

NIGERIA IN 21st CENTURY GOVERNANCE

My very slight alteration of the title of the theme proposed by this conference is easily explained. My interest here is only partly 21st Century Governance in Nigeria, as proposed, but Nigeria within 21st Century governance – that is, within global, or continental governance. That difference matters to my projection. We may differ on our estimation of tempo, but the signs are clear: neither Nigeria, nor any other nation, will decide in isolation what sort of governance will operate within her borders. More likely, the question of governance for each nation will be how that nation fits into what will have begun to emerge – what one has constantly predicted as inevitable - a people based, people authenticated, people sustained system of governance. If I may bring this form of governance down to its most basic, simplest, most accessible level, this would be governance based on the ‘ideology’ of instant response to rulers, which goes - to borrow from Fela Anikulapo’s trenchant lyric – *‘Who are you re? Who are you re l’aiye nbi?’*

The personal appropriation and sustenance of power would have been consigned to museums of societal malformations. Details of application and comprehensiveness of the new order of understanding will vary, but by the end of this 21st Century, indeed - I dare predict – long before that centennial terminus, issues of governance will have become clarified in a way that leaves no political options – either to be part of that prevailing principle of governance relationship, or to be considered a global pariah, lodged somewhere outside of the human community. Governance will be so natural and unremarkable, so logical and accessible in both theory and practice that it will involve the most illiterate or indifferent on the streets. In other words, each citizen will wonder why his or her own nation is not practising what obtains in a majority of the nations all over the world, and will agitate accordingly. The writing on the walls of people exclusion has become crystal clear. The advance of communication techniques – among other factors, even without the aid of Wikileaks - has eliminated ignorance at an unprecedented tempo these past decades, so that the peasant of my Ijebu Isara will be just as informed as the factory worker in Uzbekistan, and will wonder why his or her political lot is not at par with others’. That movement has begun, and is unstoppable.

The days of governance mystification will be decisively over. Humanity will have discovered, certainly long before the end of the twenty-first century, that issues of governance have always been adjustments between two distinct polarities – Power and Freedom. Unquestionably, the basic social facilitators such as economics, social identity, accessibility of resources and opportunities will remain at the heart of practical existence and will affect political choices, but humanity will have come to understand that, all too often, even factors of economy and productivity have never been absolutes in themselves, but constantly relate to the pursuit of choice and freedom, the right of all citizens to be fulfilled as social beings, and what negotiated portion of this may be conceded to governance for the functioning of the totality of society. Science, technology, ethics, culture and other extracts of social devices, essential and inessential, will be gauged by their ability to liberate the human entity into the universal pool called community, where each individual not only finds personal fulfillment, but enables community in turn, to fulfill and enhance itself.

That is the future to which society is drawn, albeit often along blood-stained paths. We are however obliged to begin with **now**, and not only with now but with here, where we are at this moment, the existential truth of our collective being, not opposed to, but distinct from the misty, often mystified future. That here and now happens to be of immediate concern to us and to outside watchers, that being a nation baptized Nigeria, brain child of the will of others, a nation which, even after six decades of so-called independence, is still bound to the socio-political arrangements inherited and endorsed by first-generation leaders. Let me house this condition in a spectacle with which we are all familiar: a special kind of *egungun* – a masquerade - parading as a self-regulating body, but in reality, largely subjected to the control of its handlers. You may have seen it – it looks terrifying, full of menace and potency but – tied to its waist is a rope, controlled by a handler. I purposefully avoid the analogy of puppet and puppeteer. The puppet is inanimate, has no will, no volition of any kind, does not develop, produce or procreate. The masquerade however is filled with great potency, can control its limbs and gestures and interact with other humanity – whether of this world or the next – depending on what we choose to believe. However, when that masquerade appears to go too far, the handler tugs at the rope and restrains it.

Now imagine that, from time to time, this *egungun*, strains at the leash, turns round and says – look, take off the rope, I can find our own directions without restraint? No, I do

not say that it will succeed tomorrow. Or the next year, or within a decade but, one would have to be an out-and-out pessimist to believe that it will not happen within the span of a generation or two. Even so, we dare not dismiss the negative possibilities, so let us take note of the following scenario. As the *egungun*, this restless masquerade, reaches for the ropes of control, another handler steps in. He says, 'I am the true agent of your liberation, so, I'll take over from here. Your experience of restraint is one I share. Mine is a kinder, looser restraint, one more attuned to your earthly and other-worldly needs. It is not truly restraint but submission to certain precepts – secular or divine - that are revealed specifically to me, plus a few others among the Chosen.'

