

Opinion

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Between history and current demands

By Edwin Madunagu

ONE of the propositions of Leftists' theory of history is that human beings are the makers of their own history. A corollary to this – that human beings do not make this history simply as they wish, but that they make it with materials and circumstances fashioned and transmitted by and from the past – is as important as the main thesis. This composite proposition has remained a pillar of Leftists' political and social action. And it is one of the propositions which Leftists bring to the workers' movement, revolutionary groups and, indeed, all movements that genuinely wish to change the world or segments of it for the benefit of the exploited, the dominated, the enslaved, the deceived, the humiliated and the abandoned.

An injunction that issues from this proposition is that those who fight for justice, freedom or equality should not lie, should not falsify history – however strong the temptation to do so may be. This is not simply a moral injunction. It is a political and ideological injunction because – as history itself has demonstrated over and over again – falsification of history ultimately weakens the falsifiers' cause. In late 1990, as a full-time member of the Editorial Board of *The Guardian*, I wrote a 10-part column titled **A refutation of official history**. The present article is offered both in anticipation of the appearance of an updated edition of that essay and as a commentary on the current wave of "politics-inspired" re-interpretations of our country's history.

From about 1990 to 2005 there was an intense national media debate on a subject variously called "the national question", "the ethnic question" or "the ethnic nationality question". The first alternative name is considered the orthodox variant. Nigerian Leftists not only raised the intellectual level of this debate but also made it wider and more political by introducing the concept of Sovereign National Conference (SNC) and demanding for it. I took part in that debate both as a socialist and as a

member of the Editorial Board of *The Guardian*.

Among the sharpest and most passionate contributors to this unstructured national dialogue from the Left were Comrade (Professor) G. G. Darah and the late Comrade (Dr) Bala Usman. But they entered the "National Question" and "Sovereign National Conference" debates from diametrically opposite ideological and political directions. The debate however never degenerated to personal abuses and never employed "ad hominem" arguments.

The National Question and Sovereign National Conference debates did not come to a close. Rather, it went into a lull. It remained that way until a couple of years ago. But when the debate resumed it did so as something entirely different: it had ceased to be informed by verifiable historical facts and true sequences of events; perspectives and methods could no longer be apprehended or characterized; the language had become simply horrible and the social media – unavailable to the last generation – had become the main platform for the debate – or rather, the abuse. The concrete issues around which the "national question" debate or abuse is currently being fought may be grouped into three: **One** is the question of "restructuring" or "geopolitical restructuring" of the country. Positions being canvassed on this question include the retention of the present structure; "strong" restructuring; "weak" restructuring (if we may borrow the language of the current Brexit debate in Europe); and the right of any of the present six geopolitical zones to secede from the federation. The **second** issue is national political re-alignment (combinations and dissociations) in preparation for the 2019 general elections. The **third** issue is the current widespread destructions and killings which have been officially classified as herdsman – farmers clashes.

We note, sadly, that there is no issue or sub-issue on the list of issues articulated above which we can say had been inspired by the

Left or the popular-democratic movement either in its own name or in the name of the masses of Nigeria. Of course, all the issues affect the masses and their resolutions – one way or another – will, as usual, carry grave consequences for the masses. It is, however, not the aim of this piece to squeeze into this small space explicitly Left demands such as popular-democratic restructuring and the massive re-deployment of the nation's resources in favour of the masses as articulated in my previous article, **Further notes on people's manifesto**. Rather, I wish to use the space that is left here to draw the attention of debaters to some elementary facts on the origins of, and political developments in, Nigeria up to the civil war. These are verifiable simple facts which you must respect if you intend to use your arguments and positions to persuade living human beings.

Fact One: In 1977 Professor Obaro Ikime, one of the earliest and most accomplished Nigerian historians, offered an important book on Nigerian history to scholars and non-scholars alike. The book is titled **The Fall of Nigeria: The British conquest**. It is divided into two parts. The second part, **Episodes from the British Conquest of Nigeria**, tells the stories of the British military defeat and occupation of 12 selected Nigerian communities: Lagos, Calabar, Oyo, Ilorin, Brass, Benin, Aro, Tiv, Borno, Zaria, Kano and Sokoto. If you put up a current map of Nigeria you will see the spread of just some of the areas where military battles were fought between the British colonialists and the native populations between 1885 and 1914. Ikime studied these battles.

My proposition here is: By 1914 all the present 36 state capitals and the federal capital territory had British military presence – by conquest. Put differently: The colonialists decisively won each of the battles listed in the preceding paragraph and several others not listed, put the conquered territories together and forged a country they called Nigeria. When our ancestors rose to resume the struggle, they rose not as individual communities,

but as Nigerians fighting for the independence of Nigeria. And they won independence not as members of previously defeated autonomous communities, but as citizens of Nigeria. This point was made by Bala Usman and conceded by several debaters including myself. But the point, though a powerful one, did not settle and has not settled the question of national unity decades after independence. It has, however, eliminated a large field of arguments.

Fact Two: In 1900 the British proclaimed their ownership of three territories, namely: the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria and the Colony of Lagos. In 1906, the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria was merged with the Colony of Lagos. And in 1914, the two protectorates were merged and named the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria with Lagos as capital. In 1936 the protectorate of Southern Nigeria was divided into two groups of provinces – the West and the East. By 1954 Nigeria had become a federation of three regions: North, East and West and the Federal Capital, Lagos. Independence was won for Nigeria on October 1, 1960. And in 1963, the fourth region, Mid-West, was carved out of the West.

Fact Three: On May 30, 1967, the whole of Eastern Region comprising the present southeast geopolitical zone plus the present Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa-Ibom and Cross River States was declared the Republic of Biafra. A 30-month war broke out. On January 15, 1970 the 1967 declaration was renounced and the status-quo ante was restored.

These are simple and verifiable historical facts which must be respected by debaters. They neither support nor oppose any of the current demands or opposition to any demand. But a truthful reconstruction of historical experience is a powerful weapon in any struggle for a just future. And that is why Leftists (socialists and radical democrats) invest so much energy in self-education and popular education.