

## **Reconsidering Nigeria's Role in the Southern African Struggles\***

Journal of Management and  
Social Sciences  
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### **Abstract**

This paper examines xenophobic attacks on Nigerian nationals living in post-apartheid South Africa in spite of Nigeria's significant contributions to the Southern African struggles for majority rule.

"We shall endeavour to remain on friendly terms with every nation which recognises and respects our sovereignty, and we shall not blindly follow the lead of anyone. So far as is possible, the policy for each occasion will be selected with a proper independent objectivity in Nigeria's national interest. We consider it wrong for the Federal Government to associate itself, as a matter of routine, with any of the power blocs. This freedom of action will be an essential feature of our policy founded on Nigeria's interest and will be consistent with the moral and democratic principles on which our Constitution is based." Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, "A Policy for Foreign Affairs," August 10, 1960, Lagos<sup>1</sup>.

"It is the desire of Nigeria to remain on friendly terms with all nations and to participate actively in the work of the United Nations Organisation. Nigeria, a large and populous country has absolutely no territorial or expansionist intentions. We shall not forget our old friends and we are proud to have been accepted as a member of the Commonwealth, but we do not intend to align ourselves as a matter of routine with any of the power blocs. We are committed to uphold the principles upon which the United Nations Organisation is founded. Nigeria hopes to work with other African states for the progress of Africa and to assist in bringing all African territories to a state of responsible independence. Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, "Sovereign Nigeria and the World.," October 8, 1960, New York<sup>2</sup>.

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## Introduction

Any discussion of xenophobic attacks on Nigerian nationals living in post-apartheid South Africa and the destruction of their businesses among others in the country culminating in their hasty evacuation from harm's way in the country would be incomplete without an examination of Nigeria's role in the Southern African struggles for majority rule. To be sure, any discussion of Nigeria's role in the armed struggles leading to the liberation of Africans from oppression and discrimination in racist regimes in Southern Africa is a product of many factors including the circumstances in which Nigeria got her colonial freedom, the 'state' of the Nigerian economy since independence, the quality of leadership at the Federal level and leadership style, as well as the country's relations with Nigeria's "old friends" and the nature of the international system.

Nigeria got her 'flag' independence from Great Britain without armed struggles unlike other African countries such as Algeria, Guinea and Kenya. This is what Frantz Fanon described as "false decolonization" because Frantz Fanon argues and rightly too, that since colonialism was imposed through violence, then it must be terminated through violence and armed struggles. Specifically, Algeria and Kenya got colonial independence from France and Great Britain respectively through armed struggles. In spite of the country's enormous resource endowment, Nigeria's economy was and is still a dependency, thanks to the policies of indigenisation and privatization/commercialisation of public enterprises and the neo-liberal policy of globalization being sold to unsuspecting Third World countries as the solution to their 'state' of underdevelopment and dependency.<sup>4</sup>

Although the oil boom in the 1970s and 1980s catapulted Nigeria into a situation whereby Nigeria started to be called a "Giant of Africa.", though it is largely and essentially, a "Crippled Elephant," or a "Crippled Giant,"<sup>5</sup> and because of the quality of leadership at the Federal level in the early 60s, Nigeria became one of the few African countries that participated effectively in some United Nations anti-colonial bodies such as the United Nations Council on Namibia and the United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid, as well as being one of the Eleven-Member Organisation of African Unity (OAU). Liberation Committee based in Dares-Salaam, Tanzania and named a frontline State in the Southern African struggles though it was far away from the **situs** of armed struggles in Southern Africa.

