Abubakar Tafawa Balewa; (1912-1966): The Philosopher-King of Nigerian Foreign Policy

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Abstract
This paper examined the framework of Nigeria’s foreign policy from the perspective of Tafawa Balewa’s vision. This is driven by Balewa’s profundity of philosophical thought in the enunciation of the organizing principles of Nigeria’s foreign policy and their flagging appeal and relevance through time. The analytical research method was employed for the study which revealed that Plato’s theory of the philosopher-king has been a major source of intellectual inspiration to contemporary political systems that seeks to promote good governance. The paper also unearthed that Balewa deployed his vast epistemological arsenal of public policy and governance strategy in the construction of the fundamental pillars and objectives of Nigerian foreign policy in such a manner that they have stood the test of time thus earning him the title of the philosopher-king of Nigerian foreign policy. The paper also uncovered that Balewa’s inclination to political conservatism and conservatist foreign policy owes their social-biographical provenance to the traditional conservative Hausa-Muslim values. The paper equally found that Balewa’s foreign policy was criticized for being pro-west and pro-capitalist in spite of its professing of a non-alignment policy. The study concludes that Nigerian foreign policy as enunciated by the Balewa administration will continue to twirl in scope and intensity. The paper recommends approaches and strategies of Nigerian foreign policy that would reflect the demands of contemporary times.

Keywords: Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Foreign Policy, Nigeria, Philosopher-King

Introduction
Abubakar Tafawa Balewa is the architect of Nigeria’s foreign policy. As a nationalist and later Prime Minister who took over the reign of governmental responsibility at the point of the departure of the colonialists, he had the fortune and opportunity to design the organizing principles of Nigerian foreign policy. These organizing principles have since then inspired the foreign policy orientations and ideology of successive administrations in Nigeria. Doubtless, there have been some deviations in orientation in some instances; nonetheless, they are not so significant as to initiate a paradigmatic change in the overall structure of Nigeria’s foreign policy. These convergent nuances experienced in Nigeria’s foreign policy are not of kind but of degree. This fundamental foundation wrought on Nigeria’s foreign policy is the basis of commendation for Tafawa Balewa as the architect of Nigerian foreign policy.

There are many studies on Nigeria’s foreign policy dealing with the administration of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. And they have interrogated his foreign policy orientations...
from varying epistemological and conceptual spectrums. However, the one noticeable lacuna in the literature is the absence of a biographical tribute of his contribution to Nigerian foreign policy. This lacuna forms the basis of this write-up. This paper, therefore, is a semi-biographical analysis of Tafawa Balewa and his foreign policy thrust. The paper argues that what constitutes the fundamental framework of Nigeria’s foreign policy was crafted by the Abubakar Tafawa Balewa administration when he was the Prime Minister of Nigeria from 1960 to 1966. His understanding of the nuances and dynamics of international affairs and the position of Nigeria therein was critical in his foreign policy choices and exertions. His prescience and imagination have stood the test of time given that his thoughts have continued to loom large and illuminate on the orientation of Nigeria’s foreign policy long after he seized to be in power. It is on account of this that this paper has dubbed him the philosopher-king of Nigerian foreign policy.

Given this background, the philosophical ideas and factors that shaped his foreign policy thought are critically sieved. The analytical clippers of the paper are hung on Plato’s theoretical proposition of the philosopher-king as espoused in his famous book, *The Republic* which Reeve (2004) has given us a translation both accurate and implied. In classical Platonian postulation, the philosopher-king is profoundly knowledgeable, full of wisdom, tact, craft, diplomacy, social skills and discerning. On account of these attributes therefore, the philosopher-king is placed in good stead to make informed analysis and proffer enduring policy choices that would stand the State and society in the right course to achieve its aims and objectives. The philosopher-king is the quintessential model of leadership. It is thus argued that Abubakar Tafawa Balewa was imbued with the virtues and values of the philosopher-king and deployed them to good usage in crafting the organizing frameworks of Nigerian foreign policy.

