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## **HABIB RAJI ABDALLAH, 1920 - 1982: AN UNCOMMON NATIONALIST FORGOTTEN IN THE SANDS OF HISTORY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Nationalism is a struggle or a movement by an individual or group to free one's nation from foreign rule or domination. It also includes militant resistance to any kind of foreign or alien infiltration. This paper explores the life and times of Habib Raji Abdallah and his contributions to the nationalistic struggle for self-determination and independence in Nigeria. The methodology adopted in this paper is the use of primary sources which includes oral interview, archival documents and periodicals. It also made use of secondary sources such as books, and journals. Findings reveal that Habib Raji Abdallah is one nationalist who could be called a 'bridge builder' between the north and the south for being a northerner that fueled his nationalistic campaign in the south in the era when nationalists represents their regions. H.R. Abdallah risked it all to challenge the continued domination of Nigeria by the British occupationists. The study further reveals that despite H.R. Abdallah's role in the realization of Nigeria's independence, He is scarcely mentioned in the discourse of Nigerian nationalism. The paper concludes that H.R. Abdallah has contributed immensely to Nigeria's struggle for independence and as a true nationalist; he should be so sung like his peers.

**Keywords:** Habib Raji Abdallah, Nigeria's independence, Nigerian nationalism, true nationalist

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper stems from the fact that most Nigerians in their study or knowledge of Nigeria's nationalism have heard little or nothing about one of Nigeria's foremost and early nationalist extra-ordinaire, Habib Raji Abdallah who fought ceaselessly for the independence of this

country. While the Nigerian populace could be excused for this ignorance due to lack of academic literature that portrays and x-rays the nationalistic contributions of H.R. Abdallah, the Nigerian government cannot be that excused because while recognizing Abdallah's comrades like Aminu Kano, Saadu Zungur, Abubakar Zukogi, Abdulrahman Bida, Anyiam, Anthony Enahoro, Azikiwe, Awolowo, Balewa and a host of others, H.R. Abdallah was conspicuously forgotten in the list of Nigeria's nationalists. Several conspiracy theories tend to suggest that H.R. Abdallah's predicament as an unsung hero was due to his place of origin of the mountainous enclave of Ebiraland in the present day Kogi state North-Central Nigeria. These theories however, suggests that if H.R. Abdallah was from the core north, west or eastern part of Nigeria, he will have been treated like the hero he was. However, this paper is not intended to whip tribal sentiments but to look at the contributions of H.R. Abdallah to nationalistic struggles. Born in 1920 at the height of British rule in Nigeria, Abdallah grew up to ignite the spirit of nationalism in Nigeria and was arrested and sentenced to prison for alleged sedition when he was 29 years of age. This paper attempts to look at H.R Abdallah's educational pursuit in the North and his service with the Colonial government in Lagos and Kano and his short stint as a teacher in the Gold Coast. The work further looked at his contributions to the struggle against colonial domination and independence where his speeches and lectures raised the morale of the Nigerian youths and he was arrested, tortured and imprisoned at several times. This paper thus has the strong belief that such a man who had fought for the independence of the Country should be recognized as a nationalist and be so immortalized.

### **ABDALLAH'S BIRTH AND EDUCATION**

Habib Raji Abdallah was born in 1920 at No. 15A, Otutu Quarters, Okene Local Government Area of the present day Kogi State to Pa Ibrahim Uwaha. Pa Ibrahim Uwaha was in the Colonial service in Lokoja as a messenger and was later appointed a court judge in the Ebira Native Authority by Attah Ibrahim Onoruoiza, the head of the Ebira Native Authority.<sup>1</sup> The young Abdallah at the age of six was taken to the palace of the Attah of Ebiraland where he was enrolled at the Native Authority School called '*Makaranta*' where he began his education. While in the Attah's palace, Abdallah also learnt the art of reading and memorizing the Holy Quran. Having completed his elementary education by 1930, the young Abdallah proceeded to the Bida Middle School in the present day Niger state but was later in 1931 transferred to the Katsina Middle School where he distinguished himself academically that earned him double promotion and consequently finishing the Four-year middle school education in three years. Abdallah thereafter proceeded to the Katsina Higher College which was one of the higher educational institutes in Northern Nigeria at that time and completed his course of study in 1936. Abdallah was discovered by the British occupationist to have a good command of English language with impeccable pronunciation and intonations, which qualified him for a career in

broadcasting. The British who were scouting for interpreters did not waste time to employ the young Abdallah into news casting.<sup>2</sup>

