Saro Nationalism and the Roots of Elite Political Culture in Nigeria

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Abstract
With its size, human and material resources, Nigeria should be the foremost economic and military power in Africa. This is the natural destiny of the country. Unfortunately, Nigeria has failed to actualise its potential. The country remains from all indices a poor country, with over three-quarters of its population living below the poverty line. The Nigerian ruling elite operate a political culture whose identifying indices are corruption and the exploitation of governmental power to advance the pecuniary interests of its members. The article argues that elite political culture is the bane of Nigeria’s underdevelopment nexus. Against this background, it interrogates the nationalist ideology of the Nigerian educated elite and concludes that elite political culture is inherent in the variant of nationalism that took root in Nigeria in the nineteenth century.

Introduction
Nigeria occupies a unique position in Africa. With a quarter of the black African population and with its abundant human and material resources, Nigeria’s destiny is to be the engine of transformation and development of the African continent. Nigeria ought to be a symbol of African achievement and the pride of the black race. Nigeria and South Africa should serve as growth poles for the continent’s development and the guarantor of the security of the African people. This is, to quote Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria’s first president, “the historic mission and manifest destiny of Nigeria on the African continent.”

Unfortunately, the Nigerian ruling elite has failed to fulfil the country’s destiny. Nigerian leaders are experts at self-glorification and great lovers of highfalutin titles; they describe their country as ‘the giant of Africa’. But this is a giant whose clay feet are stuck in an elite-created quagmire of political instability and economic underdevelopment; a country unable or unwilling to transform itself from a potential to an actual power. The Nigerian ruling elite, civilian and military, the inheritors of the nationalist movement against colonial rule, has literally run the country
aground. Four decades after independence Nigeria remains politically unstable; there is no national cohesion or national purpose; Nigeria, some will argue, is a failed state.

Nigerians, and indeed all concerned Africans, are bound to wonder where the ruling elite got it wrong. Externalist explanations of the African underdevelopment nexus have been rendered moot by more than four decades of independence, and by the success stories of countries such as South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, China, and India, etc. George Ayittey and other internalist scholars are right in refocusing the underdevelopment debate on Africa’s internal dynamic, particularly the role of the ruling elite.²

It is against this background that the paper interrogates the nationalist ideology of the Nigerian educated elite from the nineteenth century. Since the 1940s when the educated elite intensified the nationalist movement, Nigerian politics has been marked by corruption, parochialism, regional and ethnic loyalties and shameless partisanship which has kept the country in a perpetual state of instability. This raises some questions: Is the elite attitude to politics inherent in the variant of nationalism that took root in Nigeria in the 19th century? If the educated elite resorted to parochialism and factionalism from the 1940s when they launched the nationalist movement, were they merely reflecting a tendency that had existed within the class since the emergence of nationalism in colonial Nigeria? Was this tendency a legacy which the nationalists of the 1940s inherited from their predecessors? Did the ruling elite inherit the tendency from the earlier generation of nationalists?

Roots of Elite Nationalism
The period covered in this study begins with the rise of the educated elite in the nineteenth century and terminates with the promulgation of the Richards Constitution in the 1940s. This permits us to trace the evolution of the nationalist ideology in the decades preceding the intensification of the nationalist movement. Within this period, nationalist activity was restricted mostly to southern Nigeria. Most of the educated elite could be found in this region, especially Lagos.

Anthony Smith’s definition of nationalism, and Coleman’s definition of Nigerian nationalism, provides the framework for our analysis of the ideology, objectives and activities of the educated elite in the period under study. Smith defines nationalism as “an ideological movement for the attainment and maintenance of self-government and
independence on behalf of a group, some of whose members conceive it to constitute an actual or potential ‘nation’.\textsuperscript{3}

Coleman defines Nigerian nationalism as “sentiment and activity on the part of Africans who claim some part of Nigeria as their home, aimed at the establishment of an independent Nigerian state and the creation of a Nigerian nation coextensive with that state.” Coleman explains further that this phenomenon is described simply as “nationalism” and an adherent a “nationalist”.\textsuperscript{4}

Both Coleman and Ajayi, in their works on Nigerian nationalism, have described the educated elite of our period as “nationalists”. How appropriate is this description? In the light of the definitions provided above, do the term “nationalist” and the ideology “nationalism” capture the essence of what the émigrés stood for? What is the extent of congruence, or deviation, between their objectives and activities and the expectations of our working definition?

