

# ***Nigerian Unity and Nigerian History: Beyond Fairy Tales***

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by

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*An opening contribution to the 1st Annual Dialogue  
organised by the Citizen Magazine, Conference Hall,  
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## Nigerian Unity and Nigerian History: Beyond Fairy Tales\*

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**T**he topic of this dialogue is, "The National Question: What is the Answer?" The problem we face here, right away, is that the national question does not have an answer. It is not the type of question which has an answer. The word question in the phrase actually means issue. And an issue does not have an answer. It may, or may not, have a resolution. But it certainly does not have an answer.

### Antecedents

This phrase "the national question" goes back to nineteenth century European discourse on major, and persistent, political and diplomatic problems, which involved the issues of the nature and position of nations and nationalities. There was, for example, the German Question: which was about how the states and statelets of Germany, before unification, were to order their affairs and their internal and external relationships. There was the Italian Question, which was about the same things as applied to the polities of the Italian Peninsular. There was the Polish Question, which was about what to do about the Poles, their territory and status. There was the Irish Question; which came to be so decisive in British politics, and was about the Irish struggle for independence. There was also the Eastern Question; which was about how the major European powers were to share in the dismemberment of the Ottoman Caliphate. After that dismemberment in 1914-18, and the simultaneous demise of the Hapsburg Empire, there emerged the Balkan Question; which was about the struggles over the post-Ottoman, and post-Hapsburg, political order in the Balkans. The Balkan Question, which ignited the conflagration that became the First World War, has once again exploded into prominence, in the form of a crises and civil wars in Yugoslavia, a polity which at present seems, painfully, unable to break-up and unable to remain one.

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## **Formulation**

The point here is that, it was within the framework of this discourse, that the debates over the general issue of the consequences of industrialisation, democratisation, nationalism and imperialism on existing polities came to be formulated as: *the national question*. The German Question, the Italian Question, the Polish Question, the Irish Question, the Eastern Question and the Balkan Question, were all seen as particular manifestations of the national question. This national question is not about the general conditions, problems and destiny of a nation, or about the management of its affairs, as most of the Nigerian media is currently misrepresenting it to be.

The national question is actually not a question in the common meaning of the word "question." By the national question, what is meant is the issue of the composition of the nation, meaning the issue of the nature and the relationship between the nationalities in a polity, with particular reference to the relationships at the level of language, culture, religion, territoriality; communal, ethnic and national identities; and citizenship. These levels of a country's existence, of course, relates to almost all other levels, from ecology to economy, to law, education, military organisation, politics and administration. For, it is not possible to meaningfully separate the issues of citizenship and of communal, ethnic and national identities, for example, from the issues of land ownership, employment, income distribution, the political and legal order, and the exercise of political power, etc.

## **Clarity**

But if this dialogue is to be a real dialogue, which means a genuine exchange of views and ideas, its subject must have its meaning clarified as to what it is precisely about. Otherwise we may end up speaking at cross-purposes, without any chance of our understanding, and gaining, from one another. This clarity over the subject we are exploring here today is necessary, because one of the most basic political problems working against the development of a genuinely democratic political culture in this country, is the level of the shallowness and incoherence of so much of the public political discourse. The systems for this discourse often distort, rather than illuminate, the realities of our historical experience and of our contemporary conditions and circumstances.

## **Political Discourse**

It is for example, because of the shallowness and incoherence of the political discourse in this country that the present military regime can foist on us a notion as bogus as that of "the newbreed", which can have no meaning in democratic politics, because parties and individuals contest democratic

elections, whose outcome is determined by a number of factors, some of the most crucial of these factors; being their political antecedents, their political records and their political history. The imposition of the notion of "the newbreed" was intended to do away with all these things, which provided the most solid basis for assessing the real meaning of the manifesto, programmes and promises of a party and of a candidate. We are now to choose between parties and candidates who are supposed to have no political antecedents, no political records, and no political history!

If the level of public political discourse in this country had been higher, the whole dubious notion of "newbreed" would have been outrightly rejected and laughed out of the political arena. With it, the whole justification of this regime's carefully calculated project of intimidating, cowing, regimenting, and debasing, civilian political activity would also have been opposed. The destabilising, and dangerous, consequences of the failure to oppose this project are now very clear, as the two newbreed political parties, and their newbreed leadership move headlong towards what seems to be the almost inevitable outcome: *self-destruct*, in computer language!

We must try here and avoid this shallowness and incoherence, which marks so much of our public political discourse in this country. We must be as clear as possible as to what exactly is the subject of this dialogue. This is so that whether in the end we agree with one another or not, at least we end up comprehending each other's understanding of a clearly defined subject and our position on the major issues arising from it.

This is why my opening contribution to this dialogue is going to be an attempt to point out the need to sweep away the heavy, and dusty, cobwebs which obstruct our understanding of the actual nature of the national question in our country. This dense cobweb of misconceptions and misrepresentation as to what our country actually is and how we have come to be where we are, prevent so much of the discussion of the national question in this country from being fruitful and enlightening. Ignorance piles on ignorance! Prejudice generates more prejudice! Bigotry begets bigotry! The blind takes over, and lead the blind!

### **Three Fairy Tales**

In this contribution, I want to draw your attention to three widespread fairy tales which are quite basic to a lot of the misconceptions and misrepresentation of the national question as it is manifested in this late twentieth century polity known as the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

The first fairy tale is made up of the story that before the British colonial conquest, each tribe, ethnic group, or nationality in this country, lived largely on its own, in its own sovereign kingdoms, city-states, chiefdoms or village

confederations, under its natural rulers. According to this tale, these ethnic groups may have one, or more, sovereign polities, whose rulers had brotherly relations with one another, like is said to be the case with, for example, the Yoruba polities supposedly linked by descent from Oduduwa; or the Bura/Babur polities, supposedly linked by descent from Yamta. A few ethnic groups, notably the Hausa, the Fulani, the