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# TOWARDS BUILDING NIGERIA INTO A NATION: RETROSPECT ON A BROKEN COVENANT \*

Onwuka Ndukwe Njoku \*

## Introduction

Fifty-nine years plus one week ago, Nigeria became an independent country and started the journey towards nationhood. The prospects of her becoming a true nation appeared rosy. However, no sooner had independence been won than its inherent challenges began to rear up their monstrous heads in various hues and colours. It soon became clear that winning independence was one thing, building the country into a true nation, a different proposition. Nearly 60 years on, it seems as if the problem is developing to the stage of terminal cancer. It should occasion no surprise that the subject of nation building in Nigeria has become a recurrent theme of discussion among scholars of different academic disciplines and ideological orientations. As this project gets more problematic and thornier, so have discussions on the matter become more heated. Sometimes the debates have produced more heat than light. In the process, prescriptions for the malady and way forward litter scholarly outputs and reports. But these do not seem to be yielding the expected results. The theme of this year's Conference seems to lend support to this perspective. Unceasing attention to this matter by scholars and other stakeholders is understandable; for building a true nation is the dream of every country, especially erstwhile colonies of Western imperialists. No country in the world has achieved any significant political, economic and technological respect without attaining nationhood. As long as our dream nation of Nigeria remains a tantalizing prospect, so will the matter continue to generate intellectual discourse.

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\*This is the text of the Kenneth Dike Memorial Lecture (Keynote address) of the 2019 National Conference of Historical Society of Nigeria that held in Asaba. Prof. Onwuka Njoku retired as a Professor of History from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

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Amalgamation, which happened 105 years ago, is fingered by many as marking the locale where the rain of nation building started to beat Nigeria. Undoubtedly, the exercise has left profound imprint on the Nigerian polity. It has shaped the contour of the country's political, economic and human resource development and intergroup relations, to a very large degree. It also has incubated its major fault lines and slippery bends. Whether it was a mistake, as some high-profile Nigerian have asserted, or not is not the issue at stake in this presentation. This point has been debated by scholars of various disciplines and ideological persuasions, to no end. My stand point is that the outcome of that exercise is an enduring reality, whether good or bad.

I would essay that the critical challenge arising from that fiat is to make the best out of amalgamated Nigeria, which one source describes as "a bad marriage everybody hates but none dares to leave".<sup>1</sup> This is, in fact, the central thrust of this presentation, namely that Nigerians have to face up to the challenge of making the so-called "inconvenient marriage" convenient by whatever patriotic formula they can work out. Many plural nation states have been able to weld themselves into truly solid nations. On assuming the presidency of the USA, Barack Obama, the first American of colour to do so, posed to all Americans rhetorical questions which bordered on American's nationhood. To each query, he returned the same answer - "Yes, we can". Building Nigeria into a true nation can neither be a merry-go-round nor impossibility. The ingredients needed to achieve this exist, but are floating like atoms needing an organizing principle and the right political leadership to string them up into a coherent constructive force. There is never an easy route to success.

### **Pre-Amalgamation Setting**

Early Euro-centric writers presented pre-colonial sub-Sahara African communities as islands in splendid isolation of one another; in a state of self-sufficient primitiveness. That perspective

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1. John Ghazvian, *UNTAPPED: The Scramble for Africa's Oil*. Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 2007: 167.

has long been consigned to where it belongs: the dust bin of history. The fact is that from remote antiquity, there had been a lot of coming and going among and between the peoples, communities, kingdoms and empires occupying the territory that came to be christened Nigeria. The entities interacted most times cordially; at other times belligerently. But they devised means of sorting out conflict issues and building mutual relationships.

A variety of factors provided a conducive canvass for those mutual interactions. First, variations in natural resource endowments discounted any tendencies towards total self-sufficiency of any group, even at the minimal subsistence level. As a simple economic dictum goes, from the beginning of time, humans have always desired some consumer products and services but nature refused to put them in one location. The need to exchange goods from areas of plenty (low marginal utility) to those of scarcity (high marginal utility) encouraged trade and other forms of exchange over varying distances. Rainfall, vegetation, soil and mineral resource-induced variations dictated the items produced in different parts of the Nigerian territory. The savanna region has dominated cattle rearing and cereal crop production. Salt famine was a recurrent phenomenon in some areas, while other areas produced this biological necessity for human survival, far beyond their consumption need.<sup>2</sup> The major rivers and lakes were a source of sea foods as well as highways of trade and communication. The first European visitors to the Nigerian coast in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, described huge canoes bringing assorted agricultural and craft products from the hinterland to the coast in exchange for smoked fish and salt.

Large scale centralized kingdoms and empires such as Kanem-Borno, the Caliphate, the Oyo and Benin Empires, were indigenous experiments in large state formation, incorporating peoples of differing ethnic nationalities, languages and cultural backgrounds. Itinerant Hausa traders traversed the length and breadth of the savanna and semi-savanna belts of Nigeria just as

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2. P.E. Lovejoy, "The Borno Salt Industry". *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 2, 4; 1978: 629-628; A. Adefuyi, "Keana: A Gift of Salt" *ODU*, 33; 1998: 107-117

Fulani herdsmen annually engaged in transhumance that brought them to the precincts of the forest belt. In the southeastern parts which had no major centralized polities, the Aro established a network of trading colonies spread over much of the swath of territory covering Igbo, Efik-Ibibio, Igala and Idoma country, webbing them into some sort of commonwealth of traders, craftsmen and oracle agents.<sup>3</sup> Itinerant Igbo metal craftsmen traveled all over Igboland and far beyond up to Lokoja, to as far west as Siliku area of Yorubaland, and as far east as Bakundu in the Cameroons, long before the colonial times.<sup>4</sup> A renowned itinerant smith from Awka, the birth place of our own Kenneth Onwuka Dike, became a confidant of Attah Obaje of Igala kingdom.

These comings and goings resulted in various forms of political, cultural and social exchange and inter-marriage. Nineteenth century European explorers marveled at the multi-lingual flairs of the traders in the major market centres. In most of the Caliphate and its precincts, Hausa had become, to all intents and purposes, something of a *lingua franca*. In his journey into Igala territory, Northcote Thomas observed that Igbo was spoken up to 4 days' journey into that kingdom.<sup>5</sup> The coming of colonial rule expanded the range and frequency as well as the complexion of the existing arteries of the pre-colonial contacts. Rail and road transportation started to string together dispersed communities more firmly than hitherto. European trading stations, rail-road junctions, colonial administrative headquarters, stimulated incipient urban

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3. Kenneth O. Dike & Felicia Ekejiuba, *The Aro of Southeastern Nigeria, 1650-1980*. Ibadan: University Press Ltd; 1990. David Northrup, *Trade without Rulers: Pre-colonial Economic Development in Southeastern Nigeria*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; 1978
  4. Nancy C. Neaher, "Awka Who Travel: Itinerant Igbo Metal smiths of Southern Nigeria". *Africa*, 49, 4(1979). Onwuka N. Njoku, "Itinerant Igbo Smiths of Pre-colonial Nigeria". *Nsukka Journal of Humanities*, 7' 1994: 1-14
  5. Northcote W. Thomas, "Anthropological Report on the Ibo-Speaking of Nigeria", *Law and Custom of the Asaba District. Part IV*. London: Harrison and Sons, 1914: 5.

aggregations where various ethnicities, religions and cultures converged and interacted on daily basis.

