



# The Predicament of Nigeria

CHARLES OLA AKINDE

**“The war in Nigeria is not genocide, it is not a tribal war, it is not a religious war, it is not a racial war.”**

THE NINTH YEAR has just elapsed since Nigeria gained her independence, and six years since she became a republic within the Commonwealth. To start with, the dreams of the pioneers of independence came true. Within the first four years Nigeria's progress became an example to statesmen around the world, and aroused the enthusiasm of writers and journalists. Nigeria was esteemed a model of parliamentary democracy at work in Africa. The growth of cities, the advancement of technology, the expansion of industry and the development of social relationships were remarkable.

This progress was checked when greed, corruption, and all sorts of social evils appeared. Men on top became self-seeking, using public funds to enrich themselves and their relatives. Ministers purchased real estates in cities and key positions throughout the country. Absentee landlordism became an established business for top-rank government officials and other prominent and influential persons in all communities in Nigeria. The common people were condemned to live in slums because of the lack of housing arising from the excessive speculation in land. Even governments leased lands and houses from the speculators, who were themselves the policy makers.

The farmers were taxed heavily to raise funds for community development. These farmers could hardly produce enough to feed their families, and many had to borrow money at very high interest rates to pay for their children's school fees. When the boys managed to finish their secondary education, the parents had to borrow money again to bribe the officers in their children's potential working place.

Among the working classes there was a continued demand for better working conditions and for better housing for the low-paid workers who found it prohibitive to live in private houses because of the high rents charged by the landlords.

The vigour with which Nigerians came forward to build a nation “where no man is oppressed” soon diminished, however, when selfishness took the place of patriotism at the top and everyone became self-seeking. The people at large were condemned to want, and the physical powers and mental faculties of youth stagnated. In big cities, especially in Lagos the Federal capital, slums began to spread. Thieves, hooligans, thugs and all manner of criminals developed among the unfortunates who had no employment or who were

deprived of their opportunities. These criminals were even encouraged by the politicians, who employed them as bodyguards and party militias and violence, murder, arson, looting and many other crimes infested the political scene.

The people were fearful and terrified, while the politicians went on tour or ensconced themselves in their homes. On the 16 January 1966 the army seized power and bloodily overthrew the Federal and regional governments, bringing an end to the first Republic of Nigeria.

## ***Counter-coup and Civil War***

The people welcomed the new regime because they were at least saved from the political chaos that preceded the military take-over. The new regime promised to stamp out tribalism, corruption, nepotism and the rest of the social evils that bedevilled the nation, but it soon became clear that to eradicate the corruption, bribery and other criminal activities would take years. After a few months of military rule, the soldiers themselves were absorbed in the rat race of self aggrandisement. Brigadiers, colonels and sergeants became quasi-millionaires; nepotism was more pronounced than ever. The common man continued to wonder if there was anyone that was good.

Meanwhile, perhaps, the discredited politicians had started to provoke agitation among their tribesmen. At all events, terror started to mount in some parts of the country and many lives and properties were lost. The cry became “who will bell the national cat?” Then in July 1966 (the same year) a counter-coup overthrew the first military government.

A prolonged discussion took place within the military circle, the rivalry among which perhaps led to the secession of the former Eastern Nigeria. No sooner was secession declared than civil war replaced police action, which brought the country to its present predicament. Tears are to be shed only for the civilian population who are the victims of this ugly war.

Unity cannot be decreed. Secession will not solve the problems that have been so intense for all alike in Nigeria, and civil war can only destroy; it cannot rectify. In searching for a long-lasting solution the Nigerians must learn to co-operate and forget the past, so as to concentrate their joint efforts on waging a moral and intellectual campaign against the foremost destructive evil in the African community—illiteracy

and through it tribalism or nepotism.

I am reluctant to use the word tribalism to describe what is wrong with Nigeria. The use of "tribalism" instead of "nepotism" has made the situation confusing and unintelligible. What is wrong in Nigerian society is not, as has been alleged by writers and journalists, hatred of one person by another because of his language or tribe, but the struggle to accumulate wealth that has engendered favouritism and opportunism. When a man of one tribe is in a leading position in public office, he would favour another man from the same tribe or town irrespective of his qualifications. This practice in conventional terminology is called nepotism. There is no Nigerian who hates any other just because he is Ibo, Yoruba, or Fulani.

