

WHEN WILL THE OLD NIGERIA DIE?

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Lagos, Jun 30, 2005 (This Day/All Africa Global Media via COMTEX) -- The characteristic crisis in Nigeria is the tug of war between the a??old Nigeriaa?? and the a??new Nigeriaa??. In the classical biblical metaphor, Nigeria is at the birth-stool, but there is no strength to deliver.

Nigeria is a nation convulsed by the conflict between the new and the old. The tragedy is that the old, represented by most of the personalities in the National Confab, the National Assembly, the Presidency, and other institutions of governance in Abuja and state capitals, is always winning the war. The greater tragedy is that like T.S Eliota??s Wasteland, the worse- those consolidating the a??old Nigeriaa?? are full of courage and confidence, while the good- those advocating for the a??new Nigeriaa?? are timid and half-hearted.

I am fully convinced that the struggle for freedom in Nigeria is (or should be) a battle between proponents of the old and new Nigeria. What is the old Nigeria? The old Nigeria is the same Nigeria that makes Africa look like a giant with clay feet. Major Nzeogwu, the first Nigerian to lead a military coup, summed up the representatives of the a??old Nigeriaa?? as those leaders who make Nigeria look big for nothing. The old Nigeria is the Nigeria that wasted billions of oil revenue and today is beggarly blackmailing the world to treat her as a Highly Indebted Poor Country. It is the Nigeria that since 1959 has earned billions of dollars from oil exploitation and has refused to invest any significant amount of that stupendous wealth in programmes that directly increase the welfare of its people.

The old Nigeria is the Nigeria that was constructed by colonial interest according to the principle of highest deference to ethnic differences and traditional ruler-ship. In the north, the colonialists destroyed whatever remained of citizenship by exalting the Emirs and empowering them against the people. In the South, they equally exalted the Obas and created a cultural oddity in the person of the a??warrant Chiefa?? in the Igbo heartland. This is the beginning of the consolidation of irresponsible and unaccountable governance in what became Nigeria. Today, the custodians of a??old Nigeriaa?? have reinforced the a??disastrousa?? legacy of colonial rule. The on-going Reform Conference is considering a role for these traditional rulers whose cultural genetics is questionable. Old Nigeria cannot think afresh. It lacks the gusto to move on the path of comprehensive democratization. It slumbers under the obscurantist vision of the a??African Chiefa??, which actually is the creation of colonial rule.

Old Nigeria thinks old thoughts. It is oblivious to the ways the world is changing. It still defines itself according to the identities which the colonial masters constructed. One of the evils of colonialism is that it mobilized the African people- particularly African chiefs and political elites- according to the anachronism of ethnic exclusivity. It made ethnicity the definition of being African. Leading African political scientist, Professor Mamdani, has written a classic that addresses how this ethnicization of African identity has stunted the march to democratic citizenship. Advocates of the a??new Nigeriaa?? must read Mamdani's Citizens and Subject: The Legacy of Late Colonialism.

It was the colonial rulers who told our founding fathers that a Nigerian born in Zungeru must be first and last an Igbo. And faithful defenders of a??old Nigeriaa?? will defend this heresy with their fanatical blood. Colonial rule made us think in terms of a??Northa?? and a??Southa??, notwithstanding the contiguity of poverty, distresses and diseases. A walk from the arid villages of Sokoto to the ravaged homesteads of Bayelsa should expose the lie in a North and South with different destinies, yet the a??old Nigeriaa??, embedded in the mono-syllable of colonial memory, deliberates about Nigerian politics on the basis of this vacuous territoriality.

Assuming you still fail to appreciate the ubiquity of a??old Nigeriaa?? consider the history of constitutional conference in Nigeria. It is emblematic of the parentage of the a??old Nigeriaa?? that it began its constitutional birth in London, the land of its slavery. Every Republic gave birth to itself in its own soil. But, Nigeria began at the behest of its enemies- those who placed the nozzle on her neck. When some Nigerians seriously considered to move the country away from servitude to freedom and demanded self-rule immediately, old Nigeria launched a campaign against independence because the upholders of colonial order were fixated on the differentials of benefits accruing to a??northa?? and a??southa??, rather than the common good. In the 1960s, the keepers of colonial heritage dithered while the nation went to war with itself. In 1978, during the Constituent Assembly, old Nigeria refused to face the challenges of construct a new country from the ashes of colonial Nigeria, instead precious time was wasted papering over old cracks. These dinosaurs could not grapple with the intricacy of situating religion in the public sphere in a plural democracy.

