

IGNORANCE, KNOWLEDGE AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICS IN NIGERIA

By

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This contribution to the symposium is limited to drawing your attention to the important, but largely neglected, relationship between ignorance, knowledge and democratic politics. Drawing your attention to this relationship is relevant to the theme of this symposium and may raise awareness with regards to one of the obstacles to the building and the consolidation of a democratic system of government in Nigeria.

Democracy is built on the equality of citizens; the freedom of these citizens to associate with one another for the realisation of their ideals and the defence and promotion of their interests; and the freedom of these citizens to choose between the different political platforms of various political parties and candidates, and see to the actualisation of the platforms they have voted for, if their choices win. This is only possible if the citizens are well informed about their country, their governments, their circumstances and the various interests contending in the various parties. To put all this in a very simple way, this, requires knowledge.

Without knowledge, the association, the citizens enters into is one based on irrational, but no less powerful, instincts of fear, greed, envy, fascination, or, hatred. This is because the citizen entering into this association has no rational basis for assessing whether, or, not it serves his, or her, interest and promotes and defends his, or, her, ideals and principles.

Without knowledge, the exercise of the democratic right to choose lacks a stable and rational basis and, therefore, does not enable the citizen making the choice to make the party and the candidates accountable.

In short, democratic politics is not possible when the citizens who constitute the electorate are ignorant about the basic elements of the country, its economy, its political system, and its position in world affairs.

Ignorance is not the same as illiteracy. Knowledge is not the same as literacy, or, even the same as the acquisition of educational certificates, or, academic ranks. Some of the most highly literate Nigerians, and the most highly educated, by virtue of their certificates and ranks, are some of the most ignorant over many crucial areas of natural and human existence and over our national life, like our geography, history, economy and politics.

The person whose legacy this symposium is addressing is an outstanding example of a profoundly knowledgeable man, who did not get any high educational qualifications, or eminent academic ranks. He was, and has remained to all of us, the mallam, the teacher, the learned one, because his life and his politics were imbued with the quest for knowledge and the dissemination of knowledge.

His house, before he moved to Mambayya House, and Mambayya House itself, was not only a place where politics was a daily affair and the centre of all activities, but, was a place where people went to learn, about religion, science, culture, language, Nigerian politics, economics, world affairs and almost everything else.

Moreover, this learning was not being disseminated by Mallam Aminu Kano, his colleagues and his disciples, just for the sake of it, but for political action. Mambayya House, where this new research centre of Bayero University has the fortune to be located, was the place where, throughout Mallam's residence there, the dissemination of knowledge and the struggle for democratic emancipation in the country were integrated. It is often said that the main achievement of the NEPU led by Mallam Aminu was to teach the *talakawas* to say "No" to their oppressors and their deceivers. But Mallam, and the party he led, did not just teach them to say "No" to injustices and oppression. They taught them first to say "Why". For, they only said "No" after asking "Why". They did not just say "No", blindly, like donkeys.

This questioning, is, from my very limited experience of his style of discourse, one of the most distinctive features of Mallam Aminu Kano's interaction with people.

It is this spirit of inquiry; this permanent search for knowledge and this daily concern for its dissemination to awaken the overwhelming majority of the people to their condition, rights, duties and potential, which, in my view, are some of the most important aspects of his legacies, which this country badly needs now if its democratic system is to survive and grow.

The Politics of Ignorance

Right now, in Nigeria, the freedom of political association and the exercise of the democratic right to choose freely in all elections is being denied to tens of millions by ethnic, sub-ethnic, regional, and sectarian religious organisations. They are loudly insisting that Nigeria is made up of ethnic, regional and religious groups which are monolithic and all those who belong to them have a common interest and have to act politically together, making all those who do not agree with this type fascist politics, traitors, who are liable to be ostracised and violently dealt with.

This politics is built on the dissemination of ignorance about how Nigeria and its people have come into being. It is the Yoruba Race, the Ijaw Nation, the Igbo Nation, the Urhobo Nation, the Hausa-Fulani Nation, etc, etc, who are said to be the original building blocks which are said to have agreed to come together to form Nigeria.