Yes, that is also a distinct possibility but, at this point, we shall simply keep it in the back of our minds. We shall return to that hovering spectre, I promise, where liberation becomes a temptation to others who cannot tolerate the truly liberating transformation. Along the positive lines, the signs are present, have been especially prominent, and even though each step in that direction appears sometimes to have been followed by two or three to the rear, a number of events, still unfinished in places, fresh and enlivening in our minds, events of an unprecedented dimension and tempo have set up a direction from which it will require an extra-terrestrial effort to reverse. You know what they are. Even if Tunisia were not within the African continent, or Libya were located next to Iran, each nation on this continent still partakes of the fortunes of the world and cannot escape their infectiousness. But we must sleep with one eye open, both ears glued to the ground. Ever assiduous handlers are waiting in the wings, ready to step in and assume proprietorship of the restraining ropes even as they are torn from the hands of erstwhile controllers, often at immense sacrifice. They cannot bear the sight of the masquerade on the loose, cutting new capers in the air of freedom, inventing new tunes and rhythms, controlling its own access to other beings and bringing new insights into collective existence, understanding, and development.

This is one of the reasons – just to focus on Libya for a while – why I take the view that critics of Nigeria's early recognition of the Libyan insurgents, are not only rehashing time-worn political platitudes, but placing themselves on the wrong side of history. These critics are also guilty of the crime of which they try to convict the act – hastiness. They assume that the surrender, or seizure of the ropes of control automatically liberates the masquerade into the hands of the Libyan insurgents. Or else they are on the alert against

usurpation in only one direction – the much hated, justly excoriated West. Indeed I did read somewhere that Nigeria was acting out the script of the West by her early recognition of the Transitional Council. These objectors lose sight of the fact that, while the West has discernable borders, more or less, and structured governments, there are other forces which, despite being borderless, are just as imperialist and dominating as the discredited West. In other words, careful students of our times do not need to be told that these forces are constantly on the prowl, ready to contest possession of the ropes that have been ripped from the clutches of a dictator, forces outside the Capitalist and Socialist, Eastern and Western, christian and islamic traditional blocs, forces indeed antagonistic to all sides except their own amorphous, but nonetheless resolute entities. These are forces just as calculating, ruthless and intolerant, forces whose covert arms are strategically stretched out to garner the fruits of a people’s revolution, and assume control of the now liberated masquerade. We shall come to those forceful interests as we proceed, though you need only study the dilemma of – I propose - the Horn of Africa to recognize their baleful impact.

For now however, do accept that any nation that is truly conscious of the rapidly shifting order of global contestation for spatial control and influence must learn how to gauge the embedded parameters of any popular uprising. Such a nation may not get it right, it may get it woefully wrong, but it certainly should not plead ignorance of the existence of alternative forces. It is the failure to make a choice, and in a timely manner - that is, when it can affect events, not clambering ingloriously on to the bandwagon -that questions a nation’s claim to respect. It is this failure that diminishes the claims of any nation to true independence of thought and policy, and the ability to align with the humanistic trajectory that leads to the future.

Be that as it may, Nigeria’s unilateral action at the significant moment conveniently takes us straight into the heart of this address since, fortunately, the nation did get it right this time, one of the rare occasions when she can look her face in the mirror without averting her eyes in disgust, and even look down in condescension on her fellow occupants of the continental shelf. There was another such moment in our past, to my recollection - this was when the government of Murtala Mohammed came out in favour of liberation forces of MPLA as opposed to UNITA, the latter having proved heavily compromised by its close ties to Apartheid South Africa.

If Nigeria's decision to recognize the Libyan Transitional Council required any circumstantial vindication, we find it in the boastful appearance of Qaddafi's son on video, where he poured scorn on African leaders, assuring the world that they would not dare take a position on behalf of the so-called rebels. Mr. Qaddafi Junior did not mince words: African leaders, he sneered, regularly lined up to beg for handouts from his father. Let the facts be faced – it was an ignominious exposure of a quite notorious fact. The fact that the majority of members of the AU proceeded to line up behind Nigeria's position is of lesser significance, even though it did culminate in the formal recognition of the TLC by the Union. The act of striking out boldly on behalf of people, in unambiguous opposition to state, when the state turns cruel and oppressive, is a pointer to the direction that we outlined at the beginning. 'Breaking ranks' is not the pejorative indication that it is simplistically made out to be. If the ranks are compromised, you break with them. If such compromises make them drag their feet in a moment of critical, potentially affective decision, you break off and set the pace for the rest to follow. Risk or no risk, it is an honorable position.

Let us appreciate however that the pace was set, not by any government, not even by France which was the most people pro-active of the European supporters but - by the people themselves, and at immense sacrifice. One individual set off the spark and it caught, not because it was one individual, but because that individual was the expression of a long history of piled up popular resentment that only awaited the enabling spark. The Arab world has set the tone – recollect how government after government began to introduce reforms, lower the price of bread, enter into dialogue even where, in some cases, the tactics employed were the stick and carrot, violence and appeasement. Suddenly a masculinity defensive nation like Saudi Arabia announces the right of women to the vote – though not until 2015. And those same women are not allowed to drive till today. Believe me, it only lacks a few years before a woman sets herself on fire for the centuries old degradation of her gender or, even likelier, they conspire to castrate their husbands while they were blissfully sated and fast asleep.

