

# Obafemi Awolowo's Mental Magnitude: A Panacea to Nigeria's Rape of Democracy

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## Abstract

The discourse on how to re-articulate good governance for Nigeria after the shackle of colonialism has always occupied the centre stage in the post-colonial discursions in the country. This is so, because a mega nation like Nigeria is still in a very controversial state in governance. In response to this search for an enduring political ideology for Nigeria, Obafemi Awolowo postulated mental magnitude as a liberation ideology that will help fight against the rape of democracy by political class in Nigeria in his theory of democratic socialism. Mental magnitude is therefore a philosophical doctrine which derives from a theory of mind and body, with the assertion that the mental is superior to the physical element of a person, and should take control over the emotions, desires, and actions of man. The doctrine of mental magnitude is essentially Platonic, with Stoic and Cartesian flavors. It states tripartite divisions of man with physical, psychical and divine attributes, which invariably inform a rational being that can inculcate social and political values being advocated for Africans, depend on an African traditional way of life. Descriptive/Qualitative research design was adopted for this study. Materials were from books and other literature that may be connected or related to the various thought on governance in Nigeria. We analyze the contents of these books and materials with the view to evaluating them in line with the theoretical framework of our inquiry. The methodologies were historical, expository, analytical, critical and prescriptive from relevant literature material consulted.

**Keywords:** Mental Magnitude, Democracy, Nigeria, Rape of Democracy

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## 1.1 Introduction

In his search for a supreme value of human existence in social and political organization, Awolowo developed a doctrine known as 'Mental Magnitude'. The doctrine of mental magnitude is essentially Platonic, with Stoic and Cartesian flavors. It states a tripartite division of man with physical, psychical and divine attributes. 'It makes a case for a conscious effort to reach that state and stage wherein all the three "levels" of attributes may be jointly employed by homo sapiens to master fate and destiny, and thereby live a happy, healthy, prosperous and full life a triumphant life. (Awoism, "Selected Themes on the Complex Ideology of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, 1977, 46)

Mental magnitude is a philosophical doctrine which derives from a theory of mind and body, with the assertion that the mental is superior to the physical element of a person, and should take control over the emotions, desires, and actions of man. Indeed, the action of man now informs either the obedience to democracy or the rape of democracy here is concern with the dubious things our politicians do in the name of the so called staying in power. A leader is to serve the nation but in our case, the nation or the people are serving the leader. Democracy which supposes to be the government of the people, for the people and by the people, now turn to become a government where some individual want to stay in power till death. This issue was informed during Awolowo and Shehu Shagari's presidential nominees in 1979. Awolowo after the election condemned the act of rigging election for Shagari, which has trespass even to the present day elections in Nigeria. It is on this notes that Awolowo says: (Awolowo, *Voice of Wisdom*, 1981, 32)

"It was not a military or civilian coup, it was not even a coup d'etat, in the strict sense of the word, it was a coup de grace; a finishing stroke to a series of diabolical electoral malpractices which had gone on unsuspected, until very last moment." It is on this basis that our paper is anchored.

## 1.2. Obafemi Awolowo's Mental Magnitude: A Panacea to Nigeria's Rape Of Democracy

In so far as Socialism is seen as a particular attitude of the mind and a way of life translatable into a theory of social, political, economic and moral behaviours of man in a society, mental magnitude, as a philosophical basis of Awolowo's Socialism, puts man at the centre of all activities thus making him the main instrument of social, political, scientific, economic and moral changes. The doctrine of mental magnitude, therefore, leads to a profound metaphysical analysis of man in relation to his mental and physical capabilities and his well-being, both as an individual and as a member of a society. It reveals Awolowo's philosophical doctrine of dualism of mind and body and his recognition of both as constituting a person with no racial, ethnic or geographical qualification.

What is mental magnitude? According to Awolowo mental magnitude is a theory harps on a person's ability to subvert the human desires that crave selfish interest and crass materialism. Basically, it is about good governance

which is defined in terms of transparency, accountability, social justice, fairness, equity and selflessness. It says that leaders engage in corrupt practices and selfish acts because they lack complete education, which Awolowo links with the development of mind, body and brain, an embodiment of mental magnitude. It is the belief that leaders need to tame their appetite and emotion and embrace discipline as a value in order to achieve effective governance and development in society. It is in doing this that one can suppress the rape of democracy.

Awolowo Mental Magnitude is the philosophy shares much with the Platonic and the Cartesian conception of man as a composite of the body and the mind.

In his exact words, The regime of mental magnitude is cultivated when we are sexually continent, abstemious of food, abstain totally from alcoholic beverages and tobacco, and completely vanquish emotions of greed and fear. The reason for this position is simply that inordinate sex, much consumption of food indiscriminately; much in-take of alcoholic drinks and tobacco as well as negative emotions of fear and greed will corrupt not only the body but also the mind.