But all this is only politically potent because it is based on ignorance and the entrenchment of hostility to knowledge, which has come to riddle Nigerian politics and allow racist and fascist politics, deeply hostile to democracy, to flourish.

Anybody who has read the scholarly writings that have come out of the University of Ibadan from the early 1950's knows that there has never been and there is nothing like a Yoruba "Race". Anyone who is familiar with the works of Professor Kenneth Dike, one of the greatest academics of the 20th century, knows that there is nothing like the Igbo nation. These, like the Hausa-Fulani, Ijaw, and the other nationalities of Nigeria, came to be formed in the course of the formation of Nigeria in the 19th and 20th centuries, as we have brought out in the Ceddert publication, **The Misrepresentation of Nigeria: The Facts and the Figures.**

The Example of G.G. Darah

The degree to which ignorance has replaced knowledge and this ignorance is used to promote racist and anti-democratic politics in Nigeria, is most clearly illustrated over the claims made about the Urhobo and the petroleum resources they are supposed to possess, by Dr. G.G. Darah.

Here, the claim coming from a prominent Senior Lecturer in the Obafemi Awolowo University, now Chairman of the Editorial Board of the Guardian Newspapers, is what will be cited. In an interview published in the **Sunday Punch** of 3rd January, 1999, on page 3, Dr. G.G. Darah, said:

“I come from an area of Urhoboland... the Federal Government makes N41 billion a day from the oil produced in that place... we are asking for a hundred per cent because after all in America where this thing is exploited, your farm if they find this oil, government has no business with it. The Federal Government is rampaging our land... That land is Urhoboland. And Urhobo people were there before Nigeria was founded. Nigeria is only 87 years old. We have been here for 6,000 years.”

Such statements on an important issue, by a person with such high educational qualifications like Dr. G.G. Darah, who, moreover, is a leading public opinion leader, as Chairman of the Editorial of the Guardian Newspapers, can only be the product of a culture of ignorance which flourishes in a political environment hostile to knowledge.

Almost everything Darah said here is not true, or, is very misleading. From the figure of N41 billion obtained by the Federal Government per day from the oil drilled from “his area”, the Federal Government would be earning \$106 billion (one hundred billion U.S. dollars) per annum from that area alone! That is calculating the naira at the current black market exchange rate. This is more than fiction, or, folklore, these are just hallucinations, flourishing in a political atmosphere riddled with ignorance.

The Urhobos of America

As for what operates in the United States of America, if Nigeria were like America, the owners of the land with oil would not have been any

natives who have been there for 6,000 years, like the Urhobo are said to have been. The owners would be the Anglo-Saxon, German, Dutch, Scandinavian, Italian and other European colonists who wiped out the native American-Indian and conquered the territory driving out by brute force the Spaniards, the French and the Mexicans. If Nigeria had been America, there would have been no Urhobos to collect any royalty. The few left, like G.G. Darah, would have been in poverty-stricken native reservations, like the few American Indians left, are.

But even if this genocide had not happened, any legal arrangement granting ownership of land and minerals to individuals, on a freehold basis, as in the USA, would have left the land with oil deposits in Urhoboland in the hands of families like the Akenzua royal dynasty of Benin, whose claims in that area are extensive, and with merchant families like the Ibrus. The Urhobo people would be nowhere under laws providing for the freehold ownership of land, but shall be even more firmly subordinated to the plutocracies, who, Andrew Onokerhoraye say, are in charge of their polities.

In any case, the tax, and rating, laws of the state and federal governments of the United States, make the whole picture more complex. A simple comparison with Nigeria is grossly misleading and only takes advantage of the ignorance and the slave mentality which has been reduced to the level of believing that everything done in America is better and should be copied by everybody, oblivious of the significance of the genocide, slavery, violence and native reservations, which have produced America, and still shape its society and economy.