### **HABIB RAJI ABDALLAH IN THE COLONIAL SERVICE (1936-1948)**

Abdallah began his professional career in the Post and Telegraph Department in Lagos as a Radio Monitor and Announcer in 1936 at the tender age of 16. It was in that same year that the Rediffusions Service commenced in Lagos.<sup>3</sup> Having proven competent, H.R. Abdallah became the first Northern Broadcaster with the Lagos Broadcasting Rediffusion Services where he made rapid progress in his professional career. After commissioning the West African Pilot Newspaper, H.R. Abdallah, as a newscaster was assigned to read its editorial to the radio audience, which was constituted by the elites of those days. Abdallah was noted to be highly intelligent in the discharge of his duties as a broadcaster and capable of teaching as well was requested by the British occupasionist to teach the Ghanaians in the then Gold Coast (Ghana) how to speak English in 1937.<sup>4</sup> This became necessary because all over Africa, and in every other colonized continent, colonial governments were faced with growing number of school pupils without corresponding increase on the number of trained teachers and personnel. At the Gold Coast, H.R. Abdallah did all he could to simplify his lessons to the understanding of his pupils, but because he left a vacuum in the Lagos Broadcasting service when he left for the Gold Coast, his services was much needed back home in Nigeria. Thus, Abdallah spent four months in the Gold Coast as an instructor and returned to Lagos to resume his career as a Newscaster.<sup>5</sup>

Abdallah, having worked in the British Colonial Service, and has seen their discriminatory attitude, began to show greater interest in the struggle for liberation. By 1940, his employers were beginning to regard him too radical politically and a threat to colonial interest, especially in the South where the talk about Nigerian Independence was becoming too rampant and uncomfortable. As a result, Abdallah was transferred to Kano in 1940 as a senior staff to the Northern Region Radio Rediffusion Services in Kano.<sup>6</sup> While in Kano, he quickly linked himself up with various associations that had similar ideologies with him. Some of these organizations which he linked up with were Nigeria Reconstruction Group formed in 1942, that later transformed into the National Council of Nigerian and Cameroons (NCNC) in January 1945. He believed strongly that Africans should be given opportunity to education like the Whites and also work on equal terms with them. He wondered why Africans should be discriminated, reduced to subordinate status when some of them had equal academic qualifications.<sup>7</sup>

### **THE ROAD TO NATIONALISTIC STRUGGLE FOR H.R. ABDALLAH AND DISMISSAL FROM CIVIL SERVICE**

Abdallah swerved into nationalistic struggle due to the prevailing circumstance of his time. Barely a year after his appointment as a newscaster, his nationalistic interest was actuated by Azikwe's pilot which began publishing in 1937. What aroused his interest was the newspapers' focus on and exposure of racial discrimination in colonial Nigeria. As Abdallah puts it, "The Editorial of Zik's paper constituted a queer tonic. They brought out the discriminatory behaviour of the Whiteman, and I was as radio monitor a victim myself".<sup>8</sup> This propelled him alongside other youthful nationalists such as Kolawole Balogun and Osita C. Agwuna to form the Zikist Movement was inaugurated in Lagos on February 16th, 1946. By March 1946, Abdallah who was still a Civil Servant with the Radio Rediffusion Services in Kano, along with Agwuna established a branch of Zikist movement in Kano. Abdallah was made its Financial Secretary in March 1946, then Secretary General in 1947 and later President General of the Movement in August 1947.<sup>9</sup>