Such governments have only bought some time for themselves since, in many cases, the response - overt or silent - remains – *too late, too little*. Old alliances are crumbling and the presumptions of yesterday have become obsolete. Ask Tunisia. Ask Yemen. Ask Egypt – so what was so special about Libya and Muammar Qaddafi? The son has answered that

question: Daddy Qaddafi was lavish in dispensing the wealth of his people to equally – sometimes even more - brutal, corrupt and incontinent daddies on the African continent. Governance by alienation, where finally confronted, will find itself progressively shorn of automatic support from others in ‘old boy’s club’. They know when to distance themselves from erstwhile brothers who have finally over-stepped the mark, or for whom the time is clearly up, those at whom the ultimate, historically inevitable taunt is hurled: *Who are you re? Who are you re l’aiye nbi?* This is the template for the future, and it promises, albeit on uncertain, indeed wobbly, steps, a transformation of governance to what we know it is meant to be – the management of a people and their resources on behalf of people, equitably, and the guarantee of their dignity as fellow, sentient beings.

In my recent, public intervention at the NBA conference in Port Harcourt, I took pains to distinguish between Power and Authority. Power has always been an instrument of oppression, but never, in any human association that we know of, has authority ever been conclusively wrested from the people. Expropriated, forced into dormancy, even rubbished and derided, Authority never leaves the people definitively, and what we are witnessing today, in effect, is the convergence of both Power and Authority in favour of the people. This is where it was located during the struggle for the liberation of any people. It is the story of humanity of any age. That we have seen it dislodged and misappropriated once the struggle is over – the story of African nations almost without exception – does not guarantee the permanence of such a disorder of relationships. Lucky those who choose early to place themselves at the service of such a historic verity, joining hands in eroding the contrary foundations that were laid in the season of independence and national self-determination.

Now, a few moments on that succession of independencies - what form did that self-determination take? Had the masquerade truly surfaced without its handlers? Alas, when a virginal slab of real estate is endowed with so much of the natural resources and reserves coveted by the world, self-interest dictates clinging to the umbilical cord. Next question: how do you guarantee access – and on terms that privileged the former colonial handlers – to such resources? Simple – transfer, through manipulation, collaboration or by default – the method varied from nation to nation - the authority that resided in the people to hand-picked servitors of external powers, corral all power into their hands and give the necessary backing to ensure

permanence for this distorted relationship, one that marginalized, if not completely obliterated the people's participation as basis for the construction of a modern state.

You know the rest. The first-comers at the reins of power dug in, saying to the people, shift me if you can! Some said it with a deceptive, paternalistic smile, others with a scowl and clenched fist. Simplified but truthful of virtually every newly independent nation, this was indeed the pattern. Evoking all the mechanics of the Cold War, finger pointing as each side accused the other of playing lackey to one bloc or the other, deploying detention centres, concentration camps, crude and refined instruments of torture and other techniques for the suppression of dissidence, elevating nepotism, ethnicity and religion to the stature of governance absolutes, adopting the divide and rule tactics perfected by the departing handlers, the African masquerades of nation fell into permanent re-possession by handlers – in civil attire or on military jackboots - who proved even more alienated, more brutal and repressive than the former.

Let us proceed directly to the – admittedly – somewhat improved umbrella structure that replaced the old parade of masquerades. The most dramatic expression of a new collective thinking was the abandonment of the principle of non-interference registered as a founding principle of the parent organization - the Organisation of African Unity. This time, the articles of association established interference as a functioning ethos of membership. We saw this manifested in the protracted confrontations in the West African sub-region, of which Ivory Coast was perhaps the most instructive as, on the 26th of December 2010, the Africa Union struck a new note in conflict resolution *enforcement*. The unambiguous ultimatum to sit-tight president Laurent Gbagbo was: *Leave now, or be forced out, militarily if need be!* Was the internationally advertised criminal against humanity, Omar Bashir, king of the Sudanese janjaweed, a signatory to this resolution, one wonders? – that is just one of the contradictions and/or inadequacies of the Union, including its evident impotence in the arena of Somali disintegration.. Despite its lack of conclusive success however, the AU, by common consent, has not only intervened in Somalia, it remains actively, militarily engaged in that disintegrating nation space, Nigerian troops at the forefront. So now, the question, what is Nigeria doing in Somalia?

Yes, let us proceed to Somalia. What took Nigeria to Somalia in the first place? Now the answer to that lies, to be honest, in hindsight, and perhaps I should re-phrase that question

as follows: does Nigeria's presence in Somalia have any connection with what has been happening to the nation in recent times? Is what is happening within our borders truly a localized eruption? I promised to give a name, as we proceed, to a borderless force that had to be taken into consideration in obtaining a holistic view of the Libyan, and allied struggles, such as the Egyptian and so, straight now to the point: could this borderless force of complication be, this hovering spectre be, quite straightforwardly, Religion?

