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CENTRALISM AND ALIENATION

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Major-General Aguyi Ironsi, who took over power in January 1966 after the ill-fated, first ever coup-d'état of Nigerian history, set that nation on a course whose scars we all bear till today. He issued an edict that was purposely aimed at vitiating the federal structure and substituting a unitary one, beginning with the unification of all the regional civil service structures, the police etc. We who considered ourselves progressive -- let this be admitted -- were ecstatic. I recall driving through the length and breadth of Nigeria -- I was involved in a documentary film project at the time -- and the sensation shared by all the occupants of our station-wagon on that journey was that we were driving into a new nation that had been magically produced from thin air. Everything was suddenly transformed, and we all shared a kind of political upliftment that turned us into citizens, not so much of a place, as of a New Era. Nigeria had become not so much a geographical entity, as a space in futuristic time.

It did not take many days alas, as we drove into other parts of the country, to realise that our sense of Utopia was not uniformly shared. To say that we were astonished would be putting it mildly. How could anyone not be happy with this project of national fusion. We were about to lose that embarrassing stigma -- tribalism -- no more North, West or East, no more Igbo, Efik, Hausa, Yoruba, Tiv, no more Ijaw or Kanuri -- each and everyone of us was about to become a synthetic, conflict-free clone of one another. The politicians had been responsible for the backwardness of regionalism and ethnicism, now we had been liberated to discover our true national identity in consonance with the progressive formation of states throughout the world -- how could there be any lack of enthusiasm! Even before we entered parts of the North, however, where leaflets were being distributed in the local languages calling for 'Araba' -- or secession -- our thoughts had become rather sober, and chastened.

Could the agenda for progressive change have pursued a less suspicious route? The first admission of course is that we had been subtly, mentally coerced -- not brainwashed, no, simply coerced -- and not even by the political but by the anthropological connotations of the language of the external world, operating

through the mechanism of a single, loaded expression -- Tribe! Or Tribalism. There was also the ideological input, a potent contribution to this spirit of self-misapprehension. That ideological pressure not only proposed a socialist course as the rational option for emerging colonial states, it preached a socialism that was equated with centralism. The lesson of the powerful, 'anti-imperialist' Soviet Union was clear, and hadn't the twin-popes of the new religion, Marx and Lenin poured vitriolic scorn on the fractious petty-nationalisms of backward states and their impediment to self-realisation? Asian and African societies had even been placed outside history, incapable of realising their full social being. Trapped in a tribal narrowness of identity, these races had not -- according to the gospel -- transcended the most rudimentary stages of socio-political evolution that would qualify them for entry into world history. Naturally, we had no desire to remain outside history. In the process, we blithely ignored the contradictions within the Soviet Union itself, which insisted on paying lip-service to a federated system but had institutionalised a monolithic centralism.

And there was Ghana, under Kwame Nkrumah, the first at the tape of the independence stakes. And Sekou Toure in Guinea. For both, the 'undivided and indivisible' nation was the only guarantee of true liberation from a colonial past. As a lesson in contrasts, we were witnesses to how the Congo was tearing itself apart -- not as the evil seeds of Belgian King Leopold come to fruition but from -- tribalism. The secession of Katanga under Moise Tshombe would underline even more strongly that the tribal configurations and allegiances of newly, or about-to-become independent nations was the Achilles' heel that rendered these nations vulnerable to exploitation by neo-colonial, capitalist forces etc. etc. and prepared the way for their second coming. The Belgian Congo was the ultimate horror story, the cautionary negative model, and so the doctrine was: eliminate the tribal distinctions of any colonial holding, and the birth of nation was assured.

The truth is, much of my generation intellectually rejected objective reality and succumbed to an anthropological demonisation of that objective reality. The word 'tribe' became a malediction, and in the rush towards inserting our self-awareness into the mainstream of the world history, we wanted to jettison it completely, wash ourselves clean of the opprobrium. A question from any outsider -- especially a European or American (white or black) which remotely approached, "What tribe are you?" was answered with a defiant, "I am African". If that was followed by "Well, but from what part?", that questioner became a closet enemy of political emancipation. Occasionally, in a generous mood, we might concede the identity of 'Nigerian' or 'Ghanaian', but mostly, it was 'African', and heaven help any questioner who so much as insisted on that basic social unit of identity -- tribe!

We are speaking here of that period of the great pan-African dream, at least in those heady late fifties and early sixties. Nkrumah dreamt of a Union of African states, with a joint African High Command to forge a continental unity. Even a proposition, or comment of distinction between Arabised Africa and black Africa

south of the Sahara was considered backward, neo-colonial thinking, near treasonable. The vision was noble, combative and uplifting. Africa was divided, from this dominant observatory, not on tribal, but on ideological lines -- the Casablanca group and the Monrovia group to start with -- one radical and progressive, the other neo-colonial and reactionary. Neither group gave much thought to any cultural or historic parameters in their adhesion, nor admitted the necessity of at least recognising the internal and regional economic and developmental histories of the micro-nationalities that made them up.