"Like democracy" said Dr. F. G. Burke, "which to many people means anything that is not communism or totalitarianism, tribalism often is but a residual category collectively explaining the inexplicable." What is wrong in the Nigerian community is nepotism and other social defects caused by misappropriation of public or national wealth, and what the Nigerian people want is not any tribal mark, but a fair share in the resources that nature has provided for their country.

No government can eradicate tribalism by legislation; all that is within human power to do is to detribalise those economic institutions that do not provide for individual liberty, and deny some sections of the community equal access to the resources provided by nature for all.

Truth is the only thing that can make the people free; legislation cannot remove what has its genesis or roots in the human mind. It would be impossible to make the Ibo forget that he is Ibo, or a Yoruba to forget that he is Yoruba and any attempt to do so would be an attempt to curb individual liberty. Indeed, nobody wants to eliminate the patriotism of the Ibos and Hausas; nor does anyone want the cultures of Yorubas, Edos and Fulanis to sink into oblivion. On these different qualities Nigeria's foundation was laid.

The war in Nigeria is not genocide, it is not a tribal war, it is not a religious war, it is not a racial war. It is a struggle engendered by social maladjustment, from the blame for which none of the tribes that make up Nigeria can be exempted, for all have participated in the shameful gamble for wealth with which the first Republic of Nigeria was cursed.

All that Nigeria needs is the co-ordination of effort against the social evil that denies the individual his liberty and security, by securing the equitable adjustment of the national resources. The Nigerian people—the Yorubas, Ibos, Hausas, Edos, Efiks and all others—should combine their efforts to find the causes and remove the points of friction in order to secure peace and save the country from the inevitable economic dislocation that will follow the civil war.

## History Revisited

ORMONDE

VOLTAIRE, in an essay, said he preferred Richard Cromwell to his more famous father Oliver. Richard, he said, refused power that would have cost blood, lived a peaceful life to a ripe age, cultivated his country estate, and was loved by his neighbours. Oliver was fanatical and bloody, ambitious and lonely, dictatorial and arrogant.

Taking a clue from this evaluation, we ought to have another look at history. The artist Matisse once said that if he applied a spot of paint to a canvas and it did not harmonise with the rest of it, he might have to start from that spot and repaint the whole picture. Starting from Voltaire's spot, we might gain some fresh insights from our repainting of history.

When Cromwell was fighting a battle at Marston Moor, a nearby farmer was told that the forces of Parliament were fighting the forces of the King. "What!" exclaimed the farmer, "has them two fallen out then?" So little did these weighty events affect him and thousands like him. Yet the rarely broken silence of these humble people belies the fact that they have carried the world on their shoulders and have kept it going while the great ones have raged and fought, plotted and schemed, stolen and bribed, and carried things to a sorry pass.

There should be a new kind of history that dates from the events that have really influenced our lives rather than from forgotten skirmishes. In our present history books, looking up the 1890's, for instance, one finds dreary recitals of the complicated manoeuvres of the Great Powers, all vain and dead as a door-nail, but one does not usually find mention of the thing that has affected our lives more than any other event of that time—the invention of the automobile.

It is true that one may find these things in specialised histories. But they ought to be taught as *History*. The situation is a little better today than formerly, when history was preoccupied entirely with kings and wars. Modern history books do take more note of the social background, but "History" is still basically the political events of the world, enriched by some attention to the life of the people. It should be the other way around, with the life of the people as the main show and with some attention paid to kings and wars.

I was conducting a class in history once, when a student suddenly asked me, "Who invented beds?" Hanged if I knew. The Egyptians? If so, that is certainly more important than all those infernal dynasties and is their one legacy that is a living reality.

For three hundred years, from about 1100 to about 1400, the English language was ignored by important and learned people—it remained outside "history"—and that was a blessing. This neglect permitted the