**The Philosopher-King: Some Theoretical Musings**

Plato (428/27-348/47 BC) is one of the most outstanding ancient Greek philosophers. He wrote prodigiously and left indelible footprints on the corpus of philosophical thought and till date he has continued to exert tremendous influence on contemporary philosophy (Reeve 1998; William 2011). The theory of the philosopher-king is at the core of his philosophical system; which he developed in his magnum opus, *Republic*. In his view, philosophers ought to rule and rulers ought to be philosophers (*The Republic*) because the philosopher is a ‘wisdom-lover’ and possess the flair and love for ideas. And because of this love for wisdom and possession of philosophical ideas the philosopher is more intellectually and psychologically equipped to be at the helm of affairs of his metaphorical *ship of state* wherein he posited in his oft quoted aphorism that a ‘true pilot must of necessity pay attention to the seasons, the heavens, the stars, the winds, and everything proper to the craft if he is really to rule a ship’ (*The Republic*, 6.488d).

Plato’s personal political experiences especially of the democracy of the day and how it illegally handled the case of the Generals that were accused of not rescuing survivors of the naval battle of Arginusae (*Apology*, 32); the overthrow of the democracy by the Thirty Tyrants which also included some of his own relatives and the condemnation of Socrates to death for corrupting Athenian youth and some many other political infelicities crisscrossed to redirect Plato’s thought to imagine that the ideal state is that that is ruled by an individual who possesses enormous knowledge and intellectual capacity who would base his judgment on wise counsel and not spontaneous outbursts of emotions. The major reason for
state failure, in the Platonian imagination, was the absence of philosophers as governors and such absence created space for tyranny, dictatorship and bad governance which ultimately coalesces into poor society and the inability of the state to meet its fundamental objectives of existence.

Yadav (n.d) in his conceptual elucubrations on Plato’s theory of the philosopher-king outlines some of the defining values of the philosopher-king as follow:

A philosopher by his grasp of the Idea of Good was best qualified to rule, implying that knowledge could be obtained only by a select few who had the leisure and the material comforts. Plato shared the general Greek perception that leisure was essential for the pursuit of wisdom. A philosopher would be able to administer justice and act for the good of the community. He would have a good character, a calm disposition and a sound mind. He would have the qualities of a ruler, namely truthfulness, high-mindedness, discipline and courage. Undaunted by death, and being a lover of truth, he would be honest and forthright. He would not be petty or mean, being above physical and material pleasures. Devoid of emotional ties and economic considerations, he would be public-spirited and wise. Plato insisted that politics and philosophy ought to be safe for one another. A philosopher ruler would make a wise legislator and frame laws in accordance with the Idea of Good. For Plato, an Ideal State ruled by the philosopher ruler was a divine institution perfectly worthy of emulation and imitation.

Plato’s theory of the philosopher-king has been a major source of intellectual inspiration to contemporary political systems that seeks to promote good governance based on ideas, knowledgeable and intelligibility; and in the same breadth it has been of immense utility to those who seek to promote absolute rule. It has a double-edged effect. On account of its contemporary conceptual ambivalence, it has come under immense criticisms. The most outstanding critic of the theory in modern times is Karl Popper (2002) who accused it of being the ideological source of totalitarianism in the twentieth century. To Popper (1962), the fundamental issue raised by Plato’s theory is not ‘who should rule’ as he posed the question but ‘how should political institutions be designed to minimize the possibility of abuse against individuals.’ By placing accent on the rule of the wise or wisdom-lover, Plato has been criticized as being anti-democratic and anti-majoritarianism.

By adjudging Abubakar Tafawa as the philosopher-king of Nigerian foreign policy, the contention is that he deployed his vast epistemological arsenal of public policy and governance strategy in the construction of the fundamental pillars and objectives of Nigerian foreign policy in such a manner that they have stood the test of time. The validity of this postulation is anchored on the fact that since Abubakar Tafawa Balewa enunciated the objectives of Nigerian foreign policy no fundamental changes have been infused into them. Where there are changes, such changes are merely incremental and complementary in nature. This conceptualization negates the Popperian paradigm of the philosopher-king as all-knowing and tending towards totalitarianism. The continuing relevance and utility of the Nigeria’s foreign policy foundations as laid by Abubakar Tafawa Balewa draws their strength from their unwavering and un-diminishing value in the face of profound changes and ideological oscillations in the international system.
Abubakar Tafawa Balewa: Biographical Notes