Africa was being organised from the very top. Kwame Nkrumah did not meet an Egyptian princess and fall in love with her, no, he needed to seal the unity of the African continent with the symbolic consummation of marriage -- black Africa with the Arab world -- to obliterate, via the nuptial couch, all cultural and historic divergences, even the nagging memory of the slaving relationship between both worlds. And so, he formally requested a bride from Abdul Nasser, the radical leader of the Egyptian nation. With this symbolic continental unification, or the essence of unitarism made flesh at the pinnacle of leadership, the younger generation could hardly be blamed for refusing even to consider the clamour of the so-called 'tribes' that sought expression of their own voices within the smaller organisms of independent nations.

We need only cast a casual glance at the national configurations of the West African coast. There, the verticalism of designated nation territories wages a war of logic against the horizontal actuality of organic, and linguistic national units. It narrates the entire story of an anomaly that must be accounted as being -- at the very least -- partially responsible for the haemorrhage that still drains away the vitality of that sub-region. We can list a number of other causes, but this is one that is constantly understated, so it is time that it is recognised in its full substantiality. This anomaly is partially responsible for the horrors of Liberia, of Sierra Leone, the violent disintegration of ancient communities and the traumatising of their humanity for decades to come.

Is Somalia a nation at all today? The Sudan cannot really claim to be a single nation, at best, it is a de facto federation of the North and South. My intention is not to spend much time rehashing the obvious question of anomalous boundaries, which the Organisation of African Unity, in its nerveless wisdom, declared sacrosanct and immutable. What requires stressing is simply that, will it or not, the inherent contradictions in contemporary society -- or even mere accidents of inequitable governance -- will always trigger off questions, in the mind of peoples, of the validity of their nation belonging. I am amazed by the way, that Eritrea, and Ethiopia have yet to be drummed out by the OAU for failing to respect the sacrosanctity of their colonial boundaries -- but more on the current crisis in the Horn, I hope, before this conference is over. This is a festering boil that must be quickly lanced, and we could do worse than propose some kind of initiative here, never mind the seeming intractable nature of this conflict that has left both the OAU and the UNO apparently stymied.

I see the fundamental nature of the question before us -- for the African continent at least -- as relating to how to effect an internal reconciliation of evident misalliances within national entities, how to reconcile peoples of distinct histories with the consequences of colonial arbitrariness and the timidity, the lack of will, the failure of the first-generation leaders to boldly tackle the fault-lines of a continent that often run along -- or originate from -- the very boundaries that have been inherited. This reconciliation process may take several routes; one of them commences with the recognition of semi-autonomous entities within the current nation space. Not that this is without its dangers, and if ever a model presented itself as a comprehensive text for the study of such dangers, it is clearly the complex, tortured history of Yugoslavia and the consequences of extreme nationalist assertiveness that has made her nationalities rivals of Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Somalia and Sri Lanka in the stakes of national self-violation. The hard part of confronting that cautionary model however, is to draw the accurate lesson from its travails. One crucial lesson -- apart of its convoluted history -- is of course the disproportionate role that the personal inclinations, even psychology of power-besotted politicians play in the manipulation of differences within nation states for their own narrow advantage. This constitutes a field of critical study on its own, and obviously cannot be meaningfully addressed within the present context.

What is the end purpose of a call for a National Conference that is heard repeatedly in Nigeria today, a National Conference with or without the 'Sovereign'. What do people mean when they say, the nation must be restructured? They indicate simply that the relation of the parts to the whole, and to one another must be re-examined, but this time, from within, in full freedom, as equals and from the point of view of exposing the attractions of remaining together and working to eliminate all obstacles towards a continuing co-existence. On the negative import, they are saying that unitarism and centralism have been tried and have resoundingly failed. Unitarism has in fact manifested itself as a contradiction in terms, since it has demonstrably fostered, not unity, but its very opposite, disunity. We find ourselves in an age of recognition of the monumental failure, indeed the very anti-people definition of the over centralised system of government, its very structure of alienation from the people on behalf of whom society, and thus the state was evolved or invented. The non-viability of centralism has been manifested overwhelmingly, not merely by the collapse of the Soviet Union, but in the evident failure of its economic system, which was one of centralist production. If Slobodan Milosevic had a second chance, it is not beyond consideration that he would accept that, tragically, especially in the crisis of Kosovo, Federation was the road not taken. Or indeed Sri Lanka. Today, Nigeria is still hovering between realism and the legacy of unitarism imposed by a discredited army.