True it is, that the Leader of the Opposition at the Federal Parliament (House of Representatives) and a foremost Nigerian nationalist, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, deplored white settler regimes in East and Central Africa as well as South Africa's apartheid system and that Nigeria's relations with the outside world should be guided by 'honest conviction of national interest,'<sup>6</sup> whatever that meant. Additionally, true it is that the country's first Prime Minister, who

was equally the Foreign Minister in the twilight of independence, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, in his **Foreign Policy Statement** made on the floor of the House of Representatives on August 10, 1960, not only maintained that Nigeria would be a strong advocate of respect for the black races but he was also unequivocal in the condemnation of South Africa's racist policies: True it is, that the Leader of the Opposition at the Federal Parliament (House of Representatives) and a foremost Nigerian nationalist, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, deplored white settler regimes in East and Central Africa as well as South Africa's apartheid system and that Nigeria's relations with the outside world should be guided by 'honest conviction of national interest,'<sup>6</sup> whatever that meant. Additionally, true it is that the country's first Prime Minister, who was equally the Foreign Minister in the twilight of independence, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, in his **Foreign Policy Statement** made on the floor of the House of Representatives on August 10, 1960, not only maintained that Nigeria would be a strong advocate of respect for the black races but he was also unequivocal in the condemnation of South Africa's racist policies:

We shall maintain cordial relations with all the other nations of the world, firmly opposing all forms of aggression and striving always to obtain the observance everywhere of those human rights which all parties in Nigeria have agreed upon as fundamental, in particular, freedom from racial or religious discrimination.<sup>7</sup>

On December 14, 1960, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a Resolution entitled "Declaration of the Granting of Independence to Colonial Territories and Peoples." The Year 1960 was of crucial importance to African liberation movements which received much diplomatic support and wide media coverage from Egypt under President Gamel Abd Nasser, while Algeria provided arms and military training for armed struggles through the Liberation Committee.<sup>8</sup> Nigeria's Foreign Minister in the First Republic, Jaja Wachukwu, caused a stir at the XVI Session of the United Nations General Assembly {UNGA} when he proposed that Africa's decolonization should be stretched to 1970, whereas all nations at the time had advocated immediate liquidation of the colonial system in Africa. It was small wonder then when/that the All Nigerian Peoples' Conference, convened in August 1961 in Lagos by the Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa to review and support the policy of the Federal Government, condemned it (the Federal Government) for failing to provide material assistance to the National Liberation Movements, adding that the Movements distrusted Nigeria's leadership.<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, the attitude of the Balewa Administration to decolonization in Africa can be demonstrated in its reaction to the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) by the Ian Smith regime in Rhodesia on October 11, 1965, as well as its defiance of the OAU Resolution of May 1963 calling not

only for the isolation of the racist regimes in Central Africa but also for Nigeria's refusal to break diplomatic relations with Ian Smith's Rhodesia and Portugal which then maintained a stranglehold over Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Sao-Tome and Principe. In Rhodesia, the United Kingdom Government was given an ultimatum by the OAU Council of Ministers to crush Ian Smith's UDI by December 31, 1965 or face diplomatic ruptures with African countries. At the expiration of the ultimatum, only **eleven** African countries including Egypt and Tanzania severed diplomatic relations with the UK, with Egypt offering to send armed troops to Rhodesia to fight the Ian Smith regime. Nigeria not only refused to break diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom as directed by the OAU but also organized a **face-saving** Commonwealth Prime Ministers Summit in Lagos early January 1966, and on January 15, 1966, the Balewa administration was toppled in a bloody military **coup d'etat**.<sup>10</sup>

While and although there were flashes of emotional outbursts by the Balewa Government against the racist and settler regimes in East and Central Africa as well as South Africa, and colonial authorities in Africa, outbursts which were products of pressures by civil society organisations and human rights activists, the Balewa policy on decolonisation and anti-colonialism was condemned by a Member of the ruling Northern Peoples' Congress in the Federal Parliament, Ibrahim Gusau, who lamented that Nigeria "completely ignored dependent African nations," asking the Foreign Ministry to controvert the widely-held view that Nigeria was not a "satellite" of Great Britain because events have shown that Nigeria was a puppet of the United Kingdom.<sup>11</sup>