The major crisis which old Nigeria perpetuates is the crisis of governance which is defined as the recurrence of irresponsibility and lack of accountability in the body politics. From 1960 till today, Nigeria has been weighed down by the burden of leadership. As Fela, one of the proponents of the a??new Nigeriaa?? put it in one of his songs: the old politicians who spoiled Nigeria have been unleashed on the nation again. Fela was reacting to General Olusegun Obasanjoa??s transition in 1979. Fela felt profoundly piqued that Obasanjo had assembled all the politicians who were found guilty of criminal theft and incompetence against the nation. In spite of their terrible deeds, these a??leadersa?? were fully rehabilitated and given another platform to continue their mindless and benighted plundering, hence the disaster of the 2nd Republic. Fela called it a??army arrangementa?? and a??paddy-paddy governmenta??.

Can you imagine what would be Felaa??s pique if he was alive and beheld the a??statesmena?? gathered in Abuja to resolve the crisis of governance in Nigeria- a crisis perpetuated by their continuous relevance in Nigerian politics. President Obasanjoa??s single failure is that he continues to believe that this sort of Nigerians can ever usher the a??new Nigeriaa??. The present Reform Conference illustrates the futility of relying on this sort of political leaders to resolve the crisis of governance in Nigeria.

Believe me, the conference is a gross failure. Father Kukah and a??patriotsa?? like him will not agree. They think that the conference succeeds to the extent that Nigerians talk about their problems. But, a quality analysis of the deliberation at the conference is nauseatingly reminiscent of a??old Nigeriaa??, of the same acrimonious brickbats about a schizophrenic Nigeria, alienated from its true essence. The deliberators are talking of a??northa?? and a??southa??. Where is the a??north and southa?? in a nation that 70 per cent percent of its inhabitants are so poor that they cannot, without great violence to language, be called citizens? These statesman deliberators do not care about the economic component of citizenship. While negotiating which ethnic group and geopolitical zone should vie for presidency in 2007 it closes its eyes to the crying need for a visionary leader to mobilize the people for the great challenge of economic development and socio-political transformation. As long as a??old Nigeriaa?? cares, the world stands still, awaiting the end of our bickering over ethnic politics.

Old Nigeria considers oil revenue a good fortune to be shared and not to be invested in the welfare of the people. Old Nigerians from the South-South are warriors of resource control. By that they mean that the bulk of the oil revenue should be controlled by occupants of state houses in the oil-bearing communities and not the occupants of Aso Rock. Their conception of a??resource controla?? is not about democratic control of public expenditure in Nigeria such that every petrol dollar is spent to enhance the welfare of every Nigerian. But, the game of social and economic welfare in Nigeria is not a zero-sum game. Enhancing the economic well-being of Nigerians in the Niger Delta does not imply welfare loss for Nigerians in the northern grasslands. But, a??old Nigeriaa?? is incapable of such understanding. This is why some want 17% for others and 83% for themselves and others want 100% for themselves and 0% for others.

The Political Reform Conference is stalemated on the issue of the sharing formula between oil-bearing states and the central government. This is tragic. With all the insights from political economy about resources curse, our distinguished Nigerian leaders are at each othera??s throat on who pockets the oil revenue. They waved aside the submission from the Catholic Bishop Conference and other Nigerians groups on economic citizenship and the need to apply oil revenue to build infrastructure and invest in human development across Nigeria. The worse is that the fight is not between social groups advocating different models of the management of oil revenue, but ethnic and geo-political zones questing for territorial supremacy in a country that is becoming unsustainable.

Old Nigeria has overlooked the issue of making every Nigeria a citizen of Nigeria based on residence. Old Nigeria does not address the problems of impunity and gross violations of the rights of Nigerians in the guise of religious and communal riots. Nothing of real importance to the new Nigeria has been discussed at the conference. The conference is a big belch from old Nigeria. Sitting back and watching the delegates talk about a??resource controla??, about a??power-shiffta?? and zoning formula, I am transported to the 1960s and the 1970s. Nothing has changed because it is still the a??old politiciansaa?? who spoiled Nigeria in the past who are having a ball in Abuja.

The challenge before any person who desires a new Nigeria that is no longer big for nothing, a Nigeria whose leaders are oriented towards value creation and not rent collection; a Nigeria that arises from the ashes of the old, is to stretch out her hand and kill the a??old Nigeriaa??.

The lesson of the fiasco of the political reform conference is that the a??new Nigeriaa?? cannot be a??midwifeda?? by a??old Nigeriansa??. In 2007, there should not be even as much as the ghost of the a??old Nigeriaa??. Obasanjo failed to nail the coffin of a??old Nigeriaa?? in 1979. He can be the true father of the modern Nigeria by facilitating the death of the a??old Nigeriaa??.

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