos and Ikenne, with Abeokuta, seat of the Ogun State government, trapped in-between’ (*THISWEEK*, June 1, 1987: 16)

As already indicated, many members of the political elite saw this as an opportunity for succession struggle and politicking – the latter which had been banned by the military. Awo’s death therefore presaged ‘new alliances and realignments in the politics of Yorubaland’ and Nigeria (*African Guardian*, May 21, 1987: 23). His death, said a professor of political science, might seriously erode the North-South dichotomy in Nigeria’s politics as politicians would find it easier to mix more freely since there are ‘no more debts to pay’ (*Ibid*). There was first a muted, but eventually clear, struggle among Awo’s immediate lieutenants to assume the leadership of his progressive political formation, even though they kept denying any rift (*Guardian on Sunday*, May 23, 1987).

The task, however, was not helped by the fact that Awo did not clearly ‘anoint’ a successor. But, this did not deter members of the group from making claims (*Ibid*), as they used the funeral arrangements ‘to score political points against one another’ (*THISWEEK*, June 1, 1987: 22). Awo’s death, like that of Ataturk, was seen as the moment when the Yoruba were orphaned as a nation (*cf.* Navaro-Yashin, 2002: 191). Even though one of the gladiators, Lateef Jakande, retired media chief and former governor of Lagos State, had said Awo ‘left no shoes’ (*Nigerian Tribune*, May 13, 1987: 1) for anyone to step into and that the man ‘took his mantle with him’ (*The Guardian*, May 13, 1987: 2), the race for succession sharply pitched him against Bola Ige, lawyer and former governor of Oyo State. Interpersonal tensions are often revealed in the process of funeral ceremonies; thus, Awo’s funeral provided an insight into the innermost reaches of social and political cleavages both within his group and the wider society (Goody, 1974: 452-3).

While so many were eager to profit politically, socially and symbolically from the death and burial arrangement of Awo, some were eager to contest Awo’s place and centrality in Nigeria by issuing a rebuttal against all the accolades showered on the late leader and the ‘state burial’ accorded him. Chinua Achebe, author of Africa’s most famous novel, *Things Fall Apart*, an

Igbo, published a most scathing attack on Awo for his role in the largely unfortunate history of Nigeria, thus attempting to de-canonize the hero. While conceding that the man was ‘a remarkable and highly controversial figure’, Achebe insisted that Awo was not ‘a great national leader’, describing the ‘decision of the Federal Government to accord the status of a head of state to him in death’ as ‘no less than a national swindle’ (Achebe, *New Nigerian*, June 3, 1987: 4). He further described the effusive praises showered on Awo and the visit to Ikenne by virtually every important member of the Nigeria elite, as ‘clowning circus and expensive hocus-pocus’ of which ‘serious-minded Nigerians are highly critical or even contemptuous’ (*Ibid*). ‘Maigani’, a column in the *New Nigerian* ridiculed the struggle for Awo’s successor as a struggle for ‘a loser’s shoes’: ‘Much as it may sound cruel and unpopular... it looks really as if logic would dictate that shrewd politicians with eyes to 1990 (when the ban on partisan politics will be lifted) should avoid Awo’s shoes like the plague’ (*New Nigerian*: 8).

Another columnist in *New Nigerian*, describing the call for a national burial as ‘unwise’, asked how the disciples of the late pre-eminent leader of the Hausa-Fulani north, Ahmadu Bello, would feel about a national burial for Awo, which their own leader didn’t get when he was assassinated in 1966 (Agetua, *New Nigerian*, May 24, 1987: 3). *New Nigerian* in its editorial on the politics and ‘politicisation’ of the burial, curiously stated that ‘what Awo deserves is not a state burial, but a national burial, paid for and attended by all categories of Nigerians on a voluntary basis’ (*New Nigerian*, May 23, 1987: 1). Others writing in *Hotline*, the unapologetically pro-Hausa-Fulani and anti-(Awo)Yoruba periodical, rubbished one-by-one all the achievements of the man – who they accused of ‘tragic tenacity’ - upon which the adulations were based (Abdulazeez, *Hotline*, July 15, 1987: 16-17; Adamu, 1987, *Hotline*, July 15: 19-21). Taking a cue from ‘Achebe’s eloquent rendition’, writers in the periodical sought to ‘explode’ the myth of Awo’s administrative genius. Even the trivial was important for Adamu Adamu who rubbished the popular ‘myth’ that Awo was an ascetic and mystic. He concludes that,

The Yoruba ought to be delighted that after serving them well, Awo, by his passing away, has released them from a stultifying grip that has in no small measure stifled the emergence of alternative leadership material among the tribe (*Ibid*: 21).

