

'Why I wrote a book on Awo'

Dr. Insa Nolte is a lecturer of African Studies at the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom. She recently published a book on Chief Obafemi Awolowo. In this interview with Adewale Oshodi, she speaks about her time in Nigeria, why she chose to write on Chief Awolowo and how she has come to discover that the former Premier of Western Region remains one of the defining figures in the politics of post-independence Nigeria and, indeed, Africa. Excerpts:

WHAT prompted you to write the book on Chief Obafemi Awolowo?

I did not actually set out to write a book on Chief Awolowo! In a way, the book is the result of my longstanding interest in Nigeria and Yorubaland in particular, and in the end, I could not avoid Chief Awolowo. The story actually goes back in time. While I am now based in the UK, I am originally from Germany, and when I was a student there, I spent a year in Yaba, Lagos, with the International Cultural Youth Exchange programme then based at the Methodist Church on Herbert Macaulay Street. I think it is now based at 374 Borno Way, still in Alagomeji. I had a wonderful time living in a room and parlour on Olonode Street, walking to work during the week to Childville School in Ibikunle Street, and spending weekends with friends in Lagos or travelling to other towns and villages in Nigeria. The house I lived in belonged to the Adeolu family from Ode Remo, and after some time, they invited me to Ode Remo to visit the (late) *Alaiye* of Ode Remo, Oba Sunday Olufunso Adeolu, who used to play Chief Eleyinmi in the old TV series, *The Village Headmaster*. He and the *oloris* felt that I should see more of Nigeria than just the big cities and they were really very welcoming and friendly to me. At that time, I simply benefited from their hospitality and enjoyed the slightly slower pace of life in Remo during my visits, eating *Ikokore* with smoked fish in the house, or snacking on *suya* in Sabo, Sagamu. I used to bring bread and sweets with me when I went to Remo, and I usually bought *Gari Ijebu* to take back to Lagos as a fallback option for when I was too busy to cook.

I later returned home, but I kept in touch with Nigeria and Africa through the exchange programme, helping Germans to prepare for a trip to Nigeria or Ghana and supporting African exchange students from those countries in Germany. Through this work, I eventually met my friend, Esther Virgens, who had actually spent her exchange year in Ode Remo as an assistant nurse with (then) Oloye (Dr) Adedayo Adesino Adekoya of Losi Clinic, now Oba Amero from Ile-Ife. When she later married him, I had a real base in Ode Remo! I was very happy about this, and when I had moved to the UK and decided to do research for a PhD, I was able to return to Remo and to renew many friendships from my earlier stay.

At first, my plan was to look at many different towns in Nigeria to examine town politics, but I soon found that I could not leave Remo, because you cannot understand Ode Remo without looking at Akaka, Ipara, Isara, Ogere, Iperu, and Ilara, and you cannot understand the histories of these towns without learning about Sagamu, and then you must understand that Sagamu is constituted not only by Ofin, which is the home of the paramount ruler, the *Akarigbo* of Remo, but also of Makun, Epe and many other formerly independent towns as well as Sabo, and then you realise

that Sagamu itself relies on good relations to Irolu, Ikenne, and Ilisan, and that Ode Remo, Emuren and Ogijo are very important for the local economy because of the farmland and closeness to Lagos State, and there are so many smaller villages too where interesting and important people live. In all these places, the *obas*, chiefs and many younger people too were very, very patient with me, and I am very grateful to them for answering my many questions!

Once I had familiarised myself with the territory in more detail, I realised that Chief Awolowo played an incredibly important role in Remo politics. I was lucky in that the editor of my book, Professor JDY Peel, at the International Africa Institute, encouraged this approach - otherwise I might have been intimidated by the task. Also, I realised that even in the smallest village, Remo people really value independent judgement and political debate, and that they will only accept leadership if they are convinced that their leaders know what they (the so-called followers) want! As a result of this, I also began to think that the virtues which people in Remo value — education, enlightenment, co-operation and government by authority rather than force — had really influenced Chief Awolowo's politics beyond Remo, including at the level of the Western Region and national politics. It was then that I increasingly focused on him, and Oloye (Dr) Mrs HID Awolowo in Ikenne was very helpful in allowing me to use the Sopolu Library, which includes some of Chief Awolowo's papers and files.

In your research on Chief Awolowo, what did you discover that made him so popular among his people and Nigerians as a whole?

I think Chief Awolowo was an unusual man in his generation, even in the exceptional generation of nationalist leaders, because he was both a politician and an intellectual. *Path to Nigerian Freedom* remains a very important book on Nigeria, and there are many excellent arguments in his later political works as well. I also believe that as he matured as a politician, Chief Awolowo synthesised his own vision for Nigeria by drawing both on his (Western) education and on the local traditions and practices he had grown up with, which included an ongoing engagement with local opinion. In this way, he became a resourceful and imaginative politician, who was able to translate his concern for enlightenment and redistribution into many different debates and practices. I greatly admire his commitment to the common, rather than the private, good. But Chief Awolowo was also a fascinating man because he had a very principled character, and it seems to me that it is this quality which still divides opinion about him. But whatever one's view about Obafemi Awolowo is, he remains one of the defining figures of Nigerian and indeed African post-independence politics.

After a careful study and research on Chief Awolowo's politics and personality, can anyone



•Dr. Insa Nolte

who aspires to be like him study his way of life and wield the same influence he wielded, and even still wields among his people?

I am not a politician so I may not be the right person to ask! I think that it is very interesting that Chief Awolowo continues to inspire Nigerian (and especially Yoruba) politicians, and personally, I am very sympathetic to his emphasis on education, infrastructural development, health and social redistribution. However, I think that every time needs its own heroes, and a hero does not always have to be someone who starts out in politics. While Nigeria has produced many interesting political leaders, it also has an abundance of intellectual and artistic talent and some of the writers, poets and artists we see

coming up today may in time become spokespeople for their generation to the degree that others look to them for leadership.

Should we expect another book about another Nigerian nationalist anytime soon?

Never say never! I think my main area of interest is the South West, but there is still much to be said about Chief Awolowo as well as his followers and critics. However, I would really like to find a Nigerian publisher for the book first. I find it strange that my book should be available in the UK and, from next year, in the US, but not in Nigeria! While I have sent copies to many people who have helped me, I would really want Nigerians to be able to read the book: despite his relevance beyond Nigeria, Chief Awolowo was after all a Nigerian.

Briefly

Profiling of African artists in the US

TOMORROW, October 28, 2009, South African artist, Ruth Sacks, will highlight African artists based in the United States of America, in a programme entitled: *Conversations with a Continent: Profiles of African Artists*.

The event, which will take place at the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs, IAB Rm. 1512, 420 West 118th Street, New York, NY 10027, will be on from 6.30p.m to 8p.m, and it will profile several established contemporary African artists, many of whom live and exhibit in the US.

The informal discussions between a representative of the Museum for African Art, New York and the artist will provide an intimate glimpse into the this exciting and dynamic arts world.

The person championing the programme is Ruth Sacks, a South African artist who has taken part in a variety of exhibitions, including *.ZA giovane arte dal Sudafrica*, Palazzo delle Papesse in Siena (2008), the 52nd Venice Biennale in the African Pavilion (2007), and the 1st Architecture, Art and Landscape Biennial of the Canaries (2006). Recent and upcoming solo exhibitions include *Open Studio* at Galerie Cortex Athletico in Bordeaux, France (2007) and *Liquid History* at Extrapazzio (January 2010). She currently resides in Brussels, Belgium, where she is part of the HISK (Higher Institute for Fine Arts) studio program.