Christian missionaries sowed the seeds of nationalism in Nigeria. As Ajayi makes quite clear, the missionaries believed that Christianity could best flourish in a society organised on the model of Europe. They found western education a crucial vehicle for the creation of the Christianized African society of their dream. Africans who imbied this education would also imbibe the “nationalist” ideas of the missionaries.\textsuperscript{5}

The task which the Christian missions had set for themselves was facilitated by the arrival in the nineteenth century of Sierra Leonean, Brazilian, and Cuban émigrés—educated and Christianized freed slaves—to Nigeria. Most of these emigrants, known locally as Saro, settled in Lagos and Abeokuta. These were also the primary centres of missionary activity in the nineteenth century. The Saro were thus the first generation of the educated elite in Nigeria and, according to Gabriel Olusanya, the first ‘nationalists’ as well.\textsuperscript{6} What was the focus and objective of Saro nationalism?

First, it must be stated that the Saro did not aspire to create an African nation. They could not in fact conceive of a Nigerian nation in the nineteenth century. From their arrival in the nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth century Saro nationalism was not in opposition to European activity in Africa. Instead, it sought to advance their class interest under the tutelage of the Christian missions.

For instance, in Lagos, the indigenous population saw the Saro as collaborators with the British in the destruction of traditional political authority.\textsuperscript{7} The commercial advantages which education provided the Saro, particularly in their role as agents for European traders along the
coast, poisoned their relations with the indigenous population. This ill-feeling precipitated uprisings against the Saro in Lagos in 1854 and 1856. With the annexation of Lagos in 1861, the Saro began to provide administrative services and political intelligence to the colonial administration. This was in addition to their role as agents of the Christian missions. Thus, from the perspective of the indigenous population both in Lagos and the hinterland, the Saro were promoting European interests.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the Saro assisted the colonial administration in Lagos to extend British influence into the interior. Although their interests sometimes clashed with those of European traders and missionaries, this was not strong enough to create a permanent breach between the Saro and the Europeans. Usually, the Saro complained about the extent to which racial differences determined the distribution of rewards and privileges between their group and the Europeans. The Saro expected that their elite status should guarantee them equal access with their European counterparts to privileges and positions. Although this expectation remained unfulfilled, the Saro found nothing wrong in helping to advance the missionary effort and extending the boundaries of colonial control.

We learn from Ade-Ajayi that Samuel Johnson and Bishop S.C. Phillips, both émigrés, “lent their services in establishing the Lagos Protectorate.” James Johnson provided missionary support for the new colonial administration in Benin. Dandeson Crowther and other émigré missionaries in the Niger Pastorate supported the Niger Coast Protectorate. When the British moved against King Jaja of Opobo in the western delta, Samuel Johnson “blessed” their action as “an act of God”.9

These examples reflect the collaborative attitude prevalent in the Saro community in the nineteenth century, especially among those who found fulfilment in their work with the missions or in the colonial administration. Perhaps, the most famous of these, in terms of personal achievement, or rather, the conferment of recognition by the Europeans was Samuel Ajayi Crowther. In 1864, Crowther was consecrated Anglican Bishop of West Africa and honoured with a Doctor of Divinity degree by Oxford University.