There was a barrage of condemnations and criticisms of Achebe’s position. Adebayo Williams, a member of the generation of Nigerian writers next to the Soyinka-Achebe generation, in reaction to this, and Achebe’s similarly caustic remark on Soyinka’s Nobel Prize



in Literature, accused Achebe of ‘vitriolic mischief’, asking, ‘Has the wise and sober Obierika [a character in Achebe’s, *Things Fall Apart*] been suddenly transformed in old age to a snarling Okonkwo?’<sup>55</sup> (Williams, *Newswatch* March 20, 1989: 38). Jakande said, ‘I am sure Achebe knows that one does not have to be head of government to qualify for national leadership. Mahatma Ghandi... never held any public office... yet he was the greatest national hero India ever has’. Some accused Achebe of bigotry or ‘deep-seated animosity against anything connected to the Yoruba’, pointing to the fact that when his fellow writer, Wole Soyinka, ‘the genius of a Yoruba man’, won the Nobel Prize in literature, Achebe, more or less sulked by stating that ‘a European prize does not make anyone the *Ashiwaju* (Yoruba word for leader) of Nigerian literature’. One of Achebe’s critics described him as a ‘local laureate’ (Gboyega, *The Guardian*, June 4, 1987: 11), given his antecedents in earlier writings ‘spilling all over’ with the ‘tribal grumblings and tribal jealousies belonging to the Ibo tribe’ (Daini, *The Guardian on Sunday*, October 23, 1983: B5). Ebenezer Babatope, former Director of Organization of Awo’s party, said Achebe, who was fond of attacking Awo, was ‘a mere intellectual masquerader (sic)... reactionary intellectual (professing) intellectual fraud’ (*The Guardian*, June 4, 1987: 3). Soyinka, as if in poetic response to Achebe, in his poem for the man (Awo) whose ‘giant pace/Dwarfed, alas, the path (he) trod’, croons: ‘Their sandy voices scattered twigs and nests/But could not budge this firm-earthed trunk/Could not sway its being, could not dent/The buttress lunging skyward from one deep/Implanted root. It reached far down to core’.<sup>56</sup>

Against the backdrop of the defeat of Awo’s party in Yoruba states in the 2003 elections, the only surviving governor of ‘Awo’s party’ in the Fourth Republic (1999 – to date), Lagos State Governor Bola Tinubu says, ‘The spirit of Awo is still there; the spirit of Awo is not defeated. The spirit of Awo lives and his ideas live on. That is why the PDP candidates’ campaign on free education and free health is tuned to the same rhythm with the AD...We will continue to promote those ideals. Nobody can wipe (them) out’ (*The Guardian*, April 27, 2003: A3 & A5). A leading columnist, Reuben Abati, concurs with Tinubu, adding that even though Awo died in 1987, ‘He has been ruling Yorubaland since then from his grave’.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> “‘Alfred Nobel Dismembered’”, *Newswatch* March 20, 1989, p. 38.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Wole Soyinka, ‘One tree that made a forest (An Elegy for Obafemi Awolowo)’, *The African Guardian*, June 18, 1987: 29.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

This essay attempts to explicate particular instances of ‘(h)ow a leader survives himself and how an idea survives a man, how the community absorbs him and his idea, and how the sense of wider identity created by his presence survives the limitations of his person and of the historical moment’ (Erikson, 1975: 166). It also examines ‘(t)he inner worlds of meanings and practice that define elite identities, the cultural mechanisms used to maintain their status, and the ways elites relate to, and are embedded within, wider socio-economic and political process’ (Shore, 2002: 14). All these, I have argued, are important foci of study that are revealed in very interesting ways in the dynamics of death, burial and the raising and destruction of statues. What I have attempted to do is, as Brecht would put it, to throw burial and statue into crisis by showing their involvement in major power struggles in society (Cohen, 1981: 16).

Awo’s remains and statue constitute a meta-narrative; a meta-narrative of the Yoruba nation, and within that, of the concrete historical processes that led to Awo’s emergence as the *Ashiwaju* of the Yoruba and the most controversial politician in Nigeria’s political history, even in death. As meta-narrative, these actions and counter-actions emphasise Awo’s re-founding and re-uniting of the Yoruba nation and the struggle to construct a Nigerian nation, in ways that confirm that Awo’s life-story is ‘inextricably interwoven with history’ (Erikson, 1975: 19) – even though the man is ‘history himself’<sup>58</sup>.

While the politics of his death and burial point to the intricate ways in which the elite enact and negotiate their interests and pursue power – even with such ‘materials’ and symbols as a dead body – the construction and tearing down of his statue are ways of affirming a glorious past or taking revenge on that past (Cohen 1989: 494) respectively. Awolowo remains the central signifier of modern Yoruba identity, and the paramount marker of that ‘imagined community’. Fetishizing his statue and remains therefore are also expressions of loyalty to the project of the Yoruba nation (*cf.* Yeal, 2002: 198), in ways that provide opportunities, particularly for the political elite, to ‘use’ Awo differently to further their current and future ambitions. Which is why where the current governor of Ogun state claims to be following the footsteps of Awo, his opponents state that his claim ‘to Awo’s image is a fraud’ (*Daily Independent*, November 4, 2005: B3). As Taylor (1985) has argued, ‘true human agency is inconceivable outside of the

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<sup>58</sup> ‘Awo is history himself’, Funeral Oration by Chief (Mrs.) Folake Solanke, SAN, delivered at the special court session of Oyo State High Court 1, Ibadan, June 1, 1987 in *Nigerian Tribune*, June 2, 1987: 4.

continuing conversation of a community, from where the background distinctions and evaluations necessary for making choices of actions spring” (Hastrup, 1995: 84).

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