

NIGERIA AND THE WORLD IN THE 20TH

AND 21ST CENTURIES:

THE LESSONS AND THE OPTIONS

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The present conditions, and the future destiny, of the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, are part and parcel of the conditions and destiny of the rest of mankind. This is not a matter of choice. It is a matter of necessity.

It is a reality, whether anybody likes it, recognises it, or accepts it, or does not. It is a fact of life one has to live with and die with. However, a number of Nigerians, frustrated by the specific problems of living in this country, hold the view that any involvement in the affairs of the rest of the world by this country, beyond, may be, trading, tourism, education and the pilgrimage, is a luxury, a waste of time, and serves no useful, national, purpose, whatsoever.

Necessary Context

They do not want to face the fact that, for Nigeria, for Nigerians, for all countries, all communities, and all individual inhabitants of this planet earth, the rest of the world is a necessary, inescapable, and implacable, context, which has to be lived within and coped with, in order to even merely survive, let alone progress.

Therefore, relations with other countries are necessary and inevitable and the choice left to us is over what type of relations to have. The world is a necessary and inescapable context for Nigeria, just as other individuals, whether family, friends, partners, colleagues, or strangers, are a necessary and inescapable part of the individual lives of all of us.

Let us go back to basics. Nigeria, or any part of Nigeria, like every inch of this planet, did not drop out of the sky on its own, just like that. The territory that is now called Nigeria, with its geological, hydrological, topographical climatological, and other natural features, was not brought here on the back, or, in the bags, or pockets, of some

tribal founding fathers, dropping from the sky, migrating from elsewhere, or coming out of some hole in the ground.

This territory called Nigeria was formed as an integral part and parcel of the whole process of the geological and climatological formations of all the continents and oceans of this planet, hundreds of millions of years before the human race came into existence. About 110 million years ago, tectonic plate motions of the crust of the earth, broke up the earlier super - continent of Pangea, and what has become the continent of Africa separated from what has become the continent of South America.

This motion of the earth crust and the consequent changes in the oceans, ocean currents, wind systems, the pervasive impact of the sun, the world over is what has produced Nigeria, millions of years before the coming into existence of the human race and is what determines our existence in it up to today.

All of this is part of a process, which makes us an inseparable part of the whole world, whether we like it, or, not. Right now it is not just the price of essential commodities in our markets and shops which is determined by world wide and inescapable forces, but even the amount of rainfall, the level of the temperature, and the pattern and content of the wind we get is determined by forces which operate world wide.

These are forces, which are not captured by the marketing slogan of 'globalisation.' Globalisation is about private entrepreneurs and private corporate organisations developing technological and economic linkages, interconnections and interdependencies, spread all over the globe, in order to make higher profits wherever, and whenever these can be made on this planet. The forces and processes which make Nigerian and Nigerians an inseparable part of the world are much more pervasive, powerful and go much deeper into the very conditions of existence of mankind.

These are natural processes, which no human being has fabricated, or, is in control of. But, our survival and progress depends on the extent to which we can cooperate with other human beings to live within the physical context they have set for us and in the face of the challenges they pose. The very high price of maize, guinea corn, millet, beans, yams, cassava, and of almost all staple food in Nigeria today is directly connected with our inability to cope with some of the challenges these powerful world wide forces pose for us. But all this is addressing the issue of Nigeria and the world at the most basic level.

The 20th Century

Let us take up this issue as it has manifested itself in the very process of the emergence of Nigeria from being a colonial possession of the British into an independent country and a member of the United Nations. That is the process that made it possible for the colonial subjects of Britain in this part of the world to become citizens of a sovereign nation state. This process is often seen as one in which Nigerian politicians negotiated with the British and with one another and were given independence for this country on a platter of gold. This is far from the truth of what actually happened in the emergence of Nigeria as a sovereign nation state.

This was not a mere Nigerian nationalist struggle for independence, but a continent-wide nationalist struggle for independence, whose momentum created sovereign African states like Nigeria. These states were built on the struggle of the African peasants, pastoralists, soldiers, workers, traders and intellectuals to fight colonialism with civil disobedience, civil protests, demonstrations, and strikes and ultimately through violent insurrections, mutinies and warfare. This force of the nationalist movement was manifested concretely and directly all over Africa, in various ways.