In December 1946, Abdallah with other radically minded contemporaries like Mallam Aminu Kano, Yusuf Maitama Sule, Abdulrahman Bida, Bukar Dipcharima and Abubakar Zukogi founded the first overtly political association in Northern Nigeria called the Northern Elements Progressive Association. Abdallah was immediately appointed the General Secretary of the association while he was still a major stakeholder in the Zikist Movement.<sup>10</sup> As soon as the executive of the Northern Elements Progressive Association was inaugurated, Abdallah and other officials travelled to many parts of the North. They also opened branches in other places. During their visits, Abdallah usually emphasized the: "British usurpation of political power of the Northern Emirates and States, and, therefore, the illegitimacy of British Colonial Presence." That the British usurped the political power of the Northern Emirates was enough justification to regard their presence illegitimate. According to Iweiebor: "The formation of Northern Element Progressive Association and its activities perturbed colonial officials, who feared that the activities of these young politicized Northern intelligentsia might upset the stagnant tranquility which they sought to maintain with the emirs in Northern Nigeria through the institution of indirect rule."<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the British were very concerned that these young men might be a channel through which the "subversive" nationalist ideas espoused by Southern "agitators", especially Azikiwe and his newspapers, might penetrate the barrier which the colonial state attempted to erect over Northern Nigeria. For that, Abdallah and his comrades – Agwuna, Abubakar Zukogi, etc., were trailed by colonial agents, and dissuaded from political activities through the imposition of certain measures against them. It should be noted that Abdallah was still in the colonial service and because of his political activities; he was threatened with a sack. The Northern Elements Progressive Association itself was hounded out of the North. Its base was narrowed to Lagos.<sup>12</sup>

The high point of Abdallah's nationalistic struggles came on Sunday August 3rd, 1947, following his election at its first General Conference as the President General. In his Executive committee were the Zikist stalwarts like Osita Agwuna (Deputy President General) with whom he had worked previously as officials of the movement in Northern region: M.C.K. Ajuluchukwu (Secretary General); K.O.K. Onyioha (Treasurer General); Adewale Fashanu (Vice President, Western Region), and S.O. Achara (Vice President, Eastern Region), Mallam Abdallah also doubled as the Vice President of the Northern region.<sup>13</sup> Abdallah's rise to the top of the Zikist Movement was described as evidence of his competence and the possession of leadership qualities. Subsequent activities in the movement were to make this point manifest on August 11, 1947, when he gave his inaugural lecture at the Glover Memorial Hall, Lagos, on "*What is Zikism?*" Various titles in some books as: "*Zikism as the Northern sees it*", or "*Zikism as I understand it*". In the lecture, Abdallah refuted the commonly held view that the Zikists were a band of "hot-headed youths" who worshipped and deified Azikiwe. He explains that:

The Movement and its members were more concerned with the ideas of Azikiwe as a Social Philosopher." Zikism was a humanist philosophy anchored on the belief in freedom and implacable opposition to domination in any form. "In Zikism, there is no place for prejudices – be they social, racial, economic or political, ethnical and religious. Zikism stands for brotherhood, equality and unity .... Zikism believes in freedom for all men, not freedom for a few. It believes in practical as opposed to mere theoretical or rhetorical democracy. Zikism is not rash but rational, it is not rebellious but firm and outspoken. It does not hate anybody but opposed to slavery from any quarter. Zikism and imperialism are irreconcilable."<sup>14</sup>

Abdallah also argues that: The human spirit could not be permanently repressed. He contends that: "It was the basic urge for liberty, which inspires such momentous revolutionary events as the English Revolution of 1685, the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolution of October 1917, and posited that neither atomic bomb could suppress such revolutionary upsurges."<sup>14</sup>

Abdallah's inaugural lecture perturbed colonial officials, who feared that the activities of the young politicized Northern intelligentsia might destabilize their programme, hence they considered such lecture "anti-government". This set off a chain of events that led to his dismissal from his post as Senior Monitor and Announcer in Kano Rediffusion Service in January 1948.<sup>15</sup> Since he was accused of giving a public lecture that had a political connotation and for which he did not take permission, Abdallah was initially issued a query in which he was expected to reply within seven days. The query reads:

“You should explain why disciplinary measures must not be taken against you within seven days for having as a civil servant addressed a meeting to which members of the public had access on a subject reasonably to be regarded as of political nature without the permission of the Secretary of State or of the Governor and thereby contravening the provision of General order 40.”<sup>16</sup>

Abdallah, immediately informed the Zikist movement’s headquarters of this development while the Deputy Vice President to the Movement Mr. Agwuna notified all branches of the development and gave it maximum publicity through the press. In his reply to the Chief Secretary, Abdallah stated that he was prepared for the consequences of his action. Some excerpts from the letter will give an insight into the workings of the mind of a dedicated radical nationalist. Abdallah responded:

Am I to repent and promise never to deal with politics again? Impossible! I would sooner hurl myself into eternity that deflects from the path of my convictions..... I believe that politics is every man’s concern, and that he who is not interested in politics does not cherish his freedom of thought nor of expression, and that such lack of interest is a sign of social irresponsibility and mental retardation. It is my strong belief that the masses should be preserved from merciless and ungodly exploitation which is an attribute of that wicked and satanic imperialism, which is wrestling from the individual, his liberty of thought and of action and of feeling.... I did not take permission from either the Secretary of State or the Governor before making that memorable speech because by passing the emancipation Act of 1833, no man was to be made a slave within the British Empire .... I believe in the righteousness of my cause and offer no apologies. But I warn my imperial overlords that, that power has yet to exist which can subject the mind of men forever... imperialism has gone from one blunder to another and must continue .... Until it finally and eventually finds itself precipitated .... into the abysmal chasm of destruction. I pray sir, proceed with whatever you consider your duty, and I shall be satisfied to leave the verdict to God and History. Humble, but unhumiliated, obedient but never subservient and bloody but unbowed I remained Sir.<sup>17</sup>

### **SPURRING THE SPIRIT OF NATIONALISM**

After his dismissal from Radio Redifussion Services in Kano, Abdallah held a meeting at Sabon Gari, Zaria on the 15th of January, 1948 and the local branch of the Zikist movement passed a resolution that General order No. 40<sup>B</sup> under which Abdallah was dismissed should be either abolished or amended.<sup>18</sup> At a further meeting in Zaria on the 4th of February, 1948, Abdallah

addressed a mixed meeting of about 150 Northerners and Southerners on a topic titled “What We Are Fighting For”.<sup>19</sup> The gist of the lecture was that all must fight for freedom from imperialism. The objective of which should be “government of Nigeria by Nigerians, “that even a weak self-government would be better than foreign rule. Abdallah organized lectures, symposia and public debates to pursue the movement’s goals of overthrowing the colonial regime through enlightenment of the masses. Olusanya has credited the Zikists with having provided the necessary leadership for the bewildered masses who had been roused to political awareness by the Second World War and Zik’s political propaganda. While this was happening, the Colonial State prohibited the importation of radical and socialist magazine, books, pamphlets and other publications. It was their belief that such readings were instrumental to the cause, which the youths stood for.

Despite all measures taken against the Zikist by the Colonialist, the former were never discouraged from their struggle. They all believed that service to humanity was the best service one could render not only to one’s fellow human beings but to one’s country and the continent in general. Abdallah who felt very touched about the hypocrisy of the exploitative nature of the British observed:

We need no more evidence to show that even the “civilized” English realize that a nation’s destiny is in the nation’s own hands and comes first above every other thing as far as the nation is concerned. Our destiny lies in our hands and we must make up our minds when to realize this destiny.<sup>20</sup>

Having been dismissed from Colonial service, H.R. Abdallah became a full-time nationalist devoting his time to the emancipation of Nigeria and Nigerians from the yoke domination and oppression under the platform of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons where he occupied the position of a permanent Under Secretary prior to the transformation of the NCNC into the National Council of Nigerian Citizens. Along with his compatriots, Abdallah, initiated the Pan-Nigeria delegation to London in 1947 in protest against the Richard’s Constitution. Abdallah’s major concern then was how to reawaken the people towards political consciousness through enlightenment and inculcating in them the need for self-rule. As he argued:

We are no more prepared to accept any status of inferiority simply because we are law abiding. A foreign government . . . . In a country today has fallen short of desired expectations, and we are convinced beyond doubt that no alien government however benevolent will serve the needs of the colonies.<sup>21</sup>

In his justification for the call for revolutionary anti-colonialism activities, he questioned the rationale behind the celebration of the Empire Day – May 24th. He looked at it as a fiesta meant

for socializing the young children into subservience to and acceptance of the legitimacy of colonialism: and for the adults, it was an occasion meant to remind them of the defeat of their forebears and their current impotence. By denouncing it, Abdallah was introducing a critical awareness, sensitivity and skepticism into popular consciousness as the real nature and meaning of events such as the “Empire Day”.<sup>22</sup>

Abdallah in his public speeches always urged his audience to fearlessly embark on the liberation struggle by declaring themselves free and stand by that declaration without counting the cost of the struggle because history would always judge the stand of an individual. The youth for the first time got a leading nationalist who could give them courage and exemplary moves.<sup>23</sup>

