

The Nigerian Progress Union : An African Association in the United Kingdom in the 1920s

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1. Introduction

The Nigerian Progress Union (NPU) was founded in London in July 1924 by Ladipo Solanke and other Nigerian students. In August the following year, another organisation was founded, again on Solanke's initiative, the name of which was the West African Students' Union (WASU). The WASU grew into a large community with a membership of some 300 African students and continued in existence for a 30-year period over the Second World War and the post-war era. Going far beyond the framework of a single student association, the WASU played an important historical role in inculcating and developing political awareness during a time of

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African nationalism. By contrast, the NPU was short-lived and never grew beyond being a small community of Nigerian students residing in the United Kingdom. As such, its activities never made any notable impact on the history of Britain's African community. For this reason, the historical material on the NPU is limited compared to that on the WASU. However, while the NPU and WASU were separate organisations as such – the former being for Nigerians and the latter for West Africans (including Nigerians) – they were at the same time closely linked, as is evident by the fact that they were both founded on Solanke's initiatives and that they both had many commonalities, including shared goals, activities, and members. To put it rather crudely, being around a year older, the NPU was WASU's precursor or prototype. Moreover, analysing the NPU's activities is a crucial step in understanding the nature and trajectory of the WASU's activities.

Incidentally, I have visited Nigeria three times (August-September 1995, December 1997, and September 1998), and during these visits, I examined the Solanke Collection in the Gandhi Library of the University of Lagos. The Solanke Collection is a private collection comprising Solanke's diary, correspondence, his own collection of books, and photographs. It was donated to the library by Solanke's wife, Opeolu Ogunbiyi, following his death. I had originally accessed the collection to obtain primary sources for my research on the WASU, but while perusing the materials, I happened upon the NPU's Minute Book¹. This document was a record of the proceedings of NPU meetings covering a period of 11 months from 17 July 1924, the day it was founded, to 8 June 1925, the eve of

WASU's foundation, and it opens with the following statement: 'At the invitation of Mr Ladipo Solanke, a general meeting of the Nigerian students took place at Mr F. Ola Vincent's place at 5 Lancaster Road, W.11, to inaugurate a union for the promotion of the general welfare of Nigeria'. The Minute Book has only 44 pages of handwritten notes, yet it is a most valuable internal document on account of the insight it offers into the NPU's activities.

In this article, I refer to these minutes that I found during my research of the Solanke Collection and expound on how the organisational framework and activities of the NPU provided the precursor or prototype to the WASU.

2. Foundation

As indicated by the opening statement of the Minute Book above, Solanke played a vital role in the NPU's foundation.

Ladipo Solanke was born in Ofada, a village on the outskirts of Abeokuta in the southwest of Nigeria, in 1886 (or 1885). After completing his primary and secondary education in Abeokuta and Oyo, Solanke moved to the Colony of Sierra Leone and enrolled in Fourah Bay College. In 1922, he moved to Britain to study law at University College London (see Photo 1).

It is difficult to determine how soon it was after arriving in London that Solanke first got the idea to found such an organisation as the NPU for the African community in the UK. However, a memo he wrote on 13 March 1923 does suggest that he was starting to take interest in forming such an organisation from at least a year before



Photo 1. Ladipo Solanke

(Photo courtesy of Mrs Opeolu Ogunbiyi)

the NPU's foundation. Within this single-page memo, it is the following statements that support this assumption: 'name of the society (is) "Egbe aro" or "Kiteteyemi" club...It consists of well-drilled patriotic men'². Among the Yoruba people, *egbe* refers to a club, society, or association. As for *aro*, according to the explanatory note Solanke added to the memo, it is a synonym of the Yoruba expression *awaduro* or *awaro*, that is, 'united we stand'³. In other words, at least from the first of the two candidate names, 'Egbe aro', we can tell that Solanke sought to convey the idea of 'an association of men who stand united'.

In any case, we can at least infer from this memo that Solanke

first got the idea to establish a new organisation – either the NPU or a similar body – from as early as 1923, the year after he arrived in London.

On 15 March 1923, two days after Solanke wrote the memo, a fellow Nigerian student by the name of F. O. O. Byass sent him a letter, in which he announced, 'With reference to the subject I brought before you a few days ago, it has been decided that an informal meeting be held on Saturday next at 2pm at the above address (17a Comeragh Road, W14 London)⁴. It is not clear whether Solanke responded to the invitation and attended the meeting, but given the timing of this correspondence, it is likely that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the inauguration of a new association of Africans.