For Awolowo, the process of cultivating the regime of mental magnitude should be in piece-meal and gradual. It must begin with the leaders that want to instill discipline on the masses. Those who aspire to be leaders or masters of others must first have mastery control of themselves. According to him; Men of affairs and wisdom everywhere are unanimous in the view that only “Those who are masters of themselves become masters of others.” Indeed, Aristotle has said it with the authority of one of the greatest and wisest men that ever lived.

According to Awolowo, the cardinal aim of his mental magnitude is education. He believes that education can change people’s mentality and make them think right. He asserts; education is not as popularly but narrowly conceived, to teach a man to read and write, to acquire a profession, to master a vocation, or to be versed in the liberal arts. He continues, all these are only means to the end of true education, which is to help a man live a full, happy, and triumphant life.

The social factors consist of the society in which we live, its structure and the individual members who constitute it, together with peculiar customs, mores and ethos, as well as the economic, political and other social system which are in vogue. It behooves man to understand all these, and, where possible, bend them to his needs. The season he cannot change, but he can adapt himself to them as well as eliminate or minimize the adverse effects on him of their attendant climate, and weathers. This according to Awolowo is done through a quality education.

Arguing further Awolowo says, he must diligently probe the world, and first of all understand his physical and social surroundings, and in order to understand, he must properly be educated. For it is when he knows the law that governs the universe of which the world in which he lives is a part, the rigorous of nature, and the aberrations of the society, and can, with the necessary physical, mental and spiritual equipment, devise ways and means to temper and humanize them to satisfy his sublimated yearnings, that, man can hope to live a full and a happy life. “Man” argues Awolowo, is the sole creative and purposive dynamic in nature: everything else by comparison, is in a state of inertia. Man is not just an animated lump of earth mixed with water’. But more than this, he is dual in nature: part animal, part God; part conscious, part subconscious; part body, part mind. According to Christian ontology, God breathed into his nostrils and man became a living soul. The living soul is housed in the shell called body and this soul can only be the same in kind and quality, though not in degree, as the soul or Infinite Intelligence which pervades the universe and animates man. Looked at in this edifying way, every man, without exception, is a potential genius. (Awolowo, *The People’s Republic*, 1968, 54)

In further relating the individual to the state as a whole, Awolowo tries to show that the quality of a State is the quality of its citizens, but in order to appreciate this we must understand the nature of man and recognize his mental and physical capabilities in promoting the general happiness of each and all in a society. Hence: “Proper knowledge of man, and a thorough appreciation and competent application of the principles which govern his physical culture, his mental development, and his spiritual self-realization, is indispensable to any efforts for promoting and guaranteeing his general well-being and happiness”(Awolowo, *The People’s Republic*, 1968, 211)

But more important is Awolowo’s belief in the superiority of the mind over the body. Like Plato in his Republic Awolowo believes that the soul or mind should rule the body, and takes it as an immutable law that the soul commands while the body obeys. The soul or mind is the seat of man’s rational faculty, the body the seat of appetite or desires or what he calls “negative emotions.” Ideally then, reason should govern man’s appetite or desire. When this is brought into his idea of a Socialist State, Awolowo believes, like Plato’s idea of a philosopher king, that only men of reason should govern in a society. But if reason is dethroned for appetite, then the human mind is seized by negative emotions. This situation leads to corruption of the mind which in turn leads to all sorts of evils like greed, bribery, nepotism, abuse and misuse of power, stealing, cheating, smuggling, violence and disrespect for the rule of law - all of which Awolowo sees as flourishing phenomena in Africa, particularly in his own country, Nigeria.

Therefore, for the purpose of effective government and a just and egalitarian society, those who aspire to leadership in a Socialist State should be those who are ruled by reason as opposed to mere appetite or desire or bodily pleasure. In other words, they must be mentally equipped, for a leader without a sound and disciplined cannot rule in Awolowo’s ideal of a Socialist State. In order to be master of others and inculcate in them a sense

of discipline, one has to be first and foremost master of his own mind and be himself self disciplined. According to him: “Men of affairs and wisdom everywhere are unanimous in the view that only ‘those who are masters of themselves become masters of others’. Indeed Aristotle has said it, with the authority of one of the greatest and wisest men that ever lived: ‘Let him that would move the world, first move himself’”(Awolowo, *Thought of Nigerian Constitution*, 1978, 158)

An essential tool for a good training and discipline of the mind is Education which Awolowo makes as the first cardinal program of his socialist party. Whether in Africa or Asia, Russia or America, education and discipline of the mind are seen as essential to the improvement of the individual and of the society as a whole. An educated carpenter will be more efficient than an illiterate carpenter, and the same can be said of farmers, builders, and even traditional healers. But more importantly, the education and training of the minds of those who aspire to leadership is absolutely essential, pa the kind that is needed for the cultivation of mental magnitude. As Awolowo himself suggests, to make a success of governing the nation, “Nigerian leaders should possess comprehension, mental magnitude, and spiritual depth” (By comprehension he means, “the ability of a man to appreciate and grasp the salient details as well as most of the practical and temporal implications of a given problem or situation.”) (Awolowo, *Thought of Nigerian Constitution*, 1978,158). Precisely for this reason, he is against the idea of African Socialism based on past traditions. For him, it would appear that such -an idea of Socialism is retrogressive, for it certainly appeals to the past. When people had no disciplined education and so were incapable of grasping the salient details of socialist principles. (Awolowo, *Thought of Nigerian Constitution*, 1978, 227)