The central point here, for emphasis, is that the embryos of state formation, a potential fore-runner to nation building, were afloat and some of these were already being implanted before the British colonized Nigeria. In my view, the principal problem with Amalgamation is two-fold. One is the way it was foisted on Nigerians, by way of a fiat, to serve the central purpose of the colonizing power in line with their center-periphery policy. The second is the current perception in some quarters that the fiat is sacrosanct and, therefore, not modifiable. High profile political leaders, who have assayed that there is no basis for Nigerian unity and that Nigeria is a mere concoction, expose their ignorance of the history of this country. This uninformed view justifies the lamentations of historians that Nigerians are in dire need of leaders with a sense of history.<sup>6</sup>The need for retrospection in order to understand the present and horoscope into the future can hardly be over-stressed. This is one of the sermons which eminent Professor Kenneth Dike started preaching over half a century ago. To this matter, we shall return shortly.

### **Nation and Nation Building**

The concepts - nation and nation building - have been written about and discussed profusely by numerous scholars of different disciplines and ideological persuasions, almost to the point of redundancy. And like most subjects in the humanities and social sciences, the concepts, especially nation building, do not admit a universally accepted definition because of their hybrid nature. Most countries in Africa are colonial constructions, enclosing many ethnic nationalities with diverse origins, histories, languages, socio-cultural backgrounds and political traditions.

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6. Obaro Ikime, *History, The Nation and The Historian: The Voice of Nigerian Historian*. Ibadan: HEBN, 2006; Olayemi Akinwumi, Sati U.Fwats, Okpeh O. Okpeh, Jnr (eds.), *Historical Perspectives on Nigeria's Post-Colonial Conflicts*. Lagos: Unimark Ltd;2007.

In general, the colonial rulers in their selfish interest did not encourage a sense of nationhood or togetherness among the colonized. In fact, they used the strategy of 'divide-and-rule' to maintain their hegemony over the colonized people. Against this backdrop, the challenge of nation building, in post-colonial African countries has been how to homogenize the heterogeneous entities into polity through political, economic and socio-cultural engineering of sort, for the good of all the citizens. This involves establishment of order through the rule of law and creating effective social institutions for fostering national identity and shared values.<sup>7</sup>

There are two principal strategic dimensions to this process-political and economic- both of which are intertwined, like Siamese twins. Of course, politics is distinct but not different from economics: both are concerned with the organization of power for the control and maintenance of means of production. Politically, nation building requires convincing the component nationalities, through pragmatic programs, sometimes coupled with some bits of propaganda, to accept the nation state as their own nation, and to which they should submit their first loyalty and allegiance. The economic dimension involves achieving rapid economic development along with substantial improvements in the living conditions of the generality of the populace. In this way, the ordinary citizen would begin to appreciate the need to belong to a nation which incorporates the component nationalities. Therefore, nation building, ultimately aims at achieving a politically stable, economically viable and socially harmonious community. A nation admits unity in diversity. Diversity does not imply acrimony. History has served in many parts of the world as a major instrument of nation building. German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck acknowledged that next to the Prussian army, German historians played an invaluable role in the unification of Germany.

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7. Terhemba Wuam, "Nigeria since 1960: A Comparative Study of Nation Building and Development", *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria*;2(2012):99-116; Walker Connor, "Nation Building or Nation Destroying?". *World Politics*. 24(3); July 2011'



To achieve nationhood demands a leadership that possesses a large breadth of historical introspection and vision. As the saying goes, a historian is a prophet looking backwards. The historian looks backwards because without hindsight there can be no informed horoscope. Central to nation building is a leadership who sees and takes the wellbeing of entire state and citizens as their constituency and responsibly. We may call a leader of that bent a statesman; not a politician. As Ade Ajayi, assays, a politician works for today but cares little about tomorrow.<sup>8</sup> Nation building inheres a **COVENANT** between leaders that initiate and engineer the process and the citizens within the nation state. The leaders show the light for the citizens to find their way. In the covenant, the leaders provide such entitlements as security of lives and property, equitable and even provision of public goods across the territory to all, without exceptions. In return, every citizen contributes their expected quota for the general good of the nation. When the state fails to keep this covenant, it becomes impossible to achieve a nation. In a true nation, citizens can put their lives on the line, if need be, in defense of the commonwealth, voluntarily, not by compulsion. In the September 11 tragedy in the USA, many ordinary Americans braved the inferno to give a helping hand to those trapped in it. Citizens did this because the nation is their prized possession and the leadership serves as role model. Where there is leadership failure, especially when leaders prey on their citizens, there cannot be nation building efforts worth the while. Nigerian citizens are very governable and patient with their political leadership, almost to the point of fatalism. This tendency seems to lure the leaders to a false sense of security, on the assumption that the citizens will always be patient with them. Reality is that there is always a limit to human endurance. This is an aspect of the underlying argument of this presentation.

### **Political and Economic Narrative**

A synoptic fast track chronology of the political-cum-economic

8. Jacob F. A. Ajayi, "History and Society" in C. B. N Ogbogbo & O. O. Okpeh (eds) *Interrogating Contemporary Africa: Dike Memorial Lectures, 1999 -2007*. Ibadan: HSN, 2008.



leadership of Nigeria since its independence provides the context for interrogating the thesis of this presentation. This is laid out in time segments, with 2015 as the terminal date.

### **The independence era, 1960 -1969**

As indicated earlier, independence was greeted with tumultuous jubilations all over the new born nation state. This was because colonial rule had raped Nigeria with callous indiscretion.<sup>9</sup> The intention of the colonizers was to deliberately build a politically fractured and economically dependent country. The nationalist leaders had promised their fellow Nigerians to right the wrongs of colonial rule and make a covenant with their own people once independence was won.

