Changing Political Structure due to Changing Force in Nigeria

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1. The Dawn of Political Consciousness

In the emergent states of Africa and Asia the latent forces of nationalism have often found manifestations in the attack on imperial powers that had, at one time or the other, dominated and stultified the germ of nationalism. The reaction in Nigeria to Western dominance and the eventual "overthrow" of the British imperial power was not motivated by the philosophy of historical materialism. It was spontaneous. This is not to deny the fact that Nigerian intellectual leaders, like their counterparts in other parts of Africa and Asia, are not unacquainted with the Marx and Lenin philosophy of history. But the reaction to foreign dominance in the Nigerian context was the creature of its own environment; the attitude, and the relationship of the British proconsuls to the native population created conditions which occasionally gave vent to sporadic forms of rebellion. But while the imperial British authority was concerned with the expansion and stability of territories under its control it also, more by accident than by design, widened the horizon of the "native serfs" through education and other less tangible methods of orientation.

The awakening consciousness of the people with regard to their political rights was not after the Second World War as is popularly believed. It dated back, for purposes of historical accuracy, to 1921 almost half a century ago. The West African Congress which made its debut in 1921 must be recognised, from the standpoint of West African political history, as a significant element in the gradual but impressive awareness of the intellectual elite for legislative and administrative reforms in their respective colonial territories. The Congress

2 The Calabar Market Women Riot of 1925 which was a reaction to the imposition of Merket Toll was followed by a more violent one – THE ABA RIOT (1929) See Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Disturbances in Calabar and Owerri Provinces, Dec. 1929. Govt. Printer, Lagos, 1930.
delegation to Westminster demanded, among other things, the effective participation of the indigenes in the governments of their countries. As often is the case in colonial dependences this modest and legitimate demands of the thinking few were interpreted as the agitation of the "self-appointed demagogues" which did not reflect the spirit of the masses. Thus in connection with the political aspirations of the Indian National Congress the late Winston Churchill (as he then was) in 1931 observed in a negative tone:

They merely represent those Indians who have acquired a veneer of Western civilization, and have read all those books about democracy which Europe is now beginning increasingly to discard... To transfer that responsibility to this highly artificial and restricted oligarchy of Indian politicians... would be an act of cowardice, desertion and dishonour.¹

Strangely enough, imperial power Britain, France, or Belgium nearly always over emphasize the docility and general ignorance of the masses of the forces of change sweeping through the community. They accept the attractive illusion that the masses, because of want of literacy cannot also see nor feel the power of the White man as symbolized in aeroplanes, hypodermic needle, radio and television sets and all other forms of gadgets. They often also erroneously equate native intelligence with literacy. And the common saying among Nigerian illiterates that inability to read and write is not the measure of immaturity or still less ability to discriminate between right and wrong, reveals how little the autocratic White rulers knew of the revolution taking place even among the so-called inarticulate majority. At least they know where political powers lie. Local tax collectors who hound them from mud huts into caves and foliage, or a police officer who arrives with a search warrant to run-sack their rooms for illicit liquor and other contraband goods represent, in their imagery, the power of the White man. Yet the White administrator living in isolation from the masses and whose contact with them is usually on ceremonial occasions or when presiding over law suits assumes that he is in a position to understand and indeed appraise their emotions. Perhaps, it may be necessary to emphasize in this context, that benevolent paternalism has its limitations: it cannot substitute the desire for self-rule. Nor is the docility of the masses a true mirror of the surging wave of revolutionary thinking taking place in the community. And in any society, advanced or under-developed, it is the thinking few that often bring about a quiet change or a coup d’etat and not the inarticulate sector. Moreover, pretty often there is one salient fact which is ignored in the analysis of political changes in the emergent nations and that is, no demagogue or a group of oligarchy can impose his or its opinions on the masses without the subtle device of persuasion; their logic and rhetorics must convince the citizenry who, as we have seen, are not just robots controlled by some mechanical contraption. The thinking and dynamic few who have acquired the "cult" of the White man (education and the science of politics) are the legitimate defenders of the rights