Nigeria entered a new phase of anti-colonialism in the post-civil war era, thanks to the oil boom of the early 1970s and dynamism introduced by Generals Yakubu Gowon and Murtala Mohammed into the country's foreign policy pronouncements. While Nigeria paid her annual contributions to the OAU Liberation Fund regularly (£325,500) between 1964 and 1968, being the second largest contributor after Egypt (which contributed £387,500) followed by Ghana (which provided £139,500),<sup>12</sup> she (Nigeria) suspended further payments to the Liberation Fund, partly because Nigeria felt that Tanzania, which accorded diplomatic recognition to the Republic of Biafra during the 1967-1970 (Civil War) was using the OAU Liberation Fund to support the Republic of Biafra and, partly because of sharp disagreements among members of the OAU Liberation Committee as to their respective roles in the committee, and partly, because of issue of financial accountability.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Nigeria provided direct assistance to the National Liberation Movements in Africa by supporting them with scholarships (to study in Nigerian secondary and tertiary institutions), ammunition, food, medicine and transport facilities, among others, with General Gowon emphasising that Nigeria would work relentlessly for the total eradication and elimination of colonialism and racism in Africa.

Undoubtedly, Nigeria's changing attitude with respect to support of African liberation and decolonization movements was as a result of the support given to the Republic of Biafra by Portugal, Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa, in collaboration with Israel. Nigeria opposed any form of **Dialogue** with apartheid South Africa as enunciated at the 1971 OAU Summit and at the June 1971 Meeting of the OAU Council of Ministers. Nigeria, supported by Ethiopia rejected any form of Dialogue with apartheid South Africa. Nigeria supported Zambia under Kenneth Kaunda financially for closing its borders with Rhodesia as a step in further isolating Rhodesia but regrettably felt that Rhodesia's problem was better solved by Great Britain, demonstrating the height of naivety, while regarding the problems of Namibia and apartheid South Africa as those of the United Nations. Addressing the 29<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Nigeria's Commissioner for External Affairs, Dr. Okoi Arikpo, noted "the significance of UN support for Africa in the final liquidation of colonialism in Africa especially in Namibia and South Africa." Unfortunately, for many African leaders, enlightened self-interests by the United States, Great Britain, Federal Republic of Germany, Portugal and Israel militated against the liquidation of settler regimes in Southern Africa.

On July 26, 1975, General Gowon was removed from office in a military **coup d'état** for many reasons, an examination of which need not detain us here.<sup>14</sup> He was replaced by General Murtala Mohammed who brought more dynamism to Nigeria's foreign policy such as strengthening of inter-African cooperation and intensification of the struggles against racist and settler regimes in Southern Africa particularly following the **coup d'état** that toppled the Caetano regime in Portugal and his replacement by General Spínola (who reneged on the decolonisation of Portuguese Africa) and the equal displacement of General Spínola by General Gomes.

While decolonisation and the lowering of the Portuguese flags in Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Sao-Tome and Principe were relatively peaceful, the lack of unanimity among the nationalist movements in Angola (MPLA, FNLA and UNITA, with FLEC threatening secession of oil rich Cabinda (reminding African leaders of the Congo disaster),<sup>15</sup> and the intervention of extra-African powers, created a serious dilemma for many African leaders.

Just as Belgium hurriedly gave independence to the Congo in June 1960 without much, indeed, any, preparation, Portugal, without ensuring agreements among the contending nationalist movements and much against the pleas by Nigeria and other African states to delay Angolan independence slated for November 11, 1975, hurriedly withdrew from Angola, leading to political and economic chaos in Angola and dissensions among OAU member-States with respect to the position to take regarding Angolan independence, with several OAU member-States led by Nigeria (initially) in favour of a Government of National Unity. In the **interim**, the MPLA announced the formation of a Peoples Republic of Angola with Luanda as its capital while the FNLA-

UNITA announced the establishment of the Social Democratic Republic of Angola with Huambo as its capital, setting the stage for a **show-down** by the two parties.<sup>16</sup> Because there was incontrovertible evidence that apartheid South African forces were supporting FNLA-UNITA forces and that introduced a new dimension to the Angolan crisis. On November 25, 1975, Nigeria under General Mohammed, accorded diplomatic (*de jure*) recognition to the MPLA Government while other OAU member-States preferred a GNU, leading to the convening of an OAU Extra-Ordinary Summit slated for January 11, 1976.