The beginning appeared very propitious. First, independence was obtained without bloodshed. Second, the nationalist leaders were of moderate disposition; not war drum-beating hawks. Third, second to India, Nigeria was considered to have one of the most level-headed civil services, among the ex-colonies of the British Common Wealth. What is more, the economic prospects of the country were very bright. She boasted varied natural resources and a huge mosaic of dynamic population. She was a leading world exporter of groundnuts, palm produce and cocoa. Immediate post-Second World years witnessed insatiable demand for these products. The spiraling demand spurred more agricultural export production which yielded the groundnut pyramids. Besides, Nigeria had such minerals as coal, tin and bauxite. And on the eve of her independence, petroleum was discovered at the Oloibiri, near Port Harcourt in commercial quantities. Oil would quickly take a commanding position as a source of revenue for the nascent independent country.<sup>10</sup>

During the nationalist era, the politicians had dreamt high and aplenty; and had whipped up the revolution of rising

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9. Toyin Falola (ed.), *Nigeria and Britain: Exploitation or Development?* London: Zed Books Ltd.1987. Claude Ake, *A Political Economy of Africa*. Essex: Long man Group Limited.1981

10. John Ghazvinian, *UNTAPPED: The Scramble*:20 – 21

expectations among their fellow citizens. With independence, they were challenged to translate their dreams to reality. The First Republic political leaders attempted vigorously to realise their dreams by fast tracking economic and social development of their respective regions. They envisioned in unison Nigeria as the economic powerhouse of sub-Saharan Africa. Each of the regions had its development corporation which arrow-headed the overall development of their regions. Both the Eastern and the Western Nigeria Development Corporations invested substantially in plantation and farm settlement as well as industrial schemes. Each established a university for production of high-level manpower direly needed by the nascent nation state. The Northern Region concentrated on agricultural extension farm programs, provision of water schemes and veterinary services to rural farmers.<sup>11</sup> From historical hindsight, the immediate post-independence political leaders were certainly far more sincere than their successors in facing up to the task of trying to transform the deformed colonial heritage into a nation via economic and social engineering. However, they were hampered by inexperience in the field of modern democratic politics, especially in a plural society like Nigeria. The departure of the colonialists had unlocked the grid that had held them together. Quickly, ethnicity and regionalism transformed them into irreconcilable political foes, thereby gravely problematizing the prospects of building Nigeria into a true nation. Political struggle for power turned into a do-or-die and winner-takes-all affair. The major parties were regionally based and primordially supported. Ethnic gerrymandering shredded the NCNC of its national colouration. As Sa'ad Abubarkar argues, that action dealt a deadly blow on the possible emergence of a truly national party, and gave fillip to making political parties essentially ethno-regional

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11. Onwuka N. Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria, 19<sup>th</sup> -21 Centuries*. Nsukka: Great AP Express Publishers, 2014: 299-313. A. M. Yakubu, I. M. Jumare & A. G. Saeed (eds.), *Northern Nigeria: A Century of Transformation, 1903-2003*. Kaduna: Arewa House, 2005

organizations.<sup>12</sup> Politicians on all sides whipped up ethnic fear, suspicion and jealousy to entrench themselves in power.

The end result of all this was the military intervention of 15 January, 1966. This was, at first, nationally well received but was quickly rebranded as an ethnic *coup d'état*. A reprisal coup which had all the making of religious, ethnic and regional motivations followed and took the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians from the Eastern Region, who had nothing to do with the first coup. The upshot was a civil war of horrendous proportions that brought the nascent independent country to the brink of disintegration. Thankfully, Nigeria survived territorially intact. But nation building prospects were in tatters.

### **1970 -1980: Era of Missed Opportunities and Illusions**

The survival of Nigeria as one country provided the military leadership very promising prospects of a fresh start. National optimism was cruising at unprecedented highs, as all Nigerians breathed a sigh of thankful relief. Ex-secessionist 'Biafrans' were thankful to the FMG following its 'No Victor, No Vanquished' declaration. The military head of state, General Yakubu Gowon, was riding the crests of national popularity no Nigerian leader had enjoyed. Some thoughtful Nigerians were expecting that the technological achievements of Biafra would be harnessed and plugged into post-civil war Nigeria's national technological trajectory to achieve home-rooted autocentric-technological rebirth. To cap all this up, petroleum burst onto the front burner of the country's revenue profile. In the early 70s, the price of crude jumped through the roof and gushed into the national coffers undreamt of wealth. This saved the country from the bogey of financing post-war reconstructions on borrowed funds. Literally overnight, Nigeria joined the esteemed company of middle level world economies.<sup>13</sup>

12. Sa'ad Abubakar, "The "Challenges" of Nation Building: Nigeria Which Way Forward?" in C.B.N. Ogbogbo and O.O. Okpeh (eds), *Interrogating Contemporary Africa*:

13. Onwuka N. Njoku, "Era of Misguide Good Feeling: Yakubu Gowon and the Birth of a New Nigeria, 1970-1975" in L.A. Nwachukwu and G.N. Uzoigwe (eds.) *Troubled Journey: Nigeria since the Civil War*. Dallas: University Press of America, 2000.

A combination of all the fore-going infused a sense of manifest destiny among Nigerians. The prospects of growing Nigeria into a true nation could not have been more propitious. But, as a British parliamentarian warned with prophetic sagacity, the war had only provided an opportunity to re-make Nigeria; it had not remade it. It was up to the leadership to birth a new Nigeria from the crucibles of the war.

Sadly, the opportunity for a fresh start was squandered. It soon became evident that post-war Nigerian leadership had forgotten everything about the past and learned nothing from it. In other words, they displayed no historical consciousness. The “No Victor, No Vanquished” pronouncement turned out to be mere populist sloganeering. Poorly thought out, punitive state creation birthed a new vocabulary of far-reaching implications, possibly for nation-state truncation rather than consolidation: “state of origin”. The coded message in abandoned property saga plus reconstructions of war damage which were happening in areas far away from the main theater of the war foreboded ominous signs against nation building. Henceforth, a citizen of Nigeria can be a partial citizen within the nation state. Nigeria’s military leadership had no Abraham Lincoln among them and could not build on the soaring tide of national optimism. It was easier to win the war than to win peace.<sup>14</sup>

To compound the emerging scenario, oil wealth staggered the military junta into a bankruptcy of purposive national development vision, as billions of petro-dollars went into a jamboree of ego massaging projects that related very little to the pressing needs of the overwhelming masses. The world was told that Nigeria’s problem was not money but how to spend it; an open invitation to vampires to plunder the national treasury on the illusion of affluence. And vampires of various hues descended upon the economy. For instance, government parastatals sprang

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14. Patrick I. Ukase, “Nigeria’s Post-War Reconciliation Efforts and its Implications for the Stability of the Nation State in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” in Armstrong M. Adejo (ed.), *The Nigerian Civil War, Forty Years After: What Lessons?* Makurdi : ABOKI PUBLISH, 2008:273-292

up and became conduits for siphoning public funds into personal bank accounts of kleptomaniac officials and their collaborators. Fiscal indiscipline along with unrestrained orgy of corruption was already robbing Nigeria blind.<sup>15</sup> All the evils associated with oil in Africa started to rear up their heads and bare their fangs: the Dutch disease, resource curse syndrome, paradox of plenty and national cake mentality.