Abubakar Tafawa Balewa was born in December, 1912. He is of Gere ethnic nationality in the present-day Bauchi State of Nigeria. He was not born with a silver spoon; on the contrary, in the traditional social hierarchy of Northern Nigeria Muslim society his family belonged to the lower rung. His father, Mallam Yakubu Dan Zala, was a domestic servant in the household of the then Ajiyan Bauchi who was the District Head of Lere. His social and cultural upbringing was anchored on traditional conservative Hausa-Muslim values. His later inclination to political conservatism and conservatist foreign policy owe their social-biographical provenance to this point. He started his educational pursuits by first attending Koranic school and later Tafawa Balewa Elementary Primary School. On completion of elementary school he was enrolled into Bauchi Provincial School, and then later into, the then Katsina College, now known as Barewa College. It was at Katsina College that he met his lifelong political associate and mentor, Ahmadu Rabah, who was later known as Ahmadu Bello and Premier of Northern Nigeria. Tafawa Balewa completed his five years programme at Katsina College in 1933 and returned back to Bauchi where he began his teaching career. In 1944, he was enrolled at the University of London and studied education. He rose through the ranks and was appointed Headmaster and later Inspector of Schools. It was from the education sector that he later branched into active politics (Clark, 1991).

Abubakar Tafawa Balewa’s political career began to take roots when he and Ahmadu Bello in1951 transformed the cultural organization, Jam’iyar Mutanen Arewa, into Northern People’s Congress (NPC) and into a political party and thereafter used it as a platform to seek for political power. Resultantly, he was made the Vice President of the Party. In 1946, he was elected on the platform of the NPC into the Northern House of Assembly. While in the Northern House of Assembly, he was elected into the Federal House of Representatives in Lagos through the instrumentality of Electoral College system as provided for by the McPherson Constitution of 1951. He was also re-elected into the Assembly in 1951. While in the Federal House of Representatives he was appointed in 1952 as Minister of Works, and later, Minister of Transport. Pursuant to Nigeria’s independence in1960, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and as the leader of the NPC in the Federal House of Representatives formed alliance with Nnamdi Azikiwe’s National Council for Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) and under the arrangement he became the Prime Minister in 1957 and Nnamdi Azikiwe the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Again, after the elections of 1959 he also regained his position as Prime Minister in the same alliance with NCNC (Nigeria Federal Department of Information, 1982 and Omotola, 2017).

Politically and ideologically, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa was a conservative and an ardent believer in Northern Nigeria. And this regional attachment was by no means a strange phenomenon given that it was the reigning mode of political thought in Nigeria at the time. He was committed to the preservation of the Native Authority system and Emiratism in the North. In all these commitment to Northern Nigeria, his love for country and compatriots remained unflagging. He was a committed nationalist and patriot. In the march to independence, he displayed tremendous nationalism in the various constitutional conferences he had the privilege to attend. His rise through the social rungs as a commoner to the apogee of both his professional and political gestures to the fact that, he was a very focused and committed person who once he set his sight on a goal is never relenting in its pursuit. He brought these virtues of his to bear
on his functions as Prime Minister and as would be expected performed brilliantly in the discharge of his remit.

As the Chief Minister, he played critical roles in all departments of government and Nigeria’s national life. His roles in Nigeria’s external relations were superb. He was instrumental to the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the forging of continental and African diasporic solidarity. He played leading roles in the fight against racism, colonialism, Apartheid and conflicts on the African continent. In these regards, his interventions in the Congo crisis (1960-1964) and the Sharpeville Massacre (1960) in South Africa easily come to mind. In 1961, he created a Ministerial portfolio for Foreign Affairs and Commonwealth Relations and appointed Jaja Wachukwu as the first Nigerian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Commonwealth Relations (1961-1965). Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa was writer. In 1934, he wrote the novella, Shaibu Umar, which was published in 1955 and staged as a play in 1970. In January 1960, the Queen of England, Elizabeth II conferred on him Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire. He was killed on January 15, 1966 in the military coup that brought the First Republic to its abrupt end.

Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and Nigeria’s Foreign Policy

Nigeria got her political independence in 1960 and the person at the helm of affairs who gave philosophical and ideological direction as to the path to be trodden by Nigeria was Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. There are three main speeches that he carefully adumbrated the foundational pillars of Nigerian foreign policy: a) statement on the floor of the House of Representatives on August 20 1960; b) Independence Day Address to the Nation on October, 1 1960; and c) acceptance speech on the occasion of Nigeria’s accession of the membership of the United Nations Organization (UN) in New York on October, 8 1960. It is these foundational pillars that have provided the roadmap for Nigeria’s foreign policy ever since then.

As alluded earlier, Tafawa Balewa was instrumental in the creation of a Ministerial portfolio on Foreign Affairs and Commonwealth Relations. In debates on the floor of the House of Representatives he vigorously argued for the entrenchment of a foreign policy course that would put Nigeria’s interest at the international level in good stead. On August 20, 1960, he made a statement that turned out to be the intellectual foundation of non-alignment component of Nigerian foreign policy. He argued that, ‘we shall not blindly follow the lead of anyone; so far as is possible, the policy on 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’ (House of Representatives Debates, 20th August, 1960). These articulations were mere foretaste of what was to become of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa’s foreign policy trajectory.

At the United Nations General Assembly on October 7th, 1960 on the occasion of Nigeria’s accession of the UN charter, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa clearly laid out the fundamental principles and objectives of Nigerian foreign policy. On the occasion, he noted that: It is the desire of Nigeria to remain on friendly terms with all the nations and to participate actively in the work of the United Nations organization. Nigeria, a large and populous country, has absolutely no territorial or expansionist ambitions. We are committed to uphold the principles upon which the United Nations is founded. Nigeria
hopes to work with other African countries for the progress of Africa and assist in bringing all African countries to a state of independence.

So far I have concentrated on the problems of Africa. Please do not think that we are not interested on the problems of the rest of the world; we are intensely interested in them and hope to be allowed to assist in finding solutions to them through this organization, but being human we are naturally concerned first with what affects our immediate neighbourhood (Lamido 1999; pp. xiii-xiv).

This foreign policy enunciation constitutes the core of what is termed as the Balewa Doctrine and it is on the basis of its articulation that the under listed principles and objectives of Nigerian foreign policy are derived.

a. The protection of the sovereign and territorial integrity of the Nigerian state;

b. The promotion of the economic and social well-being of Nigerians;

c. The enhancement of Nigeria’s image and status in the world;

d. The promotion of unity as well as the total political, economic, social and cultural liberation of our country and Africa;

e. The promotion of the rights of black people and others under colonial domination;

f. The promotion of international cooperation, conducive to the consolidation of world peace and security, mutual respect and friendship among all peoples and states;

g. Redressing the imbalance in the international power structures which has tended to frustrate the legitimate aspiration of developing countries;

h. Respect for the sovereignty, independence and integrity of all nations; and

i. The promotion of world peace based on the principles of freedom, mutual respect and equality of all persons of the world.

These foreign policy principles and objectives enunciated by Abubakar Tafawa Balewa have over the years continued to be the guiding light of Nigerian foreign policy formulation. According to Lamido (1999; p. xiv), Nigeria’s former minister for foreign affairs, “these fundamental objectives of our foreign policy have remained largely unchanged since independence and have been pursued by successive administrations with varying degrees of emphasis and focus.” The doctrine of Africa as the centerpiece of Nigeria’s foreign policy was institutionalized by the Tafawa Balewa administration. He had an abiding interest in the unity and progress of the African continent and on account of this spared no measure in vigorously campaigning against colonialism, Apartheid and all other forms of oppression and domination on the continent. It was this concern for the mother continent that led Tafawa Balewa to actively participate in the formation of Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 and Chad Basin Commission in 1964.

The Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) was established by the Tafawa Balewa administration in 1961 as a centre of excellence for the scientific study of international relations. According to the Director-General of the NIIA (niia.gov.ng), Professor Bukar Bukarambe, ‘the idea of the NIIA as conceived by the founding fathers was ‘to provide a nursery of ideas on what direction in international affairs Nigeria should take’, as well as ‘to provide a meeting ground for people of all nations and a rich soil for the cross-fertilization of their minds’. This is accomplished through painstaking research, conferences, seminars, workshop, roundtable discussions, and public lectures on crucial issues in world affairs. Since its creation, over fifty-eight years ago, the NIIA has continued to be the leading institution for the research and study of Nigeria’s involvement in international affairs.
Given this background, there is no doubt that Abubakar Tafawa Balewa laid the solid foundation of Nigeria’s foreign policy and to date it has continued to be of immense ideological and philosophical importance; and on account of this we have made the case of him being the philosopher-king of Nigeria’s foreign policy. The major factors that influenced his foreign policy drives were his conservative social and cultural background; his professional background as a teacher; the fight against colonialism, racism, oppression, and domination on the African continent, and the desire to make Nigeria great. The conservatism in his foreign policy orientation owes its taproot to his social and cultural upbringing in a typical northern Nigeria Muslim social ecology. In the same manner his establishment of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) may not be unconnected with his experiences as a teacher and the desire to pursue scientific knowledge and intellectual excellence.

The foreign policy values which Abubakar Tafawa Balewa enunciated have continued to gain prominence in contemporary times because of historical prescience and relevance to the African condition. The African condition rather than abate has continue to spiral in intensity and rage. The continent has been officially freed from the shackles of colonialism and imperialism, yet the crisis of development in the continent approximates in near resemblance and intensity to colonialism and imperialism; this is aggravated by the high incidence of poverty, political and religious violence, ethno-political conflicts, debt peonage, corruption, technological and economic backwardness, and so many uncountable contemporary development ailments buffeting the continent. The challenges are as fresh as yesterday. This, therefore, makes the foreign policy choices of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa to possess a ring of contemporaneity. As contemporaneously appealing as the organizing principles and framework of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa foreign policy principles and objectives may be to Nigeria, it is advised in the strategies and measures of their pursuit should be devised in a manner to reflect the circumstances of the time. Any foreign policy short of this orientation would tantamount to treating an ailment with a medicine whose potency has been vitiates by the expiry of its shelf life.

The Criticisms of Nigeria’s Foreign Policy under Abubakar Tafawa Balewa
Much as his contributions to Nigeria’s foreign policy are, some scholars have criticized his foreign policy pursuits as pro-Western and pro-capitalist in spite of its professing of a non-alignment policy in the face of the ideological rivalry between capitalism and communism at the time. The idea of Nigeria’s traditional allies, the argument goes, is a short hand expression of Nigeria’s capitalist inclinations. This is explained in the context of the fact that, all the so-called Nigeria’s traditional allies were and are still western capitalist countries. The Anglo-Defence Pact is often cited as the icing on the cake of Nigeria’s subsuming in the interstice of imperialism. To other critics, Tafawa Balewa’s foreign policy was lacking in dynamism, contradictory in policy orientations, and therefore, could be termed as timid and lacking in ideological values. Notwithstanding these criticisms, the centrality of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa in the foreign policy thought of Nigeria remains unshaken and would continue to remain so and provide intellectual inspiration for the initiation and conduct of Nigeria’s foreign policy.

Conclusion
The thesis of this paper is that Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the late Prime Minister of Nigeria and his administration laid the foundational pillars of Nigerian foreign policy. Ever since, what have passed as Nigerian foreign policy are mere accretions while the
substance remains largely unaltered. Among the major factors that influenced his foreign pursuits were his social and cultural upbringing which were decidedly conservatist; his training as a teacher; colonialism; racism; Apartheid and other manifestations of oppression and suppression of blacks on the continent and in the diaspora. The paper argues that the organizing frameworks of Nigerian foreign policy as enunciated by the Balewa administration has continued to be relevant because the conditions that produced them ab initio has continued to spiral in scope and intensity since independence. As relevant as the Balewan foundational values that undergird Nigeria foreign policy the paper suggest that the approaches and strategies should reflect the demands of contemporary times.

References


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