We are not speaking here of religion as a personal and/or collective structure of spirituality and inner piety, but Religion as a perverted agency of control, every bit as resolute, if anything even more organized than, the overtly political. Religion as an increasingly virulent factor in Africa's affairs. We wish also to address the disheartening habit of ascriptive contrivance that attempts to deflect the contemporary criticality of Religion as an aggressive, political datum, even while we all acknowledge that conflict is not devoid of other companion data, just as critical - such as social deprivation, ethnicity, unemployment and other consequences of leadership betrayal and misgovernance.

Let me restate this even more directly: no truly perceptive mind will deny that the very sight of ostentatious consumption in the midst of scarcity, even in a society that enjoys reasonable accessibility to resources, is an invitation to civic unrest and even possibly - revolution. My reference therefore is to a habit of avoidance, of evasion and deflection that can only be categorized as intellectual cowardice, conscious or unconscious. That evasion betrays public submission to the climate of fear - a theme that I dealt with in my BBC Reith lectures under that very title - The Climate of Fear. To all such promoters of avoidance, I recommend the most recent mental corrective squarely administered by the governor of Niger State, Mu'azzu Aliyu, and the Sultan of Sokoto, whose calls for an end to "religious ignorance and extremism" reported in just yesterday's papers, could not have been more timely and salutary.

So, yes, all is admitted. Take away the economic factors, eliminate the current rage of massive unemployment and create a future of material well-being for the young, and part of the problem is solved, the population of available foot soldiers is drastically reduced and youths are rescued from murderous indoctrination. That, however, is not the end of the story and you all know it as well as I do. Re-education is a vital necessity, so also is open confrontation with those whose primary agenda is that borderless dominion subjected to a

narrow vision of humanity. They do not lack economic means, they are well fed and well-clothed. To them, human life and security mean nothing. Visit Somalia. Indeed, make a brief tour of the Horn of Africa and ask for yourself what is the most potent factor for the current destabilisation of that region and the virtual erasure of Somalia as a functioning nation, then return to this nation and preach the gospel of the mono-factor in such a virulent social upheaval. I am well aware that Mauritania is another zone of contamination to watch, even without the so-called revelations of a supposed co-founder of Boko Haram who admitted, on an AIT interview – as reported in *The Punch* of Sept. 20th – that his followers had been training in Mauritania. From active history however, it is not Mauritania that is the hotbed of indoctrination and bomb manufacture, but Somalia. I am strongly suspicious of the motivation and ‘outspokenness’ that lay behind that interview, very suspicious indeed. When asked the question - was Boko Haram responsible for the bombing of the UN Headquarters, this founder-spokesman responded, ‘I would rather not talk about that.’ Now, I do not know about others, but I found that response very strange and disingenuous, the taunting of a society still nursing its wounds, nothing less.

Let me, at this stage, call attention yet again to the response that I made to those who crowed too soon, after the earlier security skirmish with our stormtroopers of the religious mission. You may recall that, at that first encounter, the religious insurgents were worsted, their camp destroyed and their leaders extra-judicially killed. At my lecture for the 100th Anniversary of King’s College Lagos, which took place shortly after that encounter, almost two years ago to the day, I warned:

“Boko Haram has been here and gone – yes, indeed, this is what we would all want to believe. The reality – and recollection of antecedents – demonstrate however that this is self-delusion. Boko Haram has been here, obviously, but it is anything but gone.”

The warning continued explicitly:

“No, Boko Harm has not been and gone. It is sitting in quiet splendour in the Nigerian Senate, guaranteed retirements into sinecures after long, meritorious service to the nation. And the agencies of Boko Haram, the promulgators both in evangelical and practical forms are everywhere. Even here, right here in this throbbing cosmopolitan city of Lagos, there are, in all probability, what are known as ‘sleepers’ waiting for

the word to be given. If that word were given this moment, those sleepers would swarm over the walls of this compound and inundate us here as primary targets, for we are gathered in celebration of a structure of education that they detest – a philosophy of education that says that the mind must be open, not closed, a principle that subjects all claims of human discovery or certitudes to empirical enquiry and establishes in the mind of the young the foundation of equity under one law as the sine qua non of civilized society and the establishment of social man.”

Yes, even here, even now in this hall, despite whatever security measures may have been taken, we are all placed on the front line, each and every one of us, and we had better learn to accept that fact. Guilty or innocent, we have been adjudged worthy of violent, messy and sudden death. Let us internalize that stark fact as a matter of course, then proceed to debate our transformed existential challenges truthfully, and without fudging reality. ‘*There are no innocents*’ has always been the enabling cry of psychopaths within both secular and religious orders. It forms the basis of their authority for the avoidance of comprehensive analysis, for the rejection of a holistic approach to social issues. It is a contemptible cry, one that further divides the world into those who would play god, consider themselves infallible, and those who are content with their mortality and – fallibility. It is an elitist doctrine, a doctrine of those who consider themselves – The Chosen. Before them, you may crawl all you want and attempt to ingratiate yourselves with the proponents of such cultic thinking, it will not save you. To them you are disposable.