In 1975, Brigadier Murtala Mohammed wrenched power from General Gowon; and attempted to incinerate the scourge of corruption and indiscipline and the illusion of wealth and prosperity, from the national psyche. But the attempted remediation merely scratched the veneer of a deepening national miasma. So, when General Obasanjo voluntarily handed over power to the civilian government of Alhaji Shehu Shagari, after 13 years of military autocracy, Nigerians were expectant that a promising milestone of sanity in her *Troubled Journey* in nation building ambition was in the offing. The optimism proved misplaced as an “era of convivial anarchy and political patronage”<sup>16</sup> followed. A catalogue of federal projects provided open-ended avenues for over-valued contracts awarded to the inner caucus of the government. Huge kickbacks accompanied every contract and import licenses became “a ticket for instant wealth”.<sup>17</sup> The era of 10 percent had given way to that of 50 percent and a lot more. But against the backdrop of the government “Green Revolution” program, a Presidential task force on rice importation seemed like a tragic irony. John Paden avers that “Payments for imported rice had been made to merchants but the ships docking in Nigeria were filled with sand, not rice”.<sup>18</sup>

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15. Richard Joseph, “Affluence and Underdevelopment: The Nigerian Example”. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 16,2;1978

16. Martin Meredith, *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence*. London: The Free Press, 2005: 329

17. Meredith: *The State in Africa...*,221

18. John N. Paden, *Muhammad Buhari: The Challenges of leadership in Nigeria*. Zaria: Hudahuda Publishing Company, 2016: 26-27

Indeed, a casino economy was emerging in which the wealth of the country was auctioned away prodigally at party luncheons. It is for valid reasons that Paul Lubeck observes that,

The National Party...oversaw the most perverse and irrational patronage distribution system in Nigerian history ...The Nigerian state was both the instrument of primitive accumulation and, at the same time, the obstacle to advancing towards market driven capital accumulation.<sup>19</sup>

It is little wonder that the only civilian government since January 1966 was caricatured as “government of contractors by contractors and for contractors”.<sup>20</sup>

The consequent economic statistics are damning: in 1982, food imports gulped \$3bn despite “Green Revolution”, while external debt had jumped to \$20bn by 1984. The next year, 44% of the country’s foreign exchange earnings went into debt servicing (not repayment). As manufacturing collapsed, unemployment soared while the purchasing power of the ordinary Nigerian was gravely undercut.<sup>21</sup>

### **Return of Military Autocracy: 1984 - 1999**

On January 1, 1984, the army took over Dodan Barracks again, with the aim of “saving the country from total collapse”.<sup>22</sup> General Buhari promised to give the economy a new impetus and a better sense of direction. Many public buildings had been gutted by arsonists to cover up massive frauds of high-ranking kleptomaniacs and their God fathers. The new junta was clear in

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19. Paul M. Lubeck, “Restructuring Nigeria’s Urban Industrial Sector within the West Africa Region: Interplay of Crisis, Linkage and Popular Resistance. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 16, 1; 1992

20. Meredith, *The State of Africa....*, 221

21. Uma Eleazu, *Failed Dreams: 50 Years of Economic Mismanagement in Nigeria*. Ibadan: HEBN Publishers Plc; 2011: 20-25

22. Paden, *Buhari: The Challenges of Leadership...*: 19-20



their mind that only an iron hand could restore credibility and discipline to the national morass. To this end, the junta swiftly promulgated a long list of decrees, among them Decrees, 2, 3 and 4.<sup>23</sup> Decree No.2, authorized government to detain for three months, in the first instance, any person seen as a risk to national security. Decree No.3 focused on the Recovery of Public Funds and Properties acquired fraudulently by public officials and their surrogates. Decree No.4 empowered government to jail for up to two years any person who authored any publication or made a statement embarrassing to government or was seen as calculated to embarrass government. Government embarked on a War Against Indiscipline under which any person who behaved in a disorderly manner in a public place faced the wrath of cattle-prod wielding soldiers and could be subjected publicly to "frog jump".<sup>24</sup> On the economic front, the administration rejected IMF loan conditionality and opted for home-bred austerity measures such as down-sizing the public work force, discontinuing projects which had little regenerative capacity and recovering hundreds of millions of Naira from fraudulent officials and their collaborators.

For a while, discipline seemed to be returning to national life; but this proved to be meteoric in a society whose elites were habituated to convivial anarchy. Public reception of the puritanical actions of the regime was mixed reactions. Some people welcomed the measures; others considered them too tyrannical for a civil society. The principal targets of the decrees appeared to be the press, journalists, human rights advocates, militant labour unions and radical academics. Some members of the junta's caucus appeared unsure whether the government was as clean as it postured in the dispensation of justice. Public executions of convicted criminals particularly drew worldwide condemnations. What is more, the austerity measures failed to ease the economic predicament of the generality of the

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23. C.C. Agbodike, *Military Intervention in Nigerian Politics and Governance in Historical Perspective*. Awka: Valid Publishing Company; 2006:48-61

24. Paden, *Buhari: The Challenges of Leadership*: 27-28



population. The regime possibly meant well but, perhaps tried doing the right things the wrong way.

After this meteoric interlude, “Presidential Robbers” and “pirates” seized Nigeria’s ship of state and all but emptied what remained of its bullion cargo.<sup>25</sup> Generals Babangida and Sani Abacha shared some attributes, namely inordinate ambition to privatize the nation state, ruthless repression of critics, real and imaginary, and ambition to transit from military to civilian head of state. The real difference between the twosomes was in style of execution. Described variously as a “master of public relations”, “a politician in uniform” and a “beneficent General”, General Babangida presented himself as the long expected messiah.<sup>26</sup> With nationalistic posturing, he abolished some of the extant unpopular decrees; released many persons languishing in jail; slashed the list of commodities requiring import licenses, from 74 to 16, deregulated the banking industry and the foreign exchange market.

However, as Sophie Pedder observes, “it did not take long for the beneficent General to slip into the habit of his predecessors”.<sup>27</sup> He wriggled Nigeria through the back door to a SAP entanglement that met all the conditionality of the IMF, though Nigerians in a pseudo debate had overwhelmingly rejected IMF loan. SAP occasioned drastic cuts in public infrastructure and social services, closure of factories and down-sizing of the work force. After declaring himself an executive president, he appropriated total state power to himself and virtually turned Nigeria into his personal fiefdom. According to one credible source, during his rule “corruption and indiscipline intensified without scruples, attaining breath-taking proportions at the highest level of governance”.<sup>28</sup> Simultaneously, Nigeria got so

25. Victor Anosa, “Africa’s Presidential Robbers” *The Guardian*; December 1, 1998.

26. Eleazu, *Failed Dreams*: 25; Sophie Pedder, “Nigeria: Anybody Seen a Giant?” *The Economist*, August 21, 1993, 7.

27. Femi Odekunle, “Corruption and Indiscipline and the Nigerian Polity” in Abdullahi Mahadi *et al*(eds.) *Nigeria: The State of the Nation and the Way Forward*. Kaduna: Arewa House, 1994:403-412.