In 1868, G.W. Johnson, a Saro based in Abeokuta, wrote a letter to the editor of the London weekly, the African Times, arguing that the effort to “civilize and Christianize Africa” could only succeed if the British encouraged educated Africans to establish “self-government”.10 But on whose behalf, and in whose interest, was Johnson seeking self-government?
Abeokuta was the base of a large Saro community. It also had a strong missionary presence. The missionaries promoted the city as the model of their vision for Christianized Africa and were proud of their proselytizing work among the Egba (Abeokuta's indigenous population). In the mid-nineteenth century, political power in Abeokuta lay in the hands of the traditional ruling class and the missionaries preferred to keep it that way. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) mission, led by Henry Townsend, enjoyed the confidence of the Egba rulers and was able to exercise strong influence on their political actions. The Saro were unhappy with what they felt were missionary orchestrated attempts to exclude them from Egba politics. This situation was clearly intolerable to the Saro who believed that they were better equipped to deal with the British administration in Lagos. Johnson had in fact tried to organise his colleagues to seek for the reconstitution of the local government in Abeokuta into what he called "a civilised form of government" as a means to increasing the power and influence of the Saro community. In 1865, he had initiated the formation of the Egba United Board of Management, EUBM, on the model of the colonial government. His letter to the editor of the African Times was therefore aimed at gaining support for this class objective. Its primary purpose was to advance the class interest of the Saro community, or the educated elite.

This conclusion is supported by the fact that Abeokuta was not at that time under British imperial control; hence, the plea for self-government could not have been directed at the colonial government. Johnson was seeking British assistance to enable the Saro supplant traditional authority in the control of Egba affairs. To make the project attractive to the British Johnson added that "self-government" would promote the missionary effort. Not surprisingly, Bishop Ajayi Crowther condemned the self-government project, describing it as an act of ingratitude:

There are some half-educated, unprincipled young men about this country who have taken advantage of any seeming countenance from me or other natives of position, as if we were backing them in their short-sighted presumption when they said they were able of themselves to civilise and evangelise their own countrymen without European support.
Johnson belonged to the group of émigrés who have been described as “extremists”, in contrast to moderates like Bishop Crowther. In fact, both the moderate and the extremist wings of the émigré community sought the extension of British norms and values in Africa. The difference lay in the fact that the latter wanted access to political power to advance its class interest. Their call for self-government was not in the larger interest of the Egba and was thus parochial in nature. Their objective was neither to create a nation nor to improve the social conditions of the larger African society. In fact, according to the criteria established in our working definition, it is difficult to describe the extremists or the moderates as nationalists or their ideology as nationalism. But as members of the educated elite Johnson and his group were the first to seek self-government for parochial group interest. Parochialism and collaboration are therefore the fundamental essence of Saro nationalism.

The gradual extension of Pax Britannica into the Nigerian hinterland created some measure of political and social stability which enhanced the missionary effort and the spread of western education. By the first decades of the twentieth century, the class of the educated elite had expanded to embrace non-emigrants. Although the emigrants would initially retain their dominance over the class, this would be challenged by the indigenous elite as the twentieth century unfolded.

The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates into the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria in 1914 established the territorial boundaries for a potential Nigerian nation. Amalgamation gave a geopolitical focus to the nationalist agenda: the educated elite could now agitate for an independent Nigerian nation.

The promulgation of the Clifford constitution in 1922 made it possible for the nationalists to participate in colonial politics. The constitution introduced the elective principle for the election of four Nigerians—three from Lagos and one from Calabar—into a new Legislative Council in Lagos. The jurisdiction of the Council was restricted to the South while the Governor ruled the North by proclamation. The North’s tenuous connection with the Council was maintained through the Lieutenant-Governor who, by virtue of his membership of the Executive Council, could sit in the Legislative Council.

The restriction of the elective principle to the South was a continuation of the colonial government’s policy of insulating the North from nationalist influences from the South. Hence, whereas the
elective principle stimulated political activity in Lagos and Calabar, such opportunities were denied the North. This impeded the evolution of a pan-Nigerian consciousness and contributed significantly to the institutionalization of Saro nationalism.