Is memory really that short in this nation? How many years ago was it that we were assailed by a near identical group of liberationists grouped under the leadership of one Maitasine. For those whose memories are short, here is a quick reminder of details of that upheaval. Maitasine was as brutal, and even better organized than the Boko Haram. His primary targets – and here I enjoin maximum attention to this often neglected detail – his primary targets were fellow moslems. Maitasine detested and despised mainstream moslems – shiites, sunnis, sufis, wahabis and all. Above all he repudiated the Prophet Mohammed whom he termed a ‘slaving Arab’. From that position he held that black Africans who called themselves followers of the Prophet Mohammed were victims of a slave mentality and deserved to be slaughtered at will. His cure for such crimes was strangulation with bicycle chains.

Ironically – but was this at all surprising? - Maitasine himself created a slave enclave within the city of Kano. Where he raided, he killed the men, captured their women, imprisoned them in his enclave as concubines. The men who were kept alive were turned into slaves, worked like slaves and slaughtered like slaves. The Haramic rhetoric was of course not in short supply – modern gadgets were haram. Maitasine dragged passengers out of their vehicles, raided railway trains, butchered passengers on the spot or dragged them to his fortifications. Like Yusuf, he was not without political courtiers – a former governor of Kano State was among his visitors, indeed was he not reported to have provided Maitasine the original land for his mission? From his original space however, Maitasine expanded through simple tactics. He rented a room or two in a building, where he emplaced his followers as tenants. Acting to plan, they made such a nuisance of themselves that they soon chased out the other tenants, thus turning the entire building after another into an extension of the Maitasine stronghold. Gradually, the group expanded, both spatially and in influence.

When the eruption began, the radicals of our institutions of learning were jubilant. They heard that this sect targeted and attacked car owners, especially of the Mercedes Benz. The revolution had begun, they crowed, and toasted one another at the staff clubs. I witnessed this season of unreason and came close to despair. Did these dyed-in-the-wool Marxists, socialists of all hues, truly believe that this was the revolution? To keep my sanity, I penned the following lines, you will find them in the poem: “My Tongue does not marry Slogans”:

Atavists of Allah

Rose and slit the throats of fellow Moslems
Screaming, ‘Mohammed was a slaving Arab....
You dribbled slogans a thousand safety
Miles away, holding forth by Staff Club
Swimming pools: These Maitasine only kill
The propertied, the bourgeois parasites
Fat leeches, Mercedes-owning compradors.
Raise the toast – the revolution has begun!

It is difficult to believe that this is happening all over again – no, not the Boko Haram eruption but - the response from some supposedly thinking quarters. It is as sweeping – and

limited - a summation as the attempt to rationalize the new epidemic of hostage taking as a consequence of general impoverishment, or resentment of corruption in high places. Organized criminality as a phenomenon in organized society, is not a chimera, and the 'organizers' are not guaranteed to emerge only from the ghettos of impoverishment. Indeed some of these crime Bosses and protectors occupy high places in society, lacking for nothing, but itching for more. They luxuriate not merely in wealth, but in power. More than one European Head of State has been linked to organized crime, to whose Bosses their primary allegiance is pledged.

Poverty is a luxury that no nation can afford. Even more costly however is religious perversion. Despair exists not merely among the downtrodden, it sometimes manifests itself, eats deeply into the ranks of sensitive observers and thinkers of society, the genuine humanists who just manage to function day after day under the weight of social guilt and a lack of any immediate remedial solutions. This is what makes the prospect of revolution so enticing that the false is often mistaken for the real, and we lose sight of the possibility that, like organized crime, the fake revolution may be the handiwork of reactionaries every bit as corrupt, cynical and exploitative as the current upholders and beneficiaries of the status quo. Indeed, those who may be the very creators, collaborators and beneficiaries of the existing state of social inequality and indifference. The difference is that they have been nudged out of the feeding trough that they consider theirs by divine apportionment, and have become impatient at the slow pace of restoration. They want it all NOW! Look closely and diligently, dig fearlessly into the origins and/or sustainers of some of these convulsions and you will unveil the very faces of those that have reduced a generously endowed nation to penury. Not always, but certainly.

It pays them that the nation sink ever deeper into the quagmire of insecurity where their individual, or group culpability will be forgotten or simply dismissed in the interest of salvaging the total entity. Some of them are publicized criminals under a secular order that makes us all equal under one law. However, if there is anomie, then law and justice are forgotten and agitators for a strict application of the law are shunted aside as mere noise-makers. It is no new ploy. Idi Amin Dada staged a coup-d'etat in Uganda when he learnt that he was about to be arrested and placed on trial for smuggling diamonds. He also posed as a champion of the lowly, neglected *talakawa*, but ended up feeding *talakawa*, *mekunu*,

maigida, maikudi and all else as snacks to the Nile crocodiles, often after horrendous tortures.