Once upon a time, it was still possible to consider the state as an expression of

monarchical will, the monarch in effect as the embodiment of the state, the sun from which life itself radiated downwards to the people. We all know the fates of the most tenacious adherents of that doctrine. The notion of the state as the embodiment of an Ideal, or Spirit, in which the unravelling of historic processes was reflected also ran its course in its own time. That Ideal was also sometimes merged with the monarch -- especially the few 'enlightened' ones. Mostly however it retained its aloofness and purity as the inscrutable Mind or Divine Principle of whom sometimes the monarch, sometimes a Supreme Pontiff, sometimes a combination or collaboration of both became the infallible embodiments. The earthly state was then perceived as a pale copy of the heavenly realm, towards whose absolute perfection human society aspired. There are societies that constantly resurrect and refurbish this anti-human dream of Spirit Idealism whose earthly agents parade themselves as the Supreme Pontiffs and Interpreters of the Divine Will -- you will find their ruthless successors in Afghanistan. And of course the world was either mesmerised or terrified for three quarters of this century by the Ideal as Utopia whose custodianship belonged to an elect, the expositors of the dialectics of class formation to whose immanence millions were sacrificed -- from 'revisionist' intellectuals to bewildered peasants. History was working in a discernible mechanistic fashion, stage by stage, dialectically ascending towards the pinnacle of the Ideal where all social contradictions would be dissolved and humanity would emerge as one classless, egalitarian paradise.

Now what do all these stages have in common? The centralism of power of course, the eradication of diversity in social mores, in development initiatives, in cultures, in conduct -- sometimes even in attire, as witness the Utopia of Mao Ze Dong; or the comic opera of the pathetic Marxist adventurism of the Republic of Benin; or more gruesomely under the Marxist terror of Miriam Mengistu's Ethiopia, not to forget the holy terror of the Taliban. In all these instances we encounter the absurd extreme of centralist conformity in matters that extend to clothing and a mandatory length of beards -- some mystic virtue in both these outward expressions that will perhaps propel humanity towards the Ideal state of social perfectability. The centralist mentality is one that is at war with, not merely diversity but with human creativity and initiative. Its attributes -- uniformity and conformity -- are not the end however, but mere servitors of the ultimate goal -- Power, Absolutism, Domination and Control of the many by the Elect.

This is why we are obliged to denounce the lie. This is why, at the end of this century, of this millennium, we are obliged to insist that the centralist idea propagated by ideologues and political theologians is a construct of mystification that has merely provided careers for the advocates of alienated power. The Ideal realm, for us, is the humane space that empowers the citizen at all levels of social organisation and enables the total flowering of his or her human potential, as individual or as member of a basic unit of society. The most congenial systems of governance to the attainment of this may sound prosaic, but their very ordinariness means that the palpable reality of existence is not being sacrificed to

some obscurantist notion of the Ideal, means that the ideal will be found in the very process of the citizen's self-regeneration, the richness of identities within the community to which he or she belongs, and the security of a system that succeeds in merging the autonomous realm of self-regeneration with a collective identity, and an equitable share in the fruits of productive collaboration. In short, a stable, non-grudging polity, the assembly of partners and equals, not an abstract System serviced by subservient units. If this century of Rwanda, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia etc. has taught us nothing else, it is that the lure of centralised power must yield to its diffusion among peoples at tiers of responsibility which merely vary from nation to nation because of their different histories and even population sizes. Avoidance of this principle will continue to stress the casing that holds such peoples together. Even the remaining powerful monolithic empire, the Republic of China, though with excruciating slowness, appears to have begun to realise this. Whether it comes to a full practical embrace of this wisdom in good time for its cohesive survival is a question that will surely be resolved within the next generation.

Size alone is not of course the issue. On the face of it, we might say that we cannot imagine East Timor, Gambia, Liberia, Liechtenstein or Monaco even considering a federal structure of governance without descending to the ridiculous. But the internal dynamics and history of any given society differ in imponderable ways from the next, and those of a tiny nation like the Gambia may actually find correlations with those of a vast territory and conglomeration of peoples as in the Republic of China. Every nation state has its unique features and of course, shares characteristics with numerous others. The common denominator for all is always -- the humanity. It is by, and towards the enhancement of this dynamic unit that society was created, and it is for this entity, in present wisdom from millennia of experience, that systems of governance must adapt. Dependency on pinnacles of social organisation has proved to be nothing but latter-day idolatry: at the base of the pyramid even of representative power -- this is where we must seek the Ideal realm.

An Igbo saying, much favoured by my compatriot Chinua Achebe -- who however should not be blamed for any inaccurate rendition on my part -- sums up the equitable approach to the dynamics of governance. "The eagle shall perch. The hawk shall perch. Whichever says that the other shall not -- may its wing break!" Adapted for the present context, let it read -- "The tribe shall speak. The nation shall speak. Whichever dares deny the other a voice -- may its jaw break!"