One of his justifications in this regard is his belief dating back from Plato, of the saying: A sound mind in a sound body. A proper education, in Awolowo’s view, consists of the training of both mind and body. It is these kinds of education that can help man live a balanced and disciplined life. What, then, is the aim of education? Awolowo writes:

The cardinal aim of education is not...to teach a man to read and write, to acquire a profession, to master a vocation, or to be versed in the liberal arts, All these are only means to the end of true education, which is to help a man live a full, happy, and triumphant life. In other words, any system of education which does not help a man to have a healthy and sound body, an alert brain, and a balanced and disciplined instinctive urge, is both misconceived and dangerous.(Awolowo, *Thought of Nigerian Constitution*, 216-245, 1978)

The overall implication of Awolowo’s discussion on the Regime of Mental Magnitude is that Socialism cannot be said to have purely an African root. Everywhere man is recognized as a social and political animal and to evolve a good Socialist State a proper understanding of the nature of man as an instrument of social and political change is essential.

This cannot be understood by merely returning to past traditions which in no way fits into Awolowo’s doctrine of mental magnitude. What he seems to be saying is that, whether in Russia, Western Europe, America, Asia or Africa, those who aspire to rule a Socialist State must cultivate the regime of mental magnitude lest their rule prove to be a curse, rather than a blessing, to man and society. But apart from the ruler and his lieutenants, other people in the society must also possess mental magnitude through education and self discipline. Therefore, the totality of what is known as the Regime of Mental Magnitude consists of the rational and disciplined behaviour of the individuals as well as the collective members of a society, from the social, moral, political and economic points of view. But the most important of all is the disciplined behaviour of the ruler without whose example the entire super-structure of a Socialist State, as conceived by Awolowo, would collapse and degenerate into a state of anarchy. A state of anarchy usually leads into dictatorship after the forcible overthrow of the indisciplined ruler and the members of his government. This invariably is the **Rape of Democracy** in a democratic state.

The rape of democracy here is concern with the dubious things our politicians do to stay in power. A leader is to serve the nation but in our case, the nation or the people are serving the leader. Democracy which supposes to be the government of the people, for the people and by the people, now turns to become a government where some individual want to stay in power till death. This issue was informed during Awolowo and Shehu Shagari’s presidential nominees in 1979. Awolowo after the election condemned the act of rigging election for Shagari, which has trespass even to the present day elections in Nigeria. It is on this notes that Awolowo says: “It was not a military or civilian coup, it was not even a coup d’etat, in the strict sense of the word, it was a coup de grace; a finishing stroke to a series of diabolical electoral malpractices which had gone on unsuspected, until very last moment.”(Awolowo, *Path to Nigerian Greatness*, 1981, 175)

On the battle according to Awolowo, it is also our duty to make sure that Alhaji Shagari’s rule, which has been foisted on the country by his cabal of friends who contrived the judelex coup, does not inflict any fatal or serious injury on our second experiment in democracy.

Awolowo says: Election rigging and other kinds of electoral malpractices must be totally outlawed in future elections. One of the major causes of the failure of our first experiment in democracy in the First Republic was the blatant rigging of elections on two occasions. The first rigging created a tremor and alarm; the second generated a disastrous quake, eruption and violence, the seismic effects of which still linger with us. (Awolowo, *Path to Nigerian Greatness*, 1981, 176)

Judging from past experience, and having regard to the mood of the vast majority of our people, Awolowo postulated: I want to make a humble prediction. He says: "No one should be under any illusion about it: Nigeria, as a corporate entity, will not survive another large scale and shameless election rigging such as took place in 1979." (Awolowo, *Path to Nigerian Greatness*, 1981,57). The statement of Awolowo in Nigerian election seems to be fulfilling in each time we have election. Rigging in election has become the other of the day in Nigeria- indeed the rape of democracy.

In conclusion from our discursion so far, his philosophical doctrines of the mind (including the universal mind) and the regime of mental magnitude which are all given in support of his views is to use reason, education, ideas, and good governance which all are virtues of the mental magnitude, and deal with the problems of democracy and bad government in Nigeria. Like Aristotle, a good citizen is a good country man. When the people are good, the society is equally good. It is imperative to conclude by saying that, the democratic socialism of Awolowo if properly implemented by electing elites, great thinkers, the philosopher king to the leadership positions of this country and despites some inadequacies in economy, will provide solution to the problem of governance in Nigeria.

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