That is the ‘here and now’ of our existential order. Is it any wonder then that the call for a space of national dialogue persists, increasingly heard even from once hostile directions? Millions have come to recognize its place as an inevitable prelude to the genuine fashioning of a viable formula for governance, one that must result in an authentic people constitution, based on the multiple realities of the nation. Even those in governance consistently realize this, but they play games with it, they distort it to their own ends, their egotistical agenda, and thus degrade its intrinsic claim. Else they act timidly and water down its scope. The key word is evasion. Structural evasion. You may silence or ignore clamorous voices however, but you cannot wish away objective conditions.

Now let me tell you what, today, I see as the steps towards a genuine dialogue of nations – for that is what we manifestly are, several nations in one capsule – and without failing to concede the hazards entailed in such an exercise. I envisage a dialogue that does not play out in mimicry of the past, or attempt to re-invent the wheel. We must expect, first of all, that the first few days, even weeks, will be expended in a no-holds barred encounter, with brickbats and recriminations flying all over the chamber, from all sections of society. Why not? We have already wasted generations of our existence as an independent nation, thus a few weeks spent on ‘letting it all out’ cannot be grudged in the interest of eventual resolution.

For that reason, I envisage a dialogue from which the media was totally banned – at least in its preliminary stages. For its integrity and in the interest of history however, and to serve as a restraining factor against excesses, there must be a filmed record of the exchanges. All participants would agree to between a five, ten, fifteen or twenty year moratorium on the dissemination of the contents of the recording of that commencing sector. In short, we must expect an encounter where very unpalatable, indeed bitter truths would be exchanged between all the various interest sections, perhaps under the moderation of a non-Nigerian statesman or woman, or a universally trusted public figure.

At the moment, Nigeria is subsisting on nothing but hope. Well, again what is wrong with that? Didn’t Barack Obama – and that means an entire race of African Americans - triumph on that very commodity in his famous ‘audacity of hope’? Let me repeat this, if

Nigeria must continue, we must learn to confront the realities of ourselves as they appear to different sections of society. Listen for instance to the following. It is a direct quote from a lecture delivered by a journalist and poet in Benin, for the birthday anniversary of a retired judge. They are not my words, they are not even his words, since he is himself just a medium of transmission of what is daily expressed on the streets, in bars, in offices, even in places of worship. Under the section titled “Politics of Majority”, our speaker commented – and I quote – repeat – quote!

“So far, Nigeria has been ruled mainly by the Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Nd’igbo who have been the 1st, 2nd and 3rd in population rating. In the **BBC News Africa** of April 19, 2011, the population spread is listed as follows: Hausa/Fulani 29%, Yoruba 21%, Igbo 18 % & Ijaw 10%. The Ijaws now with the Presidency, seem to have adopted the same method of the past i.e. the continuation of top to bottom, masters and servants, generals and foot soldiers. As has been pointed out earlier, the three major tribes tried unsuccessfully to assimilate the other tribes but failed because the minority tribes were and have remained the glue that held (and are still holding) Nigeria including the three major tribes together. When in 1967, the three opted for separation, it was the “minorities” Midwest that opted out of the ‘deal’ that preserved the unity of the country. General Yakubu Gowon another minority decided that we must “Go on with one Nigeria”. Now, President Jonathan is on the saddle but his ethnic nationality now sees itself as a new majority that must pursue the old system. Nigeria is perhaps the only country in the world where deserts, dense swampy mangrove produce high density population. The Ijaw must not try to assimilate other minorities of the Niger Delta or to include their land in their new State.” End of quote

I could have selected any from a thousand variations on the same or related themes that agitate the Nigerian people. The question here is not whether one agrees or disagrees with that observation and words of caution. What matters is that it is a sentiment that one encounters on a regular basis, and it is one that speaks to the basis of nation adhesion or disintegration. Apart from certain historical facts which are not in dispute, the rest is perception, and perception, like it or not, is the father of response.

Religion is another spawning ground of perception. A debate by this nation on the place of religion on national life can no longer be avoided. On the one hand, it is cited in the

context of deprivation – that is, sections of society claim that they are not permitted to practise their religion as they really should. Of that section, some believe that the entire nation should worship no other god but theirs and according to no other laws but their dictates. Others say, bluntly, Religion has no place in national policies and governance. Evidently the newly sworn-in president of Zambia would disagree. This very morning, we learn that his first pronouncement on assuming office is that Zambia would henceforth be ruled by the Ten Commandments – that is, of the Christian religion. Is this really credible? What have the Ten Commandments to do with a people’s constitution in this very day and age? Why insert this potentially explosive wedge into the Zambian polity? Well, good luck Zambia. For us within these borders, one fact is not in dispute: Religion has accounted for, and still continues to account for hundreds of our own humanity, often dispatched with unbelievable sadism and irrespective of age, gender or innocence. Religion is corroding the nation from its very foundations.