The Nigerian General Strike of 1945, paralysed the colonial state and the colonial economy for 44 days, from midnight on 21st June 1945, to 5th August 1945, and cost the British million of pounds. For the first time, the British faced a nation-wide threat to their rule, a threat made more dangerous by the existence of thousands of demobilised Nigerian soldiers fresh from fighting Italian, German and Japanese fascism in the battle-fields of Asia and North Africa.

In August 1946, one hundred thousand African miners paralysed the South African gold mining industry, and almost started a general strike, before the South African Armed Forces crushed the strike. They shook one of the most important sources of wealth for the west, particularly Britain, in the whole world.

On 28th February 1948, the killing of a sergeant in a demonstration of demobilised soldiers sparked off wide-spread anti-colonial rioting in Accra and in many other parts of the Gold Coast. This uprising in the Gold Coast took place just as one of the longest strikes in African history was coming to an end.

This strike by the 19,000 workers of the Niger-Senegal railway lasted for 160 days from October 1947 to March 1948, and paralysed the economy of a large part of French West Africa for which the railway was crucial means of transport.

Already French colonialism has been shaken to its foundation by the anti-colonial insurrections in Algeria in May 1945 and in Madagascar from March 1947, in which French colonialism was violently challenged and over 100,000 people were massacred in the violent and brutal suppression of these uprisings.

The force of the African nationalist movement's challenge to colonialism was vividly illustrated in Kenya's war of liberation, whose Land and Freedom Army, known as the Mau-Mau, became a household word in villages, towns and cities all over Nigeria, where "Mau-Mau" and "Kenyatta" almost became invocations used to frighten the, ruling, colonial, white man.

From October 1952 to 1956, the British had to use over 50,000 troops and spend over sixty million pounds in suppressing the Mau-Mau. In the process over a million peasants were re-settled into "designated" villages, about 90,000 imprisoned in concentration camps and over 10,000 killed.

The option for the European colonial powers and for their global patron and protector, the United States of America, was either to

insist on maintaining colonial domination, and continue with the violent suppression of the continent – wide nationalist movement, or try to seize the initiative in this contest with the African nationalist movement, and try to find an accommodation with which would ensure that the essential elements of colonial capitalism are preserved.

Momentous changes in Asia, particularly the winning of independence by India in 1946, led by a staunchly independent and self – reliant Congress Party, headed by Pandit Nehru; the liberation of China in 1949 and the consequent establishment of the Peoples Republic of China; the attainment of nuclear capability by the Soviet Union in 1949, made the second option the most viable, both for the colonial powers and for the economic and strategic interests of the United States of America.

The historic defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 by the Vietnamese, in spite of substantial American military aid; the growth in the fighting capacity of the Algerian Front for National Liberation from 1954, confirmed that decolonisation was the only viable option in Africa.

With their experience of fighting and adjusting to anti-colonial movements, stretching from Ireland from the sixteenth century, to North America in the 18th century, to South Africa in the late 19th century, to Asia in the early decades of the 20th century, the British were the first among the European colonial powers to see this clearly, even long before, Harold Macmillan’s wind of change speech in Cape Town in 1961.

Many Nigerians who nowadays run around shouting that that they have human rights, do not seem to know that, even their rights to have human rights, and cease to be colonial subjects, with no human rights, were not won for them by their parents, by their relatives, their tribesmen, or, simply, by any local, or, Nigerian effort. These human rights, and the right to even have the right, and means, to claim them, and have the power to enforce them, were won for them by an Africa - wide struggle for independence and freedom, which was part and parcel of a world - wide movement for national and social liberation. This movement had over the first half of the 20th century had spread, to affect every corner of the globe, and, against all odds, decisively changed the history of the world.

It was this world – wide movement which made possible the establishment of the United Nations, as a necessary framework for diplomatic relations defining the context of international relations between nation states after the world – wide defeat of fascism and colonialism in the 1940s and early 1950s. This was what defined the outcome of the engagement of Nigeria and the world in the first six decades of the 20th century. It was as a part of this process of attaining independence and sovereignty from colonial subjugation that Nigeria became member state of the United Nations in 1960.

The lessons of this historical experience are precise and clear. The very right of Nigerians to claim that they are human beings, with the right to the citizenship of a Nigerian, sovereign, nation state, equal to any other citizens from any part of the

world, was not won, as a favour from a British government, obtained in isolation from the rest of Africa and the world, but as part of a world – wide movement for national and social liberation. The United Nations was made possible by the achievements of this movement. It was not the United Nations, which produced Nigeria, but it was Nigerians who joining in this world – wide struggle for national and social liberation who produced the United Nations.