By November 20th, 1948, Abdallah was arrested alongside Agwuna, Anyiam and Macaulay for no clear reasons. They were arraigned before the court and charged of sedition, which they allegedly committed during the Glover Hall meeting of August 11, 1947 after 15 months of the alleged crime. To protest the arrest of the Zikists, the Zikist movement in Onitsha declared Saturday, November 20th, a “Day of National Mourning”.<sup>24</sup> Businesses were paralysed except for some European, Syrian, Lebanese and Indian businessmen who defied the boycott of business activities and opened their shops; their shops were thus stoned. The boycott extended to places like Nkpor, Ogidi, Obosi, Nnewi, Asaba, etc. The colonial state got the support of the Chief of Onitsha, Obi Okosi II who sent his town crier to announce to the public that shops and market should operate normally and that the boycott should be ignored.<sup>25</sup> But this anti-colonialist call failed. It further demonstrated how some few individual chiefs collaborated with the colonial administration to thwart the efforts of the Nationalists which usually led to undermining the chiefs’ moral authority. This was why T. Falola and A. Mahadi state that: “While the vast majority of Nigerians resisted colonial domination, other privileged Nigerians collaborated with the British in order to safeguard their interest and partake in the British colonial exploitation of the country.”<sup>26</sup>

### **THE GLOVER MEMORIAL HALL TRIAL OF THE ZIKISTS**

The Colonial government as explained earlier responded to the Zikists initial and continued revolutionary calls by arresting the leaders of the movement and subsequently charging them to court. The trial, which started from December 1948, lasted up till March 1949. There were three sedition trials involving the Zikists - the Tom Jones Hall trials involving Agwuna, Enahoro, Aniedobe, and Dafe, the African Echo trials involving Ebi and Odufuwa and the Glover Memorial Hall Trials involving Abdallah, Agwuna, Anyiam, and Macaulay. For the purpose of this paper, we shall limit our concern to the Glover Memorial Hall Trials. The trial followed their arrest after the revolutionary re-affirmations made by the four Nationalists at the Glover



Memorial Hall on November 7th, 1948. They were arraigned before the court on six-count charges of alleged seditions that include:

- a) Calling for the forcible removal of the Governor from office.
- b) Asking His Majesty's subjects or the inhabitants of Nigeria to procure the alteration by force of the Government of Nigeria, as by law established.
- c) Urging that the laws of Nigeria should not be observed.
- d) Describing the governments of the United Kingdom and Nigeria as the common enemy of Nigeria people.
- e) Asking people to give their allegiance exclusively to the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons.
- f) Stating that "the revolution against the Government of Nigeria has commenced; the people of Nigeria must continue the common struggle by violence."<sup>27</sup>

When the preliminary hearings commenced, Abdallah and Agwuna refused legal representation while the other accused accepted legal representation. At a subsequent sitting of the court, Abdallah gave the court a copy of his Glover Memorial Hall Speech – "**The Age of Positive Action**".<sup>28</sup> He requested the court to invite the Attorney General to appear as a witness since he was responsible for his arrest. But when he was told to pay £1:6s to subpoena the official, he refused on the ground that he did not see why he should pay the amount to bring the chief law officer to help the course of justice.<sup>29</sup> Abdallah argued in court that he was correct to say that he owed no allegiance to the British because as a protected person from the Northern protectorate, only his "natural rulers could claim his first and unbounded allegiance. Therefore, his allegiance to the British could only be secondary". He went further to say that "I did not see why my declaration of personal independence should give the colonial state a headache . . . unless the government always regarded me as a slave". In addition, he defended his urge to Nigerians not to pay taxes unless the Colonial State was prepared to concede self rule to them on his conviction that "taxation without representation is serfdom or slavery". He said that his assertion that he would disobey laws made by the Colonial Legislature, which he considered a mockery of "democracy" was intended to inform the government that the legislature was anachronistic in the constitution. This was because the system, made up largely of nominated persons, was "repugnant to the idea of true democracy". Such a body according to H.R. Abdallah could not be responsible to the masses which it was in principle supposed to serve.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, his demand for a radical reconstitution of the legislature was not because he was mad, but because Africans also joined the "forces of democracy to fight for World Freedom". With his logical argument, the judge told Abdallah that he should give evidence and not express his opinions. While concluding his defence, Abdallah said that what was required of the British was

not a “rigid interpretation of laws, but a change of heart” and that if the events of that day helped to effect a change, it would be to the good of Nigeria and Britain. As for himself, whatever the outcome of the trials, he would accept it with satisfaction, patience and fortitude.<sup>31</sup>

When cross-examined on the text of his Glover Hall lecture, Abdallah admitted that: “His speech was calculated to bring disaffection to the government, but it was not intended to create discontent since discontent already existed in Nigeria.” Instead of giving way for legal representative, Abdallah choose to address the court. His address was given on February 15, 1949 which was an expression of the burning spirit of anti-colonialism entitled: “**What I believe**” which lasted for ninety minutes.