At the kind of National debate I envisage, we must expect recriminations such as: “listen you, you are a religious hypocrite, a religious manipulator for purposes outside religion, a bigot.” I expect the response: “you are simply a closet tribalist, a double-faced pseudo-radical, hiding under a secularist banner in order to deprive me of my religious entitlement.” Another voice might join in with – “You have never abandoned your delusion of a divine right of sectarian rule”, which might incur the ire of : ‘You are greedy and selfish. You wish to hog all natural resources to yourselves’. Next might be heard: “You produce nothing, you are a parasite, sucking the rest of the nation dry’. And so on, *ad infinitum*. These are not sentiments plucked from thin air – check the print media on any chosen day, and you will encounter these finger pointing declamations, and in far more acerbic form. All sides will – hopefully – buttress their charges with chapter, verse and conduct. ‘Letting off steam’ would be inadequate description for the exercise – it would be closer to lancing the boil of concealment and releasing the pus now fully coursing the blood stream of the nation – but only as structured prelude, a much needed national catharsis.

Then, at the end of such sterile but cleansing exchanges, the serious work of outlining the parameters for continuance, based on a mutual understanding, will begin.

For those who believe in the commission that has been set up for the Constitutional, I ask this familiar question: would you prescribe Vaseline or Aspirin for cancer? The nation is

at an advanced stage of cancerous affliction, and all you wish to do is give her a face-lift, administer cosmetic treatment and expect a radical cure? You cannot tinker with a system that is eating the nation to death – which is what the Presidential system is doing! Does anyone seriously expect elected legislators to act against their own existence? No doubt a few principled individuals exist among them –I personally know one or two. This handful will speak up boldly against the very system they operate but, they are a pitiable minority, and will be overwhelmed. The rest will say, don't rock the boat, leaky as it is, we can always bale out the seepage. Again, let us recall that the people have not had a say in the making of this constitution and, in any case, protocols of association are not sacrosanct. The people were willing to give this a chance – that is a fact, they have given it a chance and watched it fail. They have watched it pile neglect on neglect, inefficiency on inefficiency, pile crime upon crime, poverty on poverty and enrichment on the rich. We have a responsibility to tackle this defective edifice from its foundations and it will happen, yes it will happen. The only question is whether it will happen by that civilized means called dialogue, or through violence.

But let us watch carefully, very carefully. Let us learn to discriminate. Sure, Revolution is all around us. It has spread its wings across various parts of the Arab world and it is easy enough to mistake its mimicry, a mere scarecrow, albeit murderous in the extreme, for the real thing. If the ability to wreak violence were all, then al-Assad and Muhammad Qaddafi are the pre-eminent revolutionaries of our times. Finally, we need to arm ourselves against that very weird phenomenon, a psychology of self-abasement to which victims are sometimes prone. It is not peculiar to this nation, though that is no comfort.

Our perilous circumstances justify any repetition in giving emphasis to the following, as I summarize: From the first eruption of a movement that is generally termed Boko Haram, its proponents have made no bones of their agenda of messianism and theocraticisation of civil society, based on the precepts of 'pure islam'. That agenda was not invented by the media but announced by the leadership of that movement as its divinely appointed goal. The already cited interview on AIT by a co-founder, companion of the late Mohammed Yusuf, only reinforced what has never been in dispute. This doctrine has not been plucked from gossamer air, then imposed on a helpless, inarticulate group but merely cited after its promulgation by the very active leadership of the movement. It is embedded in the very

origin and history of the movement. And it is not a newly invented agenda, nor is it peculiar to a spot on the world map which happens to be called Nigeria. It is a doctrine of global dimensions backed by a violent methodology that has torn apart Afghanistan, incinerates Pakistan, pitted Shiites against Sunnis in Iraq, tortured India, ravaged Cherkhnyia and other parts of the Soviet Union etc, is proving endemic on our shores - the Horn of Africa – Somalia, Ogaden, Eritrea etc. and even thrown in question the very existence of the component entities of that region as nations. In the view of many however, this speaker included, and several million moslems also, this agenda is not even simply general conversion, but conversion to an islam of a very specific, narrow, bigoted, and intolerant form. Above all however, this conversion, its proponents demonstrate, shall take place by force of arms, by brutal manifestation of a total contempt for humanity, any humanity, including even those who may happen to believe in their vision of human redemption.