On 17 July 1924, at Solanke's invitation, 13 Nigerian students, including Solanke himself⁵, convened in the room of a student named Vincent. At this meeting, the attendees resolved to inaugurate a union for promoting the welfare of Nigeria. According to the minutes, at the inaugural meeting, a student named Ekundayo Williams moved that the new association be named the 'Nigerian Students Union' in order to exclude non-student Nigerians. However, after some discussion, the students agreed that membership should not be restricted to students but be open to any Nigerian who sympathises with the union's objectives, and they ultimately decided on the name the 'Nigerian Progress Union', which Ajayi Johnson had proposed. They also resolved to elect Solanke as a temporary honorary secretary and to delegate the drafting of the union's rules to four of the members: Williams, D. Esin, Jibril

Martins, and Solanke⁶.

On 26 July 1924, ten days after the inaugural meeting, the NPU held its second general meeting. The above four members submitted their draft of the Rules of the Union, and these rules were then deliberated on and then adopted. According to these rules, the ultimate aim of the NPU was 'to raise in Nigeria and elsewhere a fund for definite educational purposes chief among which are: scholarships for Nigerian youths; the maintenance and multiplication of schools in Nigeria; the foundation of a hostel in London for African students; and the promotion of research into West African laws, customs and institutions'⁷.

This straightforward and unassuming objective – to raise a fund for educational purposes – has no trace of the lofty ideals or zeal that often emerged when newly founded African organisations codified their objectives. Instead, the rather specific and concrete goals, such as funding for scholarships and the setup of a hostel, seem even to suggest that the NPU was nothing more than a fundraising vehicle. It seems rather odd that the NPU's only stated objective at the time of its inauguration was to raise funds given that the union did in fact go on to do more than just fundraising; as discussed later, it actively organised study meetings and lecture meetings among resident Nigerians. Why then, was raising a 'fund for definite educational purposes' the sole stated objective? Also, what significance did this hold?

At the time, for a Nigerian to have received a higher education in the UK meant being part of an elite. Thus, the NPU's objective might have echoed the students' own determination not to indulge

in or waste this privilege, but instead to use it to advance educational opportunities among young Nigerians, who could then follow in their footsteps. It is here that one can easily detect the ideological influence of Solanke, who passionately argued that education was essential for Africans' advancement and that, to this end, Africans needed to make self-help efforts. Also, the fact that flowery words and pomposity were eschewed in favour of the specific goal of procuring educational funds might also have had something to do with the no-nonsense character of Solanke, who placed more value in implementing concrete actions than in voicing abstract ideals⁸.

Later on, when WASU was founded on Solanke's initiative, it adopted one of the NPU's funding goals, namely the foundation of a hostel for African students (which would also serve as a club house). Having taken the post of WASU's secretary as before with the NPU, Solanke went to British West Africa alone as a WASU representative for a three-year period, during which time, he organised wide-ranging fundraising activities. In this way, Solanke took it on himself to deliver the NPU and WASU's common objective of raising funds for a hostel for African students in London. This is further indication of the close linkage and continuity between both unions' purpose and Solanke's personal drive.

During the second general meeting of the NPU, the members decided on officers and committees. Esin was elected as President, Olawole Lucas as Vice-President, Vincent as Treasurer, and Solanke as Secretary. Those elected to the Executive Committee were the

President, Vice-President, Treasurer, and Secretary, as well as four other members: Johnson, Byass, Sorinola Siffre, and Martins⁹.

3. Patrons

Many of the African organisations in the UK at the time had patrons, as was customary among other social groups in Britain.

The NPU discussed the matter of selecting suitable persons for patrons during its general meeting on 26 July 1924. The members resolved to ask three individuals to serve as Honorary Patron: Henry Carr, former Commissioner of the Colony of Lagos, Adeniyi Jones, then member of the Legislative Council in Lagos, and Richard Henshow, then Chief of Calabar (in the south of Nigeria)¹⁰.

