

NNAMDI AZIKIWE (1904–1996)

A Personal Remembrance

by Richard L. Sklar, UCLA

[President (1982), past member of the Board of Directors, and Life Member of the ASA]

I first met Nnamdi Azikiwe in the London springtime of 1957. Colin Legum, then African affairs correspondent for the *London Observer*, introduced me to him at a reception honoring delegates to the Nigerian constitutional conference. Zik (his popular nickname) expressed a keen interest in my forthcoming doctoral research on Nigerian political parties and told me about the lecture that he would soon deliver on that very subject at Rhodes House, Oxford University. Like most of Zik's formal addresses, that one proved to have lasting scholarly value.

The following day, I experienced my first exposure to Zik's immense presence as a public man when Nigerian and British delegates to the constitutional conference assembled for its formal opening at Lancaster House. On that occasion, Zik was neither more eloquent nor more important than his two peers in the "big three" of Nigerian politics, namely Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Alhaji Ahmadu, the Sardauna of Sokoto. Yet when he rose to speak one noticed a surprising deference and warmth in the prolonged applause. Only later did I understand that this was a tribute, in good British form, to the senior nationalist whose political career had nearly been snuffed out by a British tribunal of inquiry into the relationship between his banking interests and his conduct as Premier of Eastern Nigeria. My subsequent account of that incident was favorable to Zik. I remain confident that it is also objective.

When I arrived in Nigeria a few months later, Zik was in seclusion, reportedly unwell. It was always in the air that his periodic illnesses were actually political stratagems. I did not see him until the national convention of his party (the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons) in October 1957. When someone questioned my presence at a plenary session that was closed to the public, Zik, who had authorized my admission but not spoken to me since London, said something like this: I would like to introduce Mr. Sklar from the United States. He is writing a doctoral dissertation on Nigerian political parties, not just our party but all parties in this country. I think that everyone should cooperate with him. My

research was launched.

Later on I also attended a few tense meetings of the party's national executive committee. Each time someone questioned the propriety of my presence and Zik would always respond in this manner: Mr. Sklar has been at his research here for some time and I am disposed to allow him to remain. Zik was always the scholar. His devotion to academia was lifelong. It is well known that as a student in the United States he resolved to establish a university in Nigeria. Like Thomas Jefferson, he leaves as legacies to his country a university and some profound essays as well as addresses on diverse topics for which Nigerians will be eternally grateful.

I came closest to Zik, the man, during two long interviews in March 1958. His (eastern regional) government was then in the midst of a serious crisis occasioned by the reintroduction of school fees, and his mother and father had both died within the past month. He appeared to be very tired and I felt guilty imposing upon the time of such a burdened man for my research. Yet he insisted on answering all of my questions to my satisfaction. I shall always picture him tall and weary, walking with me into the courtyard to chat cheerily with my friend, C. C. Anah, the party secretary for the division of Onitsha. His manner toward everyone was invariably cordial and respectful. In those days I was often present when Zik spoke in public. However formal the address, he appeared to communicate with every member of the audience. He was the most effective public speaker I have ever heard, in a class with Franklin Roosevelt, whose style and thought he may have emulated. He had the common touch. I could never bring myself to write or refer to him in the stilted official style of "Your" or "His Excellency," not even when he was Governor General. Mr. President or plain Dr. Azikiwe seemed far more respectful.

Zik loved America. He inspired and encouraged many young West Africans, among them Kwame Nkrumah, to seek their academic fortunes in the United States. And he brought American style journalism to West Africa. But for the greater part of his political career he was not in the good books of the American government, which usually preferred his opponents. The nadir of his relationship with the U.S. government was his letter of condolence to President Lyndon Johnson on the day after John Kennedy was assassinated. Blindly he linked that tragedy to the fact that "some Americans still hate blacks." His outburst was resented by many Americans in Nigeria, who did not understand that his was an American outburst, choked with frustration at what America should and could be, but stubbornly refused to become. Several

months earlier, Zik, the President of Nigeria, had ignored protocol and written an extraordinary reply to a letter from an American schoolgirl in which he admonished Americans to stand up for racial equality, political self determination, and freedom from want. Once, as an impoverished and downtrodden sojourner in America he had drifted to the brink of suicide. Like his disciple, Mbonu Ojike, he might have entitled his memoirs "I Have Two Countries."

Zik was a versatile sportsman a keen competitor who peppered his political remarks with images and metaphors from the sporting world. Twenty one years ago he wrote me, "At 70, I am still at the wicket, batting strong." It was ennobling to know him. He was grand enough to merit the kind of judgement that history alone can make.

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