These are the characteristics of the new messiahs, indisputable both from their pronouncements and in the act. Yet what we hear, among those who know, is that they are **only** responding to the corruption and other malformations of society, with the implicit, indeed, in some cases, explicit endorsement of the means by which this is pursued. Or else, silence, absolute silence. Total silence over questioning of the right of any organization to attempt to prove its point by targeting, at random, the very humanity on behalf of whom this noble cause is being pursued. This generosity of victims towards their oppressors goes beyond the hostage syndrome that has been identified by psychologists, where the dehumanized victim, deprived of dignity, of volition, of control over his or her own fate, comes to love his or her captor. It is not a new phenomenon, but one that remains alarming nonetheless, and one that hardly befits a people with a sense of dignity, that dignity being defined in this instance as: having come so far on the path to liberation, a mouldy crumb of bread is not acceptable in lieu of a wholesome loaf.

The masquerade's ropes of restraint are being violently contested by dubious hands, yet the masquerade is expected to persist in a dance of joy? I posed this question earlier - why was it inevitable that we should be in Somalia? The answer to that question is that we are not in Somalia, have never been in Somalia, have never left Nigeria, only it has taken us this long to realize that, all along, we have been thrust right here into Somalia-Nigeria. It has taken us forever to come to an awareness that the factors that turned the state of Somalia

stateless have been present and should have prepared Nigeria for absorption into the camp of the stateless. When I read, for instance – especially from the foreign media – the hesitant, near apologetic claim that Boko Haram is suspected – repeat, suspected! - to have formed alliances with international organisations like al Qaeda, I feel like imitating one of our national heroes, I feel like laughing ...*ke, ke,ke*. Unfortunately it is no laughing matter, but I don't know where these people picked up the word, 'suspected'. Suspected? This is the same as saying that al Qaeda is 'suspected' of being contributory to the destabilization of the Horn of Africa. No one argues that the Boko Haram is a home-grown phenomenon like the Maitasine, but there should be not one iota of doubt that the Boko Haram has formed alliances with well-trained, well-funded and trans-border terror organisations, the al-Qaeda most prominently.

When desperate, the apologists or would-be assimilators of Boko Haram violence even compare the uprising with the militancy of MEND in the oil-producing Delta region. Such hogwash is beneath response, except to remark that I have not even heard either MEND nor any of its supporters or analysts describe the MEND militancy as a revolution, nor did I read in any portion of its manifesto a declaration of intent to christianise, islamise, Buddhaise, Guru maharajize, hinduise or Orunmilize the Nigerian polity.

We must dissociate ourselves from all theocratic models such as Zambia is aspiring to be. Religion must be taken out of governance beyond the constitutional guarantee for every citizen of the right to worship whatever gods they believe in, revere whatever prophets, avatars, gurus and seers they choose. The state must stay out of such choices and the system of governance must not be based on them, on their precepts, teachings and insights, except insofar as they serve as pointers and guides towards ethical and social conduct through the examples of their mortal passages. They have no place in a people's constitution. For the rest of the practicalities, the structures of governance, I have no new formulae, no new phrasing nor inclination to express the obvious in any other way than I – and others - have done on prior occasions in every available medium. Such propositions invariably commence with the repudiation of what passes at the moment for governance, but which only serves as a tool of elitist accumulation and civic alienation. So, without further ado and without further embellishment, I offer yet again those very words, consistently echoed by others, knowing even as we utter them, that they leave no impression. Still, perhaps as water eventually wears

down a rock, the leather membrane that blocks the ears of those in whom lies the most direct initiative, responsibility, and need to abandon extortionist privileges will, in their own long-term interest, eventually yield to the pressure of cascades from even the least expected directions. So, once again, I re-state the obvious:

“Nigeria as a nation cannot afford, and remains unsuited to the presidential system! Let the nation objectively assess the option of reverting to its grass-roots authority and courageously confront the necessity, not merely of decentralized governance, but of part-time representation – among other reforms. After several years of profligacy, it has surely become crystal clear that this product of the Military Mafioso, forced upon over a hundred million of free people, was never intended for a nation that truly intended to democratize. The stakes at the centre far outweigh the considerations of equity to the geographical parts that make up the whole, and those who fear that they have lost out in their assumptions of eternal, divinely bestowed control have grown increasingly desperate, anarchic and ruthless. They have formed allegiances with stateless agencies of global destabilisation and operate outside reason, devoid of all notions of equity or historic consciousness. The signs are all around us, loud enough to rouse the dead and pluck the tail feathers off ostriches that insist on burying their heads in the sand. The ride of complacency is over. It is time to return to the boards. If sectarian anarchy is not to rule the majority, let Civic Will commence the process of fulfilling its mission.”

And how does Civic Will translate? For now, in practical terms, and at its most peaceful, as - National Dialogue! Only from such a dialogue can be extracted glimmerings of what Barrack Obama has dubbed the audacity of hope, hope that put paid, once for all, to the pusillanimity of hesitancy and evasion. Hope does not guarantee certitude or triumph, but daring. In evasion however, lies the surest road to national perdition.

Wole Soyinka