Then, at its general meeting on 2 August 1924, the NPU resolved to formally confer the title of *Iyalode* upon Amy Ashwood-Garvey, who was residing in London at the time. Mrs Ashwood-Garvey was the wife of the famous Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey¹¹. In the early days of the NPU, Mrs Garvey proactively supported the union's activities. It was probably through Solanke that she came to be involved with the NPU. Solanke's diary from the time contains a scribbled note of the circumstances in which he first made Mrs Ashwood-Garvey's acquaintance. According to this note, their friendship began in March 1924, around four months before the NPU's inauguration, when Mrs Ashwood-Garvey sent Solanke a letter praising him for an article he had contributed to the journal *West Africa*. For a while thereafter, the two continued corresponding with each other, but the first time they met in person was on 2

April 1924, when Solanke visited Mrs Ashwood-Garvey on her invitation¹². Following the NPU's inauguration, Mrs Ashwood-Garvey held an unofficial meeting with six NPU members on 22 July 1924. At this meeting, she announced her intention to set up an educational programme for Nigerians and requested the NPU's assistance in this endeavour. The educational programme she advocated was to be a new kind of scheme, one which would be run by Nigerians themselves and which would contribute to the education of Nigerians in a nonpartisan manner. Mrs Ashwood-Garvey was to raise funds for the programme in the United States. The NPU deliberated on Mrs Ashwood-Garvey's proposal at a meeting on 26 July 1924 and resolved to give its full backing to the programme¹³.

On 31 August 1924, the NPU held a farewell party for Mrs Ashwood-Garvey ahead of her departure. At the party, Solanke told the attendees about how he had made her acquaintance and about the vital role that she had played in the NPU's inauguration. After the party, an unofficial meeting took place between Mrs Ashwood-Garvey and the NPU's members, and the attendees discussed how Mrs Ashwood-Garvey should raise funds in the United States and how the NPU could support her on that score¹⁴. However, while Mrs Ashwood-Garvey and the NPU maintained contact for a while after she arrived in the United States in September, their cooperation over the educational programme for Nigerians soon came to an end. The reason for this is not certain, but some hints can be gleaned from a letter sent around ten years later, on 28 March 1934. The author of the letter was Mrs Ashwood-Garvey,

who was in the United States at the time, and the recipient was Solanke, who was working as the warden of the WASU hostel. In the letter, Mrs Ashwood-Garvey notes how Solanke has acted very coldly towards her and ventures the opinion that this might stem from Solanke having become friends with her now ex-husband Marcus, with whom she was on bad terms. She then announces how she continues to have feelings of friendship towards Solanke and that her resolve to devote herself to Africa has only grown stronger since 1924¹⁵. Thus, in addition to the NPU's relatively short lifespan, the frosty turn in Solanke and Mrs Ashwood-Garvey's relationship may have directly or indirectly led to the break in contact between the NPU and Mrs Ashwood-Garvey.

4. Activities

What specific activities did the NPU undertake? The journal of the time, *West Africa*, ran a number of articles on the NPU's activities. As far as can be seen in these articles, the NPU engaged in debates at University College London¹⁶ and organised lecture meetings to discuss various issues concerning 'Education in West Africa', to which it invited as a speaker Prof J. E. G. de Montmorency, a professor of Comparative Law at the university. The NPU also printed and sold booklets containing part of Montmorency's address¹⁷. According to an internal document from the British government's Colonial Office, the NPU invited Hugh Clifford to a lecture meeting in 1924. At the time, Clifford held the important post of Governor of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria¹⁸. As

examples of other activities, the NPU published a collection of its members' memoirs recounting their experience as students in the UK and published them in booklet form with a view to raising funds¹⁹, and while it never actually did so, the NPU also sought to publish its own newsletter²⁰.

The NPU members supporting these activities numbered around 30 as of October 1925. Of these, 20 lived in London, and the rest lived in regional cities like Bristol, Birmingham, and Edinburgh.

5. Relationship with the Colonial Office

African students residing in the UK fell under the jurisdiction of the Colonial Office. It is likely that the NPU first came to the attention of the Colonial Office in October 1924, when the latter received from the former a letter of protest. During the previous month, the Emir of Katsina (emirs are traditional Islamic leaders; Katsina is in the north of Nigeria) was sojourning in the UK, and the NPU had tried to arrange a reception for the Emir at his hotel, but their efforts were twice thwarted by an official from the Nigerian colonial government, who was accompanying the Emir as an interpreter. To protest this incident, Solanke, as the NPU representative, sent a letter to the Colonial Office on 13 October in which he roundly criticised the behaviour of the official and demanded him to give an account of his actions via the Colonial Office²¹. The Colonial Office issued a reply to the NPU on 31 October, conveying the official's account, but the NPU were not satisfied with his explanation, and Solanke sent another letter of protest to the Colonial Office on 8

November²².