In order to make use of the opportunities for political activity created by the new constitution Herbert Macaulay and other members of the Saro community in Lagos, Egerton-Shyngle, Dr. C. C. Adeniyi-Jones and J.C. Zizer, inaugurated the Nigerian National Democratic Party, NNDP, in June 1923. Understandably, the party’s political objectives were infused with Saro nationalism. Like the EUMB in Abeokuta in the nineteenth century, the NNDP wanted municipal status and local self-government for Lagos. The administrative arrangement imposed by the Clifford constitution was acceptable to the NNDP as long as its members could wield power and influence in Lagos. At no point throughout its entire existence (1923-1944) did the NNDP agitate for Nigerian independence or, for that matter, the extension of the elective principle to the North. On the contrary, the party confined itself to the Lagos arena and was only concerned with local matters.

The NNDP was therefore “Nigerian” only in name; its nationalism could hardly be described as such. And in conformity with the collaborative tendencies of Saro nationalism the party defined its broad aims as

To secure the safety or welfare of the people of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria as an integral part of the British Imperial Commonwealth and...to maintain an attitude of unswerving loyalty to the throne and Person of His Majesty the King Emperor... (Emphasis added).14

This attitude explains why Macaulay’s criticism of the government in his newspaper, the Lagos Daily News, was so muted. Coleman asserts that Macaulay “was so saturated in the British tradition that his...appeals for the redress of grievances were usually made on the grounds of the ‘inviolate rights’ of ‘British subjects’, or of the ‘manifold blessings of Pax Britannica’”15 Saro nationalism was the operational ideology of Macaulay’s Daily News.

Since the NNDP was not fundamentally opposed to the colonial administration and was not seeking to supplant it in Nigeria, the party leader, Macaulay, directed his attention to those elements among the
educated elite who opposed Saro nationalism. His role in this regard is best described by Coleman:

For nearly four decades he did more than any other man to create divisions among the educated elements in Lagos. His ruthless abandon in vilifying his opponents in his paper and on the platform left deep and unhealed scars which decidedly influenced later developments within the nationalist movement.16

By promoting the desire of the House of Dosumu to re-establish its control over the Obaship institution in Lagos Macaulay was able, in Awolowo’s words, to trade “on the gullibility of his unsophisticated...adherents” who provided electoral support for the NNDP.17 This enabled the NNDP to dominate Lagos politics for almost two decades. Within the period, Macaulay was able to institutionalize Saro nationalism and the politics of vilification into the nationalist movement. Saro nationalism would henceforth become the dominant attitude in the educated elite although before its eventual triumph advocates of pan-Nigerian nationalism would make a new attempt to control and direct the nationalist movement.

Those who initiated this challenge in the 1930s were indigenous members of the educated elite, not Saros like the leaders of the NNDP. These were members of a new generation, unencumbered by the loyalty of the Saro to the British tradition. The educational policy of the colonial administration provided these young nationalists the excuse to enter the mainstream of party politics.

In 1934, the government established the Yaba Higher College in Lagos to award Nigerian diplomas in various fields ranging from medicine to economics. The nationalists believed that the programme offered by the college was substandard and was designed to keep Nigerians in subordinate positions in the public service. To promote their opposition to the programme some of these nationalists, led by Dr. J.C. Vaughan, Ernest Ikoli, H.O. Davies and Samuel Akinsanya founded the Lagos Youth Movement, LYM, in 1934.

It should be noted that unlike the NNDP the LYM was not dominated or controlled by the Saro community in Lagos. In fact, the Youth Movement took it upon itself to challenge the dominance of those it described as “native foreigners” over the nationalist movement.18 All the
members of the educated elite who were dissatisfied with *Saro nationalism* found the Movement a credible alternative.

The LYM’s campaign against the Yaba Higher College could not sway the government from implementing its educational programme. However, this very failure must have sharpened the nationalist consciousness of its members for in 1936 they transformed the movement into a political party and renamed it the Nigerian Youth Movement, NYM. Nnamdi Azikiwe’s membership in the Movement, which he joined in 1937, helped to mobilize the political support of the Igbo and other non-Yoruba groups in Lagos.