“First of all, I have to express my gratitude to providence for this opportunity offered me to express my feelings which are the feelings of the country generally to the government through this court. I do not believe in the game of hide and seek where national issues are concerned. I do not believe in hiding the truth when that truth would be of immense value to both the oppressor and the oppressed. When God created man, He called him man. He did not call him rich or poor man, aristocrat or commoner. He did not call him superior, He did not call him inferior, and He called him just man. All men are, therefore, by creation, equal, and this theory of equality is, in my opinion, the fundamental upon which all other rights of man, be the social, or religious, political or economic have been based. Greed born of the desire to possess puts in to man’s mind the idea of exploiting man, pride in vain glory, blind faith in ephemeral glamour, the jettisoning of things spiritual for the love of things temporal, all these and the maddening effort to cheat nature by preventing history repeating itself, led man farther and farther away from his creation. Man had climbed on the wings of his mechanical talisman, subdued the world and set up empire upon which the sun would never set. I say the sun of iniquity because the very idea of empire is in itself a novelty of the violation of the natural rights of man. Such violation is evil and things that are evil are, indeed evil.

My country has for over half a century been panting under the oppressing heels of British imperialism. For years we have by verbal ejaculation and other forms of expression protested against the status quo. Thirty to forty million inhabitants of my country have been deprived of a national identity, and that is the calamitous tragedy of our race; they labour and toil only to answer to the needs of their oppressor who is backed up by crude force. They are economically strangulated and they starve in the midst of plenty. The potential wealth of our fatherland is

being drained steadily and relentlessly while we are assigned to an inferior status in what they hypocritically call a common wealth of families. And by this, those who have paid a dear price for liberty and fully know what it meant to deny others their liberty. We can now see the necessity from their point of view for the public land acquisition. We can now understand why the vast expanse of territory known as Northern Nigeria can remain so.

Aliens came to the country in thousands whether we like it or not, they find our land a paradise but to us, the owners of the land, the land has become a hell. And we are supposed to keep quiet as if we do not know that in South Africa, the dignity of man has sunken down the abysmal well of degradation". Others may find it a source of joke. Laws have been enacted for us by a legislature, which is a mockery of democracy. These laws aim at incapacitating us, to tie us down forever. This, as I have said is man's effort to cheat nature but who can stay the hands of destiny? Nineveh of Sennacherib, in her full dazzling glory and splendor, the Baghdad of Harun-al-Rashid with superb majesty and grandeur, the proud Rome of militant Caesars have all gone into the rabble of history.

"Then, sir, I warn the innocent people of British who are being misled by their imperialist agents to take heed: for, what happened to these ancient cities can, and shall happen to proud and imperial London. (Now addressing his Honour, the judge personally, Abdallah said), "Let alone with conscience, I should have no doubt as to what verdict you would return, but I am in no illusion as to what justice means under the crown colony system. Here lies in you an enviable position".

"I should have preferred to plead guilty, but I find it difficult to reconcile such plea with the dictates of my conscience". You are here at the instance of that oppressor to punish any such violation of the law". I am also aware of the fact that irrespective of personal feelings, as the judge, you must not allow sympathy to overshadow your duty. "If it is a sin to strive to win freedom for one's country, then the great country which is America today sailing the sinking ship of British should have not existed. If it is your conviction that to fight for freedom is a crime, then, by all means condemn me: but remember Ireland and her struggles.

If you are convinced it is not a crime and yet you have to convict me due to pressure, then. I leave you and your conscience to the great and Omnipotent Judge of judges. Under the circumstances I will implore you to inflict on me the

maximum punishment for what they have called an offence which I conceive to be a sacred duty discharged. Were I to be set free today, I cannot give you assurance of muzzling my tongue and since I must speak and those laws which brought me here today still exist, what guarantee have I that I may not commit worse crime tomorrow? Proceed to fulfill the pleasure of those who put you there: as for me, my conscience being clear, I will be satisfied to leave the final verdict to God and His unfathomable river of time. This is all I have to say in my defence, it is now for your Honour to say whether it is relevant or not.”