Despite having conducted such correspondence with the NPU, the Colonial Office was, to begin with, largely ignorant of the NPU's organisational character or its activities. The same was apparently true for the management of University College London. An example of this lack of awareness can be seen in a letter that the secretary of University College sent to the Colonial Office in July 1925, more than a year since the NPU's inauguration. In this letter, the university management states its understanding that the NPU is a beneficial organisation in general, but then requests the opinion of the Colonial Office out of concern that the union might possibly be a front for political activities among Nigerian students²³. Because of the Emir of Katsina affair, the Colonial Office had by then at least become aware of the existence of the NPU and its Secretary Solanke. It did not, however, have much information on the NPU's specific activities, and faced with the pressing need to respond to the university's request, it had to request information from Hugh Clifford, who had spoken at NPU meetings²⁴. However, in October 1925, the Colonial Office arranged a meeting between its Undersecretary of State for the Colonies and NPU members. At this meeting, Solanke gave an oral address to the Undersecretary, explaining in great detail about the NPU's activities and requesting the Colonial Office's understanding and support²⁵. It was through such a process that the Colonial Office gradually gained awareness about Solanke and the NPU as well as the clear organising trend among African students in the UK at the time.

6. Conclusion

On 7 August 1925, Solanke held a meeting at his home with 21 students from four British colonies in West Africa: Nigeria, Gold Coast (today's Ghana), Sierra Leone and the Gambia. There were at least four African associations in London at the time; aside from the NPU, there were the Union of (for) Students of African Descent, the African Progress Union, and the Gold Coast Students' Association. However, most of the students attending the meetings at Solanke's house came to the view that what was needed was a student association that would debate issues concerning West Africa in particular and that would foster West African solidarity. Accordingly, the students resolved to found the WASU as an organisation for West African students²⁶.

The NPU continued for a while after WASU's inauguration. However, the two organisations that Solanke had inspired shared many of the same objectives, activities, and members, and Solanke, secretary of both organisations, clearly placed priority on the WASU. It was probably for these reasons that the NPU declined and finally disappeared in the late 1920s.

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Notes

- 1 The Nigerian Progress Union, *The Minute Book*, SOL Box. 78. SOL stands for the Solanke Collection (the Gandhi Library, the University of Lagos).
- 2 Ladipo Solanke, *Diary, Note, Memo. etc.: Private and Confidential (1920)*, SOL Box 34.
- 3 Solanke, *Diary, Note, Memo. etc.*
- 4 F. O. O. Byass to Ladipo Solanke, 15 March 1923, SOL Box 34.
- 5 The thirteen foundation members are Ekundayo Williams, G. Rufino, D. Esin, Ajayi Johnson, O. Vincent, Jibril Martins, Ernest Goyea, J.J. Martins, Olawale Lucas, A. Pedro, S. Siffre, Omosanya Adefolu, and Ladipo Solanke (NPU, *The Minute Book*, 17 July 1924).
- 6 NPU, *The Minute Book*, 17 July 1924.
- 7 NPU, *The Constitution of the Nigerian Progress Union*, 26 July 1924, NA CO 583/138. NA and CO stand for the National Archives (London) and the Colonial Office respectively.
- 8 In terms of this point, Solanke wrote in his diary '(T)he society talk least but act most.' (Solanke, *Diary, Note, Memo. etc.*)
- 9 NPU, *The Minute Book*. 26 July 1924.
- 10 NPU, *The Minute Book*. 26 July 1924.
- 11 NPU, *The Minute Book*, 2 August 1924.
- 12 Solanke, *Diary, Note, Memo. etc.*
- 13 NPU, *The Minute Book*, 26 July 1924.
- 14 NPU, *The Minute Book*, 31 August 1924.
- 15 Amy Ashwood-Garvey to Ladipo Solanke, 28 March 1934, SOL Box. 2.
- 16 *West Africa*, 28 February 1925, p. 167.
- 17 *West Africa*, 7 March 1925, p. 178; 8 August 1925, p. 985; 13 March 1926, p. 279.
- 18 Hugh Clifford to Harding, the Colonial Office, 1 August 1925, NA CO 583/138.
- 19 NPU, *The Minute Book*, 13 December 1924.
- 20 NPU, *The Minute Book*, 11 October 1924.
- 21 Ladipo Solanke to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 13 October

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- 1924, NA CO 583/131.
- 22 Ladipo Solanke to the Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, 8 November 1924, NA CO 583/131.
- 23 Secretary of University College to the Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, 16 July 1925, NA CO 583/138.
- 24 Harding, the Colonial Office, to Hugh Clifford, 31 July 1925, NA CO 583/138.
- 25 Ladipo Solanke to the Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, 5 February 1926, NA CO 583/138.
- 26 *West Africa*, 15 August 1925, p. 1002.