Meanwhile, Nigeria actively campaigned for the recognition of the MPLA Government by the OAU Member-States while the United States President, Gerald Ford who succeeded the disgraced Richard Nixon warned OAU member-States through a Letter sent to African Heads of States and Governments against recognising the MPLA Government with Nigeria's military Leader calling off the **bluff** of the United States President telling him (President Ford) to mind his own business.

Addressing the OAU Extra-Ordinary Summit on January 11, 1976, General Mohammed gave a fiery Speech, **Africa Has Come of Age** which has been regarded as "declaration of radical Nigerian Pan Africanist ideals."<sup>17</sup> He noted forcefully and this is significant:

Let us make no mistake about the problem which confronts us at this Session. It is not the question of a simple solution in the African tradition. Rather it is the danger of extra-African powers in collusion with the inhuman and obnoxious regime in Pretoria trying to frustrate the will of a people, who having sustained a heroic struggle against a most brutal colonialist repression, are on the threshold of a glorious dawn of national self-determination. If neo-colonialists succeed in Angola, then our hopes for Southern Africa will have been dashed.

Because General Mohammed did not mince words, his Speech saved the Day for the MPLA, and as a consequence, the OAU recognized the MPLA Government as the **legitimate (defacto and de jure)** Government, representing the **whole** of Angola. Armed with the OAU decision, Nigeria provided more and additional direct material assistance to the African National Liberation Movements as shown in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Nigeria's Assistance to African Liberation Movements**

<b>Nigeria's Assistance to African Liberation Movements</b>	
1	Special South African Fund to which the Federal Government donated ₦2,500,000.00 (Two Million, Five Hundred Thousand Naira) supported by donations by CSOS and individuals.
2	At Mozambiquean Independence Celebration, the sum of ₦1,500,000.00 (One Million, Five Hundred Thousand Naira) was donated by Nigeria to Mozambique for closing her borders with Rhodesia;
3	Angola received ₦13,500,000.00 (Thirteen Million, Five Hundred Thousand Naira) from Nigeria as a show of solidarity with the MPLA Government. <sup>19</sup>

Obviously, the radical foreign policy posture of General Mohammed was regarded as a threat to Western capitalist interests in Africa, particularly as the United States was displeased with the presence of Soviet and Cuban Military Advisers in Angola. On February 13, 1976, General Mohammed was assassinated in an abortive **coup d'état** led by Lt.-Colonel Bukar Dimka. While the Olusegun Obasanjo Administration which succeeded the Murtala Mohammed Administration reiterated its commitment to the continuation of the policy of the Murtala Mohammed Administration with respect to the Southern African struggles, and the Commissioner for External Affairs, Brigadier Joseph N. Garba told an Extra-Ordinary Summit of the OAU Council of Ministers that the assassination of General Mohammed would not in any way entail any fundamental change in Nigeria's domestic and foreign policy, the commitment of the Obasanjo Administration to implement the transition-to-civil rule programme and Nigeria-United States' *rapprochement* changed the course of events in South Africa and Rhodesia that are not fundamentally at variance with Western economic interests, though the year 1976 saw intensive diplomatic activities in the struggle against colonialism and apartheid.

First, Nigeria intensified campaigns for sanctions against South Africa as well as against recognition of the independence of the Bantustan Transkei and as Brigadier Garba put it:

The so-called independence of Transkei was devised to create confusion among the blacks of South Africa<sup>20</sup>.

Second, Nigeria not only condemned the 1976 Soweto Massacre of black South Africans, reaffirming the country's total support for armed struggles in South Africa, it also opposed South Africa's diplomatic offensive of "**Detente**", with Nigeria joining OAU member-States to oppose "**Detente**". Third, the Obasanjo Administration embarked on arm-twisting of Western Powers such as blacklisting multinational corporations maintaining business links with apartheid South Africa.<sup>21</sup> Fourth, the Obasanjo Administration in 1978 directed all government agencies to close all their Accounts in all the branches of Barclays Bank DCO in the country. Fifth, following Reports that the United Kingdom Government had authorised the British Petroleum

Company to sell oil to apartheid, South Africa, in clear and gross violation of United Nations sanctions, and because the United Kingdom accorded recognition to the Ian Smith-Bishop Muzorewa Regime in Rhodesia, the Obasanjo Administration nationalised the subsidiary of British Petroleum Company in Nigeria, thus, compelling a change in the position of the United Kingdom Government led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, with respect to the Rhodesian crisis, a decision which eventually paved way for the Lancaster House Agreement and the independence of Zimbabwe led by Robert Mugabe.

