

**Sustaining Development through Servant-Leadership: A Commentary on Nnamdi Azikiwe's *My Odyssey: An Autobiography* (1970). Publisher: Spectrum. Place of Publication: Ibadan, Nigeria. Number of Pages: 452. ISBN: 978-029-095-8. Price: Not Stated.**

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The thrust of this paper is a commentary on Nnamdi Azikiwe's *My Odyssey: An Autobiography* (1970) as a reflection of a template for sustaining development in Africa through the prism of personal journey (*odyssey*) that resonates with servant-leadership. Although written over four decades, *My Odyssey* offers a vignette of how leadership ought to be envisioned in the present time for Africa's development through an accomplished leader's personal experience. Another point worth noting here is that a commentary on this book will be made, not a review of the book *per se*, going by the fact that book reviews tend to dwell on recent publications, as traditionally understood in the academia. However, as the subject matter of leadership takes the world by storm, the relevance of servant-leadership in the wake of how leadership failure has impacted negatively on the capacity of Africa to develop as well as crippled the continent's rise from underdevelopment ashes, is crucial. Here lies the essence of this review/commentary.

Taking a cue from the persuasions, personal experiences, events and opinions shared in the book by Nigeria's independence president, Nnamdi Azikiwe, as this book review/commentary argues, will bring about better way of rethinking leadership for African continent's sustainable development and populist oriented leadership.. Although, *My Odyssey* was written over four decades ago, as this paper suggests, it still has a lot of leadership lessons to offer contemporary African (Nigerian) politicians, leaders and aspiring leaders, who are embroiled in leadership malaise. Thus, dwelling on the political as well as philosophical credo that shaped Azikiwe's triumphs and extraordinary leadership style will be beneficial in reframing the way political leadership should be conceived for more sustainable development, given the backdrop of leadership failure on the continent.

Nnamdi Azikiwe's famous book, *My Odyssey* is a chronicle of leadership as a personal journey nuanced with leading by example. As Azikiwe averred in the preface of the book, "my life is a pilgrimage from the unknown to the unknown" (p. xi), to suggest that life is a personal journey, but could be used to frame history for humanity's development and betterment if lessons are to be taken seriously from what happens to others be it in politics, leadership or any kind of public service – all are mere peregrinations – aimed at enhancing our memory (p. xii). *My Odyssey* is a 452-page book with 14 chapters excluding preface, appendices and index. It is a tale of personal journey made by Nigeria's independence president Dr Nnandi Azikiwe, who was born in 1904 in Zungeru, Nigeria. *My Odyssey* was written when Azikiwe (the Great Zik) was 66 years old. Technically, the book was written about the time he should have retired from active public service. No doubt, the book is full of insightful comments and analysis. *My Odyssey* begins with Azikiwe's (Zik's) birth in Zungeru in Northern Nigeria, and covers his boyhood days as well as deals with his quest for the Golden Fleece in the United States of America and his return to Nigeria after completing his studies and teaching abroad. The Book also traces Azikiwe's rise in journalism by establishing the Nigerian *West African Pilot* in 1937 after he had edited

the *African Morning Post*, a Ghanaian flagship newspaper in the early 1930's. Part of the key issues the book covers deal with Azikiwe's rise from being a politician to a statesman, his political triumphs and travails, and his credentials in sports.

Azikiwe's arrival to Africa on the heels of personal convictions to be part of the pillars that would help foster change in Africa given colonial rule and domination is crucial. Before being part of the wind of political change, he set his eyes on certain ideals, which shaped his personal convictions as well as political leadership. Azikiwe's overarching personal conviction was anchored in serving humanity through leadership, a metonymy for Robert Greenleaf's servant-leadership paradigm:

First I coined the expression *spiritual balance* to connote the fundamental freedom of conscience, thought and opinion... Second, I constructed *social regeneration* to imply freedom of association and freedom from discrimination ... Thirdly, I ventured into the realm of economics, which I believed was the taproot of human society... I christened such a condition of life *economic determinism*, because I believed in Karl Marx's idea of the economic interpretation of history in the light of experience all over Africa... Fourthly, I decided to make a voyage into the realms of the intellect. ... Hence I proposed the thesis that *mental emancipation* was necessary for the mis-educated African to be re-educated and be politically renascent. Fifthly ... there could be no doubt about the inevitability of the *political Risorgimento* of the African, since the satisfaction of these conditions implies freedom to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (pp. 253-4).