28. Pedder, “Nigeria: Anybody seen a Giant?”: 7. See also Soji Akinrinade, “Don’t Bury the Past.” *Newswatch*”, May, 42, 1996

deeply implicated in international drug trafficking, some observers described the regime as a “narco dictatorship”. Various government programs, such as RBDAs, DFERRI and BLFRW, became conduits for pirating huge amounts of public funds into private pockets. Over \$12bn oil windfall from the US-Iraq war of 1991 vanished mysteriously. A correspondent of the *Financial Times* of London, who reported the missing fund, was sent packing home. It is not for nothing that Meredith describes the General as “the most massively corrupt leader in Nigerian history”.<sup>29</sup>

It was in the prevailing climate of repression that a rough-and-ready paramilitary force code-named “Kill-and-Go” eliminated Dele Giwa, the investigative Editor of *Newswatch*. Nigeria was experiencing, as one author describes it: “the Latin Americanization of politics complete with human rights abuse”.<sup>30</sup> Maier quotes the ‘beneficent General’ as saying, “Human rights stopped where my rights started”.<sup>31</sup> He left office with damning legacies. He annulled the June 12, 1993 General Elections which political pundits adjudged the most credible in Nigeria’s history. He bequeathed to the country a crushing foreign debt burden; a budget deficit amounting to 10% of the GDP and an annual inflation rate above 70%. His eight years in office slipped Nigeria further into the sorry company of the world’s poorest countries<sup>32</sup>; a badge of sorrow and indignity for a country so richly endowed

Sani Abacha continued, with reckless indiscretion, from where his predecessor had stopped. It appears that his principal aim was to get rid of any person he felt stood on his way. Thus, he flung into jail Chief Abiola, the presumed winner of June 12, 1993 presidential election for daring to declare himself winner of that election. Assassins widely suspected to be government buccaneers eliminated Kudirat, Abiola’s wife. A kangaroo tribunal set up by him sentenced the Ogoni activist, Saro Wiwa, to death by hanging.

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29. Lubeck “Restructuring Nigeria’s Urban Industrial...”: 18

30. Karl Maier, *this house has fallen: Nigeria in Crisis*. London: Penguin Books Ltd; 2000: 68

31. Maier, *this house has fallen*:1

32. Maier, *this house has fallen*, 3

Generals Obasanjo and Yar'Adua and many other Nigerians were arrested, charged with planning to topple the government and sentenced to death. Thanks to world-wide pressure, the sentences were commuted to life imprisonment. Yar'Adua died while in detention under very suspicious circumstances. Like Babangida, Abacha made no distinction between public coffers and his personal and family bank accounts. As Maier states, he ran Nigeria "not so much as country but as a personal fiefdom".<sup>33</sup> For instance, in the Ajaokuta "Dirty Deal", he all but shredded the steel company bare.<sup>34</sup> The tyrant was hours to transforming himself into a civilian president when the "coup from heaven" put paid to that.

When General Abdulsalami Abubakar assumed control of the country's ship of state, Nigeria was a pariah state. He tried to bring some semblance of civilized attributes to military governance by soft-pedaling on repression of dissent and criticisms. Most significantly, he stuck to his time-table for returning the country to civilian democratic rule. But the junta was unable to resist the contagion of public waste and mismanagement so characteristic of most governments since 1970. Eleven oil exploration blocks and eight oil-lifting licenses were awarded, without tender, to companies owned by or linked to some top brass officers and businessmen. *Newsweek* of May 24, 1999 blazoned a front-page article captioned "Squandermania ...Exclusive Details of Abubakar's Last Minute Spending Spree". According to the source, three weeks to its end, the regime approved an extra- budget expenditure of N64bn on "items of dubious urgency."<sup>35</sup>

33. Ghazvinian, *UNTAPPED*,80-82; Maier, *this house has fallen*:3

34. Salif Ajokoto, "Ajaokuta Steel-The Dirty Deals" *Newswatch*, May3, 1999; Yakubu Mohamed, "Abacha's Gifts". *Newswatch*; May3, 1999.

35. *Newswatch*, May 24, 1999. Gloria Chuku, "The Quest for National Purification: Murtala Muhammed's New Vision, 1975-1976" in L.A. Nwachukwu and G. N. Uzoigwe (eds.) *Troubled Journey; Nigeria since the Civil War*. Dallas: University Press of America, 2000: 79-101

### **Return of Civilian Rule, 1999-2015**

When retired General Obasanjo, returned as a civilian President, the political, economic and social condition of the country was much worse than before the oil boom kicked in. Poverty had not just spread but also deepened from relative to absolute; that is poverty that kills. There was little sense of national purpose and direction. The most pressing problems were the country's debt crisis, its pariah status, decayed infrastructure, anemic power generation, soaring unemployment, and societal indiscipline. The administration had the challenge of showcasing the dividends of democracy, the sing-song of returning politicians. To its credit, the administration started to tackle these pressing problems with a sense of national direction and commitment, almost unknown in the preceding decades of military rule and the Second Republic.

He established some institutions and mechanisms with the aim of bringing discipline and accountability in the conduct of public affairs. Among these were ICPC, Fiscal Responsibility Act, aimed at curbing budget indiscipline and fragrant abuse of public funds. He set up the Excess Crude Account where possible windfall from crude sale would be set aside for rainy days. He revived the Technical Committee on Privatization and Commercialization and set up the Public Enterprises Bureau to deal with sale of moribund government enterprises. He organized a 'dream team' of credible technocrats to help him get the country back on its feet.<sup>36</sup> All these were, in part, intended to convince the country's creditors that government was serious in dealing with the country's economic problem. Against the backdrop of these reforms and the credibility of the technocrats, he tried to re-lander the country's international image. He successfully negotiated debt-forgiveness of \$18bn from the Paris and London Clubs and offset the remaining balance of \$18b.<sup>37</sup>

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36. In the team were Ngozi Okonjo Iweala from the World Bank as Minister of Finance; Alhaji Muktar, headed the Budget Office; Oby Ezekesili headed the Price Intelligence and Budget Monitoring Office and Charles Soludo headed National Planning.

37. Eleazu, *Failed Deams*: 30-32

The efforts were not without their political fault lines. Privatization provided a haven for political jobbery, under-hand manipulations and sale of equipment and property as if they were scraps.<sup>38</sup> The deals got so messy and riddled with fraud that it generated virtual open altercation between the President and Vice-President Atiku Abubakar. To compound the mess President's ambition to prolong his tenure embroiled him in a political survival battle which took the wings off the sail of his economic reform agenda.