Meanwhile, the nature of Nigeria's political economy and the preoccupation of the Obasanjo Administration with the transition-to-civil-rule programme necessitated a reappraisal of the country's foreign policy with respect to decolonization in appreciation of the "virtues" of United States policies in Southern Africa as enunciated in the controversial National Security Memorandum 39 of April 1969, dealing with United States Strategy in South Africa as well as a Secret Study ("D-18") on United States Global Strategy.<sup>22</sup>

Put differently, prior to 1977, Nigeria had always taken a position that the Southern African problem could **only** be resolved through armed struggles.<sup>23</sup> With Nigerian-United States **rapprochement**, Nigeria favoured a **negotiated** settlement of the Rhodesian crisis though the United States under President Carter supported apartheid, South Africa, providing military hardware to the Rhodesian regime to combat armed struggles by Robert Mugabe and his compatriots. More significant, Nigeria held a reconciliatory and mediatory position between Africa and Western Powers whose nationals' assets were threatened by the continued insurgency in Southern Africa. At the International Conference on the Strategies for Dismantling Apartheid in Lagos in August 1977 jointly organised by the United Nations Committee on Apartheid and Nigeria, Nigeria's position surprised many Observers, because rather than embracing anti-colonial and anti-Western sentiments espoused by many African / Extra-African countries and National Liberation Movements opposed to the policy of appeasement, Nigeria played a mediatory role, resulting in the **Programme of Action** adopted at the Conference being less radical than expected.<sup>24</sup> A similar position was taken by Nigerian delegates at other international fora including the United Nations Security Council specifically convened to discuss apartheid. The Obasanjo Administration delivered the **coup de grace** by establishing diplomatic relations with Iran under the Shah regime which had been secretly supplying apartheid South Africa with oil in serious breach of United Nations mandatory sanctions against apartheid South Africa.

While the Shagari Administration maintained the rhetorical anti-colonialism, which was the hallmark of the Balewa Administration, Nigeria provided material support to various National Liberation Movements (African National Congress and South West African People's Organization) in Southern

Africa and rejected any linkage of the presence of Cuban Military Advisers in Angola with the implementation of United Nations Resolution 435 of 1978 on Namibian Independence. However, the 'state' of Nigeria's political economy during the Shagari Administration and the character of the Administration with its support for neo-liberalism limited the freedom of action of the Shagari Administration with respect to the Southern African struggles.

The Buhari Administration which succeeded the Shagari Administration following a **coup d'état** on December 31, 1983, was less pro-American or pro-Western. Its style of administration, particularly its rejection of devaluation, removal of subsidies, International Monetary Fund conditionalities and privatisation of Public Enterprises and recourse to **counter-trade** did not endear it to the Western Powers.<sup>25</sup> However, the Administration enunciated radical foreign policy objectives which included recognition of Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, allowing the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) to open an office in Lagos and rejection of the "constructive engagement" and "linkage" policies of the United States and provision of material assistance to the National Liberation Movements in Southern Africa, with the Minister of External Affairs lamenting the fact that,

It was distressing to find that South Africa had broken out of the international isolation in which the World seemed to have put her in the '60s and '70s. South Africa was not only getting more aggressive; it was trying to get more respectability.<sup>26</sup>

The Babangida Administration which succeeded the Buhari Administration in August 1985 following a palace **coup d'état** did not do much short of applying secondary sanctions against apartheid South Africa and providing military assistance to National Liberation Movements in South Africa and Namibia. However, Nigeria rejected the suggestion of sending Nigerian troops to assist Angola facing concerted security (border) attacks from South Africa.