By 1938 the NYM had become what one commentator described as “the first Nigeria-wide multitribal [sic] nationalist organisation in Nigerian history” with branches in Ibadan, Ijebu-Ode, Warri and Benin City in the west; Aba, Enugu, Port Harcourt and Calabar in the east; and Jos, Zaria, Kaduna and Kano in the north. At its delegates conference in 1938 the party called for among other things, the abolition or reform of indirect rule and the representation of the provinces, including the North, in the Legislative Council. The NYM’s Youth Charter spelt out its national agenda quite explicitly:

> The principle of the Nigerian Youth Movement is the development of a united nation out of the conglomeration of peoples who inhabit Nigeria. It shall be our endeavour to encourage the fullest play of all such forces as will serve to promote complete understanding and a sense of common nationalism among the different elements in the country. We would combat vigorously all such tendencies as would jeopardise the unifying process.

This was the first time since the missionaries introduced the concept of nationalism into Nigeria that some members of the educated elite would articulate a nationalist ideology which is in complete accord with our working definition. One of the leaders of the party, H.O. Davies, promised the country: “We can never split, no, never. We are not a party; we are a national government whose mission is the regeneration of our fatherland.”

This was undoubtedly a nationalist commitment of great import. It would be interesting to see whether the Youth Movement would be able to abide by this commitment, or whether it would succumb to *Saro*
nationalism and the politics of vilification instituted by Macaulay. The acid test was not long in coming.

In 1938, the Youth Movement challenged the NNDP in the election for the seats in the Lagos Town Council and the Legislative Council. The party’s new nationalism appears to have gained support among the electorate. It won all but one of the seats in the Lagos Town Council and the three seats in the Legislative Council. The NYM’s victory brought the dominance of the NNDP on Lagos politics to an end. However, the latter’s ideology, Saro nationalism, appeared to have seeped deep into the ethos of the educated elite. The leaders of the NYM, whose advocacy of pan-Nigerian nationalism held so much promise for a Nigerian nation-in-being, also adopted Saro nationalism in their pursuit of personal political advantage.

The signs were there even in 1938, the very year the party achieved electoral victory. The Movement relied on the West African Pilot, owned and edited by a member of its executive committee, Nnamdi Azikiwe, to propagate its views. However, the leaders of the Movement felt that Azikiwe was unwilling to sacrifice his business interests for the party’s political aspirations. Consequently, in June 1938, they established the Daily Service as a party newspaper and appointed Ernest Ikoli, another member of the executive committee, editor. Azikiwe appears to have resented this competition. The acrimony which surrounded this episode breached the cohesion in the Movement, leading to the resignation of Azikiwe from the executive committee. According to Awolowo "articles and reports inimical to the interests of the NYM and derogatory of its leaders" began to appear in the Pilot. The breach in the NYM became a gulf in 1941.

The problem arose with the nomination of a candidate to replace Dr. K. A. Abayomi in the Legislative Council. Dr. Abayomi’s seat was declared vacant early in 1941 when he travelled to the United Kingdom for a specialist course in ophthalmology. Ernest Ikoli, who had just been elected President of the Movement, declared his desire to contest the by-election. The Movement’s policy, adopted in 1938, was that when the President declared his interest to contest an election he should be selected automatically. On the basis of this policy, only two of the three seats in the Legislative Council had been thrown open to the party members in 1938. The third seat had been granted to the President, Dr. Abayomi.

But in 1941, Samuel Akinsanya, the only NYM candidate who lost the election to the Lagos Town Council in 1938 and who had recently been elected Vice President, insisted, with Azikiwe’s backing, on
contesting against Ikoli, in spite of the party policy. If we are to believe Awolowo, who alone among the principal characters has written about the episode, Akinsanya’s supporters argued that he “had laboured much for the NYM and was overdue for rich reward, and none could be more appropriate and befitting than his election to the Legislative Council.”

Although Chief Awolowo, who opposed Akinsanya, may be partisan in his explanation, he does provide a clue to why Akinsanya and Azikiwe were prepared to sacrifice the Movement’s cohesiveness and its more important nationalist agenda on the alter of personal ambition. Interestingly Azikiwe does not even mention the NYM or this particular episode in his autobiography, My Odyssey, which was published ten years after Awolowo’s.