Thus, late H.R. Abdallah ended the court address which lasted exactly ninety minutes.<sup>32</sup>

A week after the defence speech, precisely on February 22, 1949, Justice J. R. Gregg delivered his verdict, finding H.R. Abdallah and his comrades guilty of “uttering sedition, contrary to section 51 of the criminal code”. Abdallah was later sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labour. After pronouncing the judgment, the judge asked whether Abdallah and others had anything to say? Abdallah answered in the affirmative. In his statement, Abdallah said:

You have your Honour found me guilty! I have done for my country no more than British had done. I have committed no worse offence than Ireland has been guilty of. And you have found me guilty of fighting for freedom. This much I have to say – that any nation that arrogates to itself the right to oppress another must have conceived the idea in iniquity. And that nation is bound in abomination to perish. Thanked you for finding me guilty.<sup>33</sup>

### **H.R. ABDALLAH IN NATIONAL POLITICS**

As enunciated in the preceding theme, H.R. Abdallah was sentenced to two years in prison with hard labour and while in prison, he was monitoring the political happenings in the country and when he was released in July 1951, he took time to access the wind of political change that had affected his nation. Abdallah who was pursuing the cause of national unity to chase a common enemy found out that tribal and regional interest had superceded national interests. National parties were formed along regional lines and this dealt a big blow to the dreams of H.R. Abdallah of a united Nigeria with common front and unity of purpose. According to Alhaji Ahmad Badams, H.R. Abdallah developed a painful heart related complications which affected his health in later years.<sup>34</sup> Abdallah felt betrayed as he affirmed that any struggle based on regional or tribal lines negates the cause of national unity. By 1951, when he came out from the prison, Chief Awolowo had pulled the yorubas from the Zikist movement to form the Action Group while Dr. Azikiwe went to the Eastern region to consolidate on the National Council of Nigerian Citizens. H.R. Abdallah was further decimated as he was left alone. He neither belonged to the

Action Group nor the NCNC. Within this period, another political party was formed called the Northern people's Congress all championing regional cause, Abdallah therefore retired to Lagos and disassociated himself from these parties. He was later to go to Ebiraland his home of birth to reorganize the polity following the Ebera political crises of 1951 popularly referred to as the Okene riot of 1951. His heart still aches from the regionalization of national politics and thus became passive in national affairs until his death on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1982 after a prolonged illness that affected his heart traceable to the regionalization of nationalistic struggles which was not in tandem with his beliefs.<sup>35</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper espoused Habib Raji Abdallah as a frontline nationalist who was fully involved in the struggle for the independence of Nigeria. Being the president of Zikist movement which was the most vibrant group that opposes the continued domination of Nigeria, he was very instrumental to the attainment of Nigeria's independence through the group's activities. He was a leading light in the formation of the Northern Elements Progressive Association also at that time making him a true and only nationalist who has bases in the South and North of a regionalized Nigeria. It is a fact of history that only few Nigerians went to jail because of Nationalistic struggles and those include the likes of Anthony Enahoro, Gambo Suweba, Osita Agwunna, Aminu Kano and Habib Raji Abdallah. It is similarly a rare fact of history that Abdallah was the first Nigerian to declare himself free of British rule on November 7, 1948 at the Glover Memorial hall in Lagos in the course of his speech.

Thus, it is rather a costly oversight for the Independent Nigeria to forget the heroic role of Abdallah and not to accord him the right place in the history of Nigeria's Nationalism. It is important to note that while Nigerian authors and historians hardly recount the activities of H.R. Abdallah, foreign authors like J.S. Coleman's *Background to Nationalism* amongst others mentions prominently H.R. Abdallah's contribution to Nigeria's Nationalism. Abdallah should be sung as a national hero because he served as a bridge between the North and the South. He was a prime mover in the National Council of Nigerians and Cameroons which was a southern based political party and a stakeholder in the Northern Elements People Union which was a Northern based political movements. H.R. Abdallah could be described as the only Nigerian that belonged to several political blocs to exhibit his nationalistic ideals in a then regionalized Nigeria. This paper thus has the strong belief that such a man who had fought for the independence of the Country should be recognized as a nationalist and be so immortalized.

**Endnotes**

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