Overall, Nigeria's role in the Southern African struggles can be seen in terms of propaganda against racism, colonialism and apartheid as well as material assistance to many countries in Southern Africa as shown in Table 2:

**Table 2: Nigeria's Assistance to Southern African Countries**

Year	Recipient	Amount (#M)
1972	Mozambique	1.0
1973	Liberation Fund (in addition to Regular Contributions)	0.15
1973	Guinea-Bissau	0.5
1974	Zambia	0.5
1975	Angola (MPLA)	13.5
1975	Zimbabwe (Liberation Movements)	0.13
1976	Mozambique (Liberation Movements)	0.15
1976	South Africa Liberation Movements	0.17
1979	ZANU	0.03
1979	Mozambique (Flood Victims)	0.64
1979	Mozambique (Refugees)	0.68
1983	ANC	0.28

**Source:** S.G. Tyoden, "Africa in Nigeria's Foreign Policy" in *Twenty-Five Years of Nigerian Foreign Policy*, p. 230

Nigeria championed the expulsion of South Africa from the Commonwealth at the 1961 Commonwealth Summit though South Africa ultimately withdrew from the organisation rather than face humiliation of expulsion being championed by Nigeria, India and Ghana. In addition to material assistance to colonial territories fighting for independence and liberation movements in Namibia, Rhodesia and South Africa, Nigeria provided scholarships to thousands of black South Africans to study in Nigerian secondary and tertiary institutions. One of them, Dr M. P. Matlou, who studied at the Mayflower School, Ikenne, founded by late Dr. Tai Solarin, was one-time Director-General of the Africa Institute of South Africa based in Pretoria, and there are many of them holding top positions in South Africa including Thabo Mbeki (later Vice-President and President of post-apartheid South Africa) and other parts of the World.

## Conclusion

We have examined Nigeria's role in the Southern African struggles against the background of xenophobic attacks by black South Africans directed against Nigerians living in South Africa. There is no doubt that Nigeria's contributions to the armed struggles in Southern Africa and realisation or attainment of majority rule in apartheid South Africa have not been reciprocated by Black South Africans, the main beneficiaries of majority rule. What we have witnessed from the xenophobic attacks is the unfortunate recourse to scape-

goatism by Black South Africans who see successful Nigerians as the source and cause of their misery and poverty rather than the ANC leadership, the 'heirs' to the throne. Whether Nigeria's role in the struggles against Portuguese colonialism, racism and apartheid is borne out of altruistic or selfish reasons, is not the concern of this study. We do know as a fact that Nelson Mandela and Winnie Mandela visited Nigeria following Nelson Mandela's release from prison by the South African Government though Nigeria was not his first Port of Call. Nigeria organised several Conferences to draw World attention to the evils of apartheid. The leader of the MPLA Government in Angola was honoured by Nigeria's Premier University, University of Ibadan with a Honorary Doctorate Degree at a Special Convocation Ceremony. What is obvious is that Nigeria's role in the Southern African struggles is a product of many factors including the circumstances in which Nigeria got her independence, the "state" of Nigeria's political economy, quality of leadership and leadership style, the nature of Nigeria's relations with Nigeria's "old friends" and the nature of the international system.

**\*A revised version of a paper prepared for the NIIA 9<sup>th</sup> Brainstorming Session on Nigeria's Contribution to International Development. Peace and Security from 1960 to 2012. NIIA, Kofo Abayomi Road, Victoria Island, Lagos, may 15 – 16, 2012.**

## Notes

1. See **Nigeria Speaks Speeches of Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Introduced by Sam, Epelle** (Lagos: Longmans, 1961), pp. 56-67.
2. **Ibid.**, pp. 62 – 63.
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7. Supra Note 1, p. 58.

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18. **Ibid**, pp. 203 – 204.
19. **Ibid**, p. 204.
20. **Ibid**, p. 205.
21. Akinsanya, "Multinational Cooperation in South Africa, armed Conflict and Majority Rule in South Africa," **IRAP** 3 (June 2004): 14 – 46.
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25. Akinsanya, "Public Policy, Privatisation and/or Commercialisation of Public Enterprises in Nigeria, pg. 276 – 302.
26. Alli, pp 215 – 216.