Now that the Movement was confronted with making a choice between two of its members the candidates and their supporters abandoned their pan-Nigerian nationalist ideology and fell back on Saro nationalism. But in this instance the latter could no longer be sustained on racial consciousness as their forebears had done in previous decades. Saro nationalism found a more secure base in the ethnic group identity of the candidates and their promoters. The campaign was conducted on this platform. Azikiwe’s paper, the West African Pilot which promoted Akinsanya, and the Daily Service, which supported Ikoli, appealed to the electorate on the basis of their ethnic affiliation to the candidates. When Ikoli won, Azikiwe and Akinsanya charged that it was because of ethnic discrimination against the Igbo and Ijebu-Yoruba (Azikiwe and Akinsanya’s ethnic groups). Azikiwe and Akinsanya deserted the Movement, along with their Igbo and Ijebu kinsmen. With the triumph of Saro nationalism in the Movement, the party ceased to be a credible alternative to the NNDP.

The NYM could hardly survive the schism which Saro nationalism had created in its ranks. Its leaders went their separate ways. Some exchanged their nationalist ideology for government appointments. For instance, H.O. Davies, the militant nationalist who wrote the Youth Charter, became a government marketing officer. Akinsanya went back to his roots, becoming the Oba (traditional ruler) of his hometown. Azikiwe’s Igbo supporters and their Ijebu allies transferred their allegiance to the NNDP. Azikiwe himself would later team up with Macaulay to launch a new political party, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons, NCNC, in 1944.
The NYM's pan-Nigerian nationalism proved to be very ephemeral. It was very appealing but lacked depth. *Saro nationalism* was much more resilient; having found a secure base in the country's poly-ethnic configuration, it would shape the political culture of the ruling class as the country evolved towards self-government and independence. The constitutional and administrative arrangements which the colonial government initiated from the 1940s provided a fertile ground for the institutionalisation of *Saro nationalism*. Henceforth, it would take the form of ethnic nationalism, ethnic politics and regionalism.

In 1939, the government divided the South into two administrative divisions—the Eastern and the Western group of provinces while the North was left intact. This created separate ethnic spheres which the educated elite could exploit to advance their political ambitions. The Richards constitution of 1946 consolidated this arrangement. It gave each of the three regions a House of Assembly while the North also got a House of Chiefs. It created a Central Legislative Council in which the North was for the first time represented.

The regional structure established the administrative and political parameters for the growth of *Saro nationalism*. Since the regions were coterminous with the country's ethnic configuration, ethnic nationalism and regional loyalties became the major instruments employed by the educated elite in the contest for political power. Regionalism made it easier for the educated elite to exploit ethnic loyalties in what became an inter-regional and inter-ethnic contest to control the central government. Henceforth, the contest for the control of the central government in the decade before independence, and after, would be between three major political parties each of which represented one of the three regions and was dominated by the educated elite of the majority ethnic group in the region.

With the triumph of *Saro nationalism* over a pan-Nigerian nationalist ideology, the educated elite were ready to employ all imaginable political vices in a fierce competition to control power which the British transferred to them at independence in October 1960. Since then the ruling elite have operated a political culture which has kept the state in a perpetual state of instability, the people pauperised and the country grossly underdeveloped. That political culture derives its roots from *Saro nationalism*. 

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Conclusion
In spite of its enormous human and material resources, Nigeria has remained politically unstable and economically underdeveloped since independence in 1960. In searching for answers to this unfortunate state of affairs, the article has interrogated the nationalist ideology of the Nigerian educated elite from its roots in the nineteenth century. The analysis leads to the conclusion that elite political behaviour has its roots in the way the émigrés, who were the first generation of the educated elite, interpreted the nationalist ideology that was introduced to colonial Nigeria by Christian missionaries. Actualising Nigeria’s potential is therefore contingent upon a fundamental transformation of elite attitudes to governance in the country.

Endnotes