His successor, Musa Yar'Adua, rolled out a 7-point development program with the ambition to make Nigeria one of the 20 leading economies in the world in a few short years. However, as Uma Eleazu points out, the program forgot that to attain world class industrial status needed world class infrastructure, including, *inter alia*, world class educational institutions to produce world class manpower and uninterrupted power supply.<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly, not much came out of the program. Ebelechukwu Jonathan's administration on its part went into socioeconomic enhancement programs in the areas of youth empowerment, road rehabilitation, beefing up local participation in the downstream sector of the oil and gas economy and Niger Delta rehabilitation. But the President lacked the required vision and resolve to transform his tentative dream into reality. His unique contribution towards possible political stability and democratic practice in Nigeria is that he handed over power peacefully to General Buhari, the declared winner of the 2015 general election. He is the first sitting executive President of Nigeria to concede victory to a political opponent, without a fight.

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38. Folasade O.Ifamose &Adesoji Omoniyi, "When Reality Contradicts Rhetorics:Analyzing Privatization Policy in Nigeria,1986-2007".*Nigerian Journal of Economic History*; Nos 9&10 Ayodeji Olukoju, Liberalization, Deregulation and Privatization in Nigeria since the 1980s" in Toyin Falola and Adam Paddock (eds), *Emergent Themes and Methods in African Studies: Essays in Honor of Adiele E. Afigbo*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 2009: 457-472

39. Eleazu, *Failed Dreams...*: 31

### **Building or Enfeebling the Nation State?**

Our fore-going presentation permits this opinion: after 59 years of Nigeria's journey aimed at attaining nationhood, the score card is one of dismal failure. Nigerians were poorer and more divided at the terminus of our time frame than at its beginning. After those 59 years of independence, winning elections is still a matter of which political party rigs, bribes and manipulates most. Law makers fight one another lawlessly over constituency votes, contract awards and housing and furniture allowances. A wide gulf separates the political class from those who vote them into office. Later day political leadership has not measured up near the level of their First Republic predecessors. The likes of Ahmadu Bello, Aminu Kano, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo, for instance, by no means angels, did not make politics a gateway to instant wealth. They were known more for their commitment to what they believed in, than in material rewards of politics.

No country stands a chance of attaining true nationhood without patriotic statesmen as well as ebullient masses. And no country can aspire to full nationhood, if its leaders cannot perform the most basic of civic functions, especially, enabling the country to feed itself and provide security of lives and property. Nigeria was able to feed itself and export aplenty before the flush of oil maniac. Despite a catalogue of agricultural development programs plus a huge fertile land mass and agriculture friendly climate, the country has been very externally food dependent since the 1970s. Billions of petro-dollars per year, is spent in needless importation of what the country can produce abundantly. At the same time Nigeria exports in huge quantities what she direly needs. This in direct disregard of the thoughtful homily of Mbonu Ojike, "the boycott king", who advocated for selective importation and imitation of Western products.<sup>40</sup>

The Lagos Plan of Action for 1980-2000<sup>41</sup> envisaged that by the turn of the present century, Nigeria would at least have her

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40. Gloria Chuku (ed). *The Igbo Intellectual Tradition: Creative Conflict in Africa and African Diasporic Thought*, PalgraveMacmillan,2013.

41.OAU, *Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa,1980-2000*.Adis Ababa,1980



toes on the initial rungs of modern industrial ladder. That ambition did not materialize. The fact today is that Nigeria has no modern industrial sector properly so called; that is, an industrial sector firmly rooted in the Nigerian soil. Stand-alone factories which most Nigerians mistake for evidence of industrialization litter the manufacturing landscape. But their livewires are located in Europe, America and Asia. The indigenization decrees of the 1970s merely introduced another version of indirect rule system, with Nigerians as armchair men of companies dependent on external science and technology for their sustenance. No overarching industrial policy, linking the various sectors of the economy into a coherent reciprocal schema, exists. Nor are there base industries such as iron and steel and petrochemicals rooted in the country to provide a platform for downstream industries. What is more, the critical local know-how and do-how are virtually non-existent. By know-how is meant as the capacity to produce tools with which to kick-start modern industrial production process. 'Do-how' refers to the capacity to use and modify the products of 'know-how', as the need arises. Know-how involves mental conception of how to solve an everyday problem relating to factory goods production and consumption.

The Biafra experience teaches that those basics abound in this country.<sup>42</sup> What is direly wanting is a government with a national perspective and political will. No country transfers its technology; that is the secret of its economic, military and international power relations, to another, except under very strict conditionality. This is why industrial/technological espionage is prevalent among the highly industrialized economies of the world. Our steel plants were touted as exemplifying the industrial ambition of great Nigeria. After billions of Naira had been sunk into them with nothing to show for that, some were sold off as if they were scraps. They still lie in ruins, their hanging cranes providing good havens where birds build their nests.

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42. Reuben N. Ogbudimkpa, *The Economics of the Nigerian Civil War and its Prospects for National Development*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd; 1985



At the root of all this parody, therefore, is failed leadership. Nigeria has been awash with political 'lootocrats', unlucky with most of her leaders and bereft of statesmen. Karl Maier does not overshoot in saying, "Rare is the head of state who acts on behalf of the entire nation."<sup>43</sup> It can stand repetition to state that, a politician acts for today in ignorance or regardless of yesterday and little thought of tomorrow. A statesman builds from yesterday for today and with a vision of tomorrow. The lack or perhaps disregard of historical consciousness by even high profile Nigerians seem to mock that Dike worked for, lived for and died on.

### **Dike Betrayed?**

Esteemed scholars of conspicuous credentials have extolled Dike in no flattering words, as a scientific historian, pioneer and ambassador of the new African historiography, all of which and more, he truly embodied.<sup>44</sup> Dike dreamt big and high for Nigeria; nay for Black Africa. His first engagement in black self-recovery and liberation was at the intellectual level. This was sequel to the centuries of African enslavement which gave a badge of sub-humanity to Africans. His focus on intellectual self-recovery for Africans was logical: the bullet can compel the body but cannot subdue the mind or the intellect, which is the intrinsic essence of the human being. And as Carter Woodson, an American historian argued, "When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to bother about his actions."<sup>45</sup> He will act as you expect. Against this backdrop of intellectual logic, Dike challenged the prevailing Euro-vision of Africa as presented by the likes of Georg W. Hegel and Trevor Roper. He won convincingly the intellectual and ideological war that birthed the Ibadan School of Historiography

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43. Maier, *this house has fallen*: xiii

44. E. Afigbo, K.O.Dike and *The African Historical Renaissance*. Owerri: RADA Publishing Company, 1986. See also C.BN Ogbogbo and O.O.Okpeh ( eds), *Interrogating Cotemporary Africa*;, among others

45. Carter Goodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*.<https://www.thrfitbooks.com>

of which we are all proud inheritors. And, thanks to Dike's pioneering intellectual prodigy, the dominant Eurocentric explanation, through the Hamitic spectacles, of Africa's pre-colonial achievements, was laid to rest. In *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885*<sup>46</sup> and other intellectual engagements, he taught a lesson that may brave eternity: imperialists are your friends only so long as they stand to benefit even at your own expense. He recalled what they did to Jaja and Nana Olomu. As Chinweizu argues, if today the West decides they want Nigeria without Nigerians, they can do so.<sup>47</sup> Consider what happened to Tasmania and the aborigines of America. Moral self-restraint is a mere fallacy in international politics.