The 21st Century

Now that the rulers of the United States, of Britain, and their allies, have developed the delusion that they can reverse the victories won over half a century ago which produced the United Nations, and enforce by economic, military, media, and other means, a new phase of imperialist domination over the rest of the world, what are the citizens of Nigeria going to do? Are they going to sit down and hope that Amnesty International, or the Human Rights Watch, or some NGO, or whatever, such agencies come to be called, will protect their human rights to be citizens of a sovereign nation state? Or, are they going to wait for election funding and support from the National Democratic Institute and the National Republican Institute of the Government of the United States to seek to defend these rights of sovereignty and of citizenship?

The options, early in these early decades of 21st century, are very clear. Are Nigerians going to relate to the rest of the world as part of a new world wide movement against the new form of slavery, or are they going to allow themselves to be subjugated again as they were in the early decades of the 20th century.

The current attempt to reform the United Nations provides an arena for this contest. The issue goes far beyond Nigeria's membership of the Security Council. It goes far beyond the issue of the basis of the qualification for the membership of that council. It goes down to the level of the issue of the sovereign rights of states to exercise their rights of the defence of their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

It in fact goes down to the very fundamental issue of who decides which is a legitimate state and which one is not. In short, which state should be subject to international sanctions, and to military attack, because of its illegitimacy and which state should receive support and assistance to protect its legitimacy, its sovereignty and territorial integrity?

In the contest over this, the people and the Government of Nigeria have to take a leading role in Africa and the world. Nigeria has many unique features, which require it to do that. Nigeria has the basic capacity to shoulder the responsibility involved in taking this leading position over the current reforms of the United Nations. It stands out among other countries in Africa and the world because of these features.

Significance

Its linguistic and ethnic diversity, for example, is immense. The magnitude, multiple dimensions and motion of this diversity are hardly recognised, as simplistic stereotypes of its ethnic and religious geography have been developed to obscure this.

Unlike almost any other country in Africa, Nigeria has within its territory, substantial, number of speakers of three, of the five, families of languages found in Africa, namely Afro - Asiatic, Niger – Congo and Nilo – Saharan. The only language families in Africa, not found in Nigeria, are; the very small Khoisan, spoken by the Khoi and the San of the Kalahari Desert, and the, essentially Asian, Indo – Malay languages of Madagascar.

This high level of concentration of Africa's population in this small corner of Africa, now known as the Federal Republic of Nigeria, has persisted over the centuries, in spite of the heavy loss of population the area suffered as a result of the Atlantic and Trans – Saharan slave trades, and substantial emigration from Nigeria to other parts of West, Central, and North-Eastern, Africa, in the 19th and 20th centuries.

With a population of 140 million, the Federal Republic of Nigeria is the tenth most populous country in the world, and the most populous African nation on earth. Nigeria's territory of 923.7 thousand square kilometres, amounts to less than 3% of the total territory of the African continent. But, it has within it, up to 25% of the continent's total population. This high level of concentration of Africa's population, in this rectangle of African territory, standing out on all the population density maps of Africa, that has come to be Nigeria, is not a recent phenomenon.

Moreover, the position of Nigeria in Africa has additional global significance. For, in both territory and population, Africa is the second largest continent on earth, after Asia. The African continent covers 30.3 million square kilometres, amounting to 20.3% of the land surface of the earth. Europe covers 6.7% of the earth's surface; North America covers 16.2%; South America covers 11.9%; and Australia covers 5.7%. Most maps we use now, however, are derived from Mercator's projections, which reduce the size of the African continent and exaggerate the size Europe.

Furthermore, for well over five centuries, forced, and voluntary, waves, of immigrants, from this rectangle, that has come to be Nigeria, have settled and populated many parts of West, Central and North-eastern Africa, the Caribbean, South, Central and North, America, forming long - established, and substantial, Nigerian diasporas, across three continents. Clearly, Nigeria's global significance has deep historical roots. It is these demographic, geographic and historical realities which place on the shoulders of the people and governments of Nigeria the responsibility of playing a leading role in the current reforms of the United Nations and in the larger struggle for a just and equitable international order.