The Urhobos of Nigeria

As for the Urhobos being there before Nigeria, this is just laughable, if it is not so much part of the anti-democratic campaign of peddling ignorance to make for the rise of fascist political organisations in Nigeria. In the first instance, Obaro Ikime, Onigu Otite, and others, who have closely collected and studied Urhobo oral traditions, have brought out that even according to these traditions, the autonomous Urhobo clans were of diverse origins. They were of Benin, Ijo and Igbo origin. The Udu clan, which G.G. Darah himself wrote about 20 years ago, came into the area in groups at different times and from disparate sources, including a group from Benin. The Ewreni clan

claims that they migrated from a village called Enene Elele in Igboland. The Ughweren clan, on the other hand claims both Ijo and Benin origins.

That is as far as the oral traditions, which an eminent scholar of folklore like G.G. Darah, somehow finds convenient to set aside and fabricate some monolithic Urhobo nation going back six thousand years!

As for the name Urhobo, G.G. Darah must know that the name only came into use significantly after the political agitations crystallised by the article in the **Daily Times**, edited by Ernest Ikoli, of 13th June 1934 and the reply of 19th June 1934. Before then, a common identity for the clans that came to be called Urhobo barely existed. As Obaro Ikime observed on page 67 of his 1977 study of the life and times of Chief Mukoro Mowoe:

“In the 1930’s and 1940’s the Urhobo as a people, a group distinct from their neighbours... were very much in need for identity. The history of the preceding three decades had a major role to play in this challenging need for identity. Identity required a focus, a rallying point, leadership; Mukoro Mowoe provided that rallying point, that leadership”.

In fact, it was the political activities of people like Mowoe which produced the Urhobo as a distinct nationality, not six thousand years ago, but within the context of the politics of colonial Nigeria, as the specialists on the subject have made very clear, but as G.G. Darah wants to cover up, taking advantage of the widespread ignorance of our history which is very crippling to our political development.

The emergence of the Urhobo as a nationality took place within Nigeria and one of the major steps towards this was the Government Notice No. 1228 published in the **Nigeria Gazette** No.49, Vol.25 of 8th September, 1938 which with effect from 1st October, 1938 changed the name of Sobo Division of Warri Province to “Urhobo Division.”

But even after that, the issue of who is Urhobo and who is not, remain a political issue, as is illustrated by the question of the position of the Isoko, which there is no need to go into here.

But then G.G. Darah may be talking of six thousand years of the Urhobo language. If he is, which of the dialects of the South-Western Edoid

dialects is he referring to? Is it the Agbarho dialect or the Uzere dialect? When did these separate from the mother Edoid cluster to become a distinct language, homogenous enough, and sufficiently cohesive, to define a nationality, four thousand years before Christ? In fact, were there any inhabitants in that area in that period, given what is now known about the formation of the Niger-Delta and the climatic changes in this part of West Africa?

It is clearly playing on public ignorance to claim an Urhobo people, or, nation, going back six thousand years. There is no evidence available to support this claim. Elements that came later to form the nationality called Urhobo, produced within colonial Nigeria, most likely were to be found in various form and combinations much further north? But, all that is still subject to further research and inquiry.

Conclusion

The sorts of claims made by G.G. Darah are now being thrown around all over the place, taking advantage of the ignorance blocking public knowledge of what we actually are, where we are coming from, where we are going and where we can reach in this 21st century. State Governors of many of the northern states, and the other non-oil producing states, being part of this network of ignorance, are also throwing around meaningless claims about solid minerals and agriculture. Instead of studying our geology, ecology, history, economics, and constitutional and legal development, they resort to the same cheap politics of claiming sovereign rights for their states where they have none. The blind confronts the blind and the country's politics sinks into a welter of baseless tribalist and racist claims at the beginning of the 21st century. Anti-democratic organisations using the fascist political tactics of intimidation, using the threats of and the use of violence flourish in this political contest based on ignorance.

All these types of bankrupt politics taking place now are what the legacy of Mallam Aminu Kano emerged to challenge, oppose and overcome. For democracy to survive and grow in our country we have to build our political theory, political principles, political research, political training and political practices on the foundations of this legacy of a politics of humane values, deeply imbued with the quest for knowledge and the dissemination of knowledge committed to the betterment of all human beings.