Deductively, Azikiwe's preoccupation in *My Odyssey* is more of journey of statesmanlike leadership, than politics and its spoils of office, which is the bane of contemporary African leaders. As Azikiwe was "armed with this 'philosophy' of the 'New Africa'" (p. 254), he had to temper political leadership with service to humanity. This political philosophy largely precipitated Azikiwe's leadership success. Nevertheless, leadership trend in recent time in Nigeria (Africa) tows the path of self-aggrandisement and disservice; this is largely instrumental to Africa's underdevelopment and continental woes. Thus, from the experiences shared in the book, it is ostensible that the logic of *My Odyssey* detonates with Robert Greenleaf's postulation in his landmark work, *Servant-leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness* (1977/2002). In this vein,

servant-leadership is providing a framework form which many thousands of known and unknown individuals are helping to improve how we treat those who do the work within our many institutions. Servant-leadership truly offers hope and guidance for a new era in human development, and for the creation of better, more caring institutions (Spears, 2011, p. 20).

#### **A Call for Servant-Leadership, Not Self-Service**

Leadership is one of the greatest challenges facing humanity – particularly servant-leadership – which is crucial for the betterment of man and sustainable development of African continent. At the present, "everybody agrees that there is less

of it (leadership) than there used to be'' (Bennis and Nanus, 2007, p. 1). However, there is no place that the quest for better leadership for sustainable development is more needed than in Africa, where images of leaders invoke terror, tyranny, ruthlessness and evil as well as master-servant relations. Robert I. Rotberg, in his thought-provoking piece "The Roots of Africa's Leadership Deficit" considers leadership in Africa as thus: "leadership in Africa is typified more by disfiguring examples – the Idi Amins and Robert Mugabes – than by positive role models such as Nelson Mandela and Seretse Khama" (2003, p. 28) and the Azikiwe's. Correspondingly, in his preface to Richard Dowden's book on Africa, *Altered States, Ordinary Miracles* (2009), the Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, states unambiguously Africa's failed and unsustainable leadership style as the main cause of her "tormented history" (p. xv).

In *My Odyssey*, what Azikiwe does is to challenge African leaders to envision leadership from the lens of service rather than an opportunity to perennially sap the resources on the continent, torment its people and foreground slaughtering altruistic motives on the altar of self. In the word of Gandhi, this constitutes "the silent force", the harbinger of truth, trust, and transformational leadership, which are vital for driving the people in the right direction without coercion. It is in this direction that Gary Yukl in his *Leadership in Organisations* (2010) considers a servant-leader as thus:

The servant leader must empower followers instead of using power  
to dominate them. Trust is established by being completely honest  
and open, keeping actions consistent with values, and showing trust in  
followers. Greenleaf believes that the followers of such leaders are  
inspired to become servant leaders themselves (p. 340).

In extending the above argument, servant-leaders should create an environment that empowers the people as well as capable of sustaining development on the African continent. This is critical in re-inventing African leadership for a more prosperous continent that will be able to compete in the global marketplace.

Although, a well-written and well-research book with insightful comments, *My Odyssey* is bedevilled with sanctimonious statements as well as personal experiences that would not apply to everybody. So, some of the events narrated in the book could have happened differently to diverse people in disparate circumstances. However, the lessons and great insights shared in this book are worth experimenting on by contemporary African (Nigerian) leaders, who have privatised power as well as personalised the public space thereby undercutting the renewal of Africa and sustainable development on the continent.

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