Dike went beyond the realm of intellectual history to its praxis. So, he built, nurtured and administered institutions aimed ultimately at building Nigeria into a true nation. He produced detribalized brigades of intellectual generals to firm up and perpetuate the engagements. To be fair, Dike's vanguards, immediate and subsequent, at home and in Diaspora, alive and beyond, have not rested on their oars. This fact is evident in the labours of the likes of Abdullahi Smith, Ade Ajayi, Adiele Afigbo, Bala Usman, Bolanle Awe, Geoffrey Nwaka, Obaro Ikime, Okon Uya and many others. In addition to these, is a long list of younger (not junior) academics too many to be mentioned individually.

These acknowledgements notwithstanding, it has to be admitted that the quality of scholarship and of administration in our institutions of higher learning these days compares poorly to what Dike was familiar with. Many people who have little or no business being in the system have found their way into it. This is a worrisome development for the academia, as some of us have

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46. K. Onwuka Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger, 1830-1885*. London: Oxford University Press, 1956; Dike and Ekejiuba, *The Aro of Southeastern Nigeria*.

47. Chinweizu, "African Studies, Indigenous Knowledge: Towards the Building of a Black Super Power in Africa" in Sam M. Onuigbo, *Indigenous Knowledge & Global Changes in Africa: History, Concepts and Logic*. Nsukka: Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, 2011.

pointed out.<sup>48</sup> Of course; the products of the system inevitably reflect the system itself both in character and learning. The implications of this for nation building are too obvious to generate debate.

Perhaps, the most penetrating significance of Dike's contributions in the area of nation building goes to the roots of Africa's predicament even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, namely, 'how to build Black African military and economic power', rooted in the African soil. This is a task he bequeathed to all of us and on which we must not relent. Are Nigerian political leaders living the Dike dream? It is difficult to give a 'yes' answer to this in the light of the brief narrative on our political-cum-economic leadership since independence.

The most ironic tragedy of our time is this: Our nationalists fought long and hard to liberate us from ruthless colonial exploitation. They promised to right the wrongs inflicted on us by the colonialists once independence had been won. Inexplicably, the billions and trillions of dollars government officials and their surrogates have been siphoning away from their impoverished country, are stashed away in banks located in the home countries of the same exploiters. These leaders show their class by having their holidays and medicals at the capitals of our erstwhile colonizers and current exploiters. They come home and romanticize stories of the good life over there. Monies stolen from public coffers deny other citizens their basic socio-economic entitlements, such as direly needed infrastructure and public necessities. By their action, they still idolize, as the role models of human civilization, the same nations who robbed and are still robbing us blind. They seem to be infested by the Hamitic virus which Dike had long incinerated and caricatured.

These political leaders portray a perverse sense of manhood, measured by their unguarded romance with the West by which

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48. Onwuka N. Njoku, "Okon Uya@70: Matters Arising" in David Mbuja, Stella Attoe *et al* (eds), *Okon Uya@70: Issues in Historiography, Nation Building and the Diaspora*. Makurdi: Aboki Publishers, 2016:3-25; Okon Edet Uya, "The Historian as a Citizen: The K. O. Dike Challenge" in Ogbogbo and Okpoh (eds), *Interrogating Contemporary Africa*:

means they set themselves above and apart from the rest of society. All this is like throwing to the dogs the heroic efforts of Dike and his current successors, who are still straining hard to keep his vision and efforts afloat. In this respect, the lamentation of our distinguished Nobel Prize Laureate, Wole Soyinka is instructive:

This is what others have done to us is, frankly, less painful than this is what we have done to ourselves, worst still, 'this is what we are still doing to ourselves.'<sup>49</sup>

As a result of 'what we are still doing to ourselves', millions of unemployed, socially maladjusted young men and women roam our streets in search of non-existing jobs; many recourses to social misdemeanors such as urban banditry, to survive. Scores flee this country in search of modern-day slave jobs in countries less endowed than theirs. Scores have died from the scorching heat of the Sahara Desert; others have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, in search of slave jobs. How these youths - the supposed leaders of the future - perceive nation building is any person's guess.

The current parody in the political leadership of Nigeria emphasizes the need for all disciples of Dike to wake up to the demand of fast globalizing 21<sup>st</sup> century; and explore new ways of keeping him alive. Two principal lines of approach, by no means entirely novel, deserve more thoughtful consideration. One of these is to rejig our research priorities and make them more Afro-centric in all its ramifications than we have so far done. We need to re-excavate the archaeology of our indigenous knowledge and ways of coping with life, and draw inspiration from that heritage. This requires that we get back to its genesis through time to the present, codifying, documenting, deciphering and chronicling it and explaining its relevance in coping with the challenges and

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49. Wole Soyinka, *Forget the Past, Forfeit the Future*. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 2005, 15.

opportunities of globalization. To build on other people's indigenous knowledge is a recipe for failure, and a subscription to the long-discarded *tabula rasa* approach to African development strategy.

The Asian Tigers and China know this too well. After 250 years of failed industrialization, the Chinese discovered that *the simple recipe* for success lies in building bottom up on the repertory of their indigenous know-how and do-how. Up until the 1970s, China was an impoverished agrarian economy with per capita GDP, one fortieth of that of the USA and a tenth of Brazil's. Thirty-five years on, she became the second industrial power house in the world. That is why China has been acknowledged as a modern industrial miracle.<sup>50</sup>

From the socio-political and economic landscape we have sketched earlier in this presentation, Dike has every reason to feel betrayed by our political elite. For littered all over Nigeria are antitheses of his legacies. Yet, the only route to African liberation is self-reliance which implies building on the reservoir of our historical foundations and inheritance. The big man in traditional African society was respected for his sterling contribution in helping society assert itself. A lone ranger was the subject of satirical songs and social innuendos. These days, the big man in Nigeria sets himself away from and above the rest of society and yet is the cynosure of sycophantic adoration. Therefore, we have to guard our roots and heritage jealously to ensure these do not slip away from us. But that heritage is already slipping away from us towards the bottom of a pit too scary to contemplate.

It is instructive to note that, in current times, Western scholars have been researching African indigenous knowledge systems with especial focus on plants and their medicinal and food values, a subject of especial interest to their pharmaceutical and food companies. African knowledge of medicinal plants developed, over several millennia by African ancestors, is widely recognized

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50. Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty: How We can Make it Happen in Our own Time*. London: Penguin Books, 2005:148-169

as profound. Under UNESCO's "Living Human Treasures" Project, the Intangible Cultural Heritages of various countries, especially in the Third World, are receiving serious research attention. Interestingly, it is said that European researchers gained knowledge of Viagra from medicine men in Namibia. They subsequently appropriated and patented the knowledge and are making fortunes from their patent.<sup>51</sup> Their on-going genetically modified seeds/livestock program may soon disable our farmers from re-using stocks from previous harvests, thereby compelling them to rely on their multinational agro companies for their needs.

Indigenous science and technology in food crop and animal production, herbal medicine and metalcrafts are deeply rooted in the Nigerian soil. Early European explorers into the Nigerian interior depended on the herbal and orthopedic expertise of locals for their survival. The earliest guns imported by the Dutch into Nigeria were of very inferior quality and very easily became unserviceable. Some frequently burst in the hands of their users killing or hurting them. Through experimental trials, local blacksmiths not only repaired them but were able to convert an inferior grade of gun to a superior and more reliable grade.<sup>52</sup> By the colonial times, local smiths were able not only to repair imported guns but even to produce the entire implement. This was adaptive or copy engineering technology in practice. European Christian missionaries and administrators confessed that often it was impossible to distinguish imported guns from locally fabricated ones.<sup>53</sup> In his exploratory journey on the Niger and the Benue Rivers in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, B.W.Baikie marveled at local smiths at work and averred that,

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51. Chinweizu, "African Studies...":39-41

52. Onwuka N. Njoku, "Traditional Technology and Nigeria's Industrial Future: Reflections from the Field and History"; *Abraka Journal of Humanities*, Vol.1, No, 1, 1990:1-19.

53. W B. Baikie, *Narrative of Exploring Voyage up the Rivers Kwora and Binue in 1854*. London: Frank Cass (1966 reprint):301-311



notwithstanding the few tools that are used by the working smiths, their quickness and ingenuity cannot be excelled even by a European professing the said trade.<sup>54</sup>

Indigenous knowledge and skill was transferred from generation to generation via a strictly regulated apprenticeship system which was fastidious about the ethics of the profession and training calendar. There was no room for any crash training program; the sort which modern day Nigeria has practiced to its chagrin. It was in this sort of indigenous know-how and do-how that the Chinese and the Asian tigers built on. In Nigeria, the colonial rulers introduced a schooling system that was essentially mimetic. It separated the brain from the hand and trained the recipients away from, rather than into, their society. As a result, the system could not build on the fund of existing know-how and do-how. Sadly, independent governments of Nigeria have retained the colonial system. Who can say where Nigeria would have attained in the area of modern weaponry, for instance, had the local expertise not been asphyxiated by officialdom.

The second priority that needs to be addressed is the fatalistic submission of the impoverished Nigerian masses to their life beneath human dignity, in a country so rich and yet so poor. The role which history can play and has played in nation building has been stressed by Nigerian historians for umpteen times. But the messages seem to sound like empty cymbals to the wealthy and powerful elite to whom they are especially intended. Since these leaders are not listening and the homilies are being ignored by them, it is needful to shake up the under-class from their fatalistic submission to their degraded socio-economic status. This overwhelming impoverished are bonded in a patron-client relationship foisted on them by their powerful patrons who merely provide them a modicum of life support at the barest level of subsistence. The patron withdraws the life support if a client

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54. Alan G. Smith, *Human Rights and Choices in Poverty*. Praeger West Port & London: 2003:106



behaves politically incorrect. Thus, to retain the favour of the patron, the client submits to the life of a virtual zombie whom the patron uses for any dirty jobs. Thus, poverty-induced dependency severely limits the scope of political assertion of the dependent poor. For such clients, freedom is in the grave. But as walking dead, the bonded clients litter the country with inflammable canisters.

It should, however, be made clear that wealth and poverty cannot coexist in mutual compatibility because they are strange bed fellows. A situation, in which a tiny minority becomes stinking rich by impoverishing the rest of society, imperils the prospects of nation building. It is also important to stress that those privileged by the *status quo* are not going to give up their privileges on the basis of appeals to their moral self-restraint. The prevailing inequity has to be fought and extinguished by those most disadvantaged by the system across the country - North, South, East and West - in a movement in which religion and ethnicity cannot soothe the plight of the afflicted. This is a call for a revolution in national thinking and behavior; in fact, a call for some sort of mental, attitudinal and ethical renaissance. Civic education in history is needed to expose the inherent danger in the patron-client relationship between the rich and powerful elite and the overtly-afflicted clients who survive at the sufferance of their patrons, who are, at the same time, their exploiters. Such civic education should go beyond the ivory tower to the wider society via available mediums of information dissemination. The Renaissance in Europe was heralded by a liberal way of thinking and appraising the essence of human existence. True, the revolution was in the arts and humanities; but it laid the foundations for Europe's greatness in science and technology. The same can happen in Nigeria, as, indeed Africa, given the right leadership that can provide an exemplary model to the rest of society. The demonstration effect of such exemplary model of leadership on the populace can hardly be over-stressed.

## **Conclusion**

Homogenizing the heterogeneous nationalities into a nation

requires sustained political, economic and ideological engineering of no mean order. Nearly 60 years of independent political leadership (military and civilian), which was bereft of true patriots and statesmen, has dealt a deadly blow on nation building prospects in Nigeria. Political leaders have often used politicized ethnicity to cause ethnic hatred, acrimony and suspicion to boost their political standing. In spite of its huge leadership deficit, Nigeria still has enormous potentials for attaining viable and stable nationhood. The intractable problem is that the leaders have been preying on their own people, whose interest they are supposed to serve. They thereby stiffen the 'they' and 'we' gulf that separates the rulers and ruled. There is, therefore, absolute need for a political leadership that can convince the people that there exist to serve, not to prey on them. As long as the populace sees their leaders as wolves preying on them, nation building in Nigeria will remain a mirage. Nigeria's political leaderships have to come together and discuss frankly how best to govern Nigeria. Such negotiations may be tortuous and protracted but they can be no better way forward.

If this presentation has stepped on some sacred toes, let it be clear that no harm is intended and no apologies are necessary. It is in the nature of this very democratic discipline of ours, which flourishes in debate aimed at using the past to understand today and avoid possible future mistakes.

I thank most immensely everybody gathered here for patiently listening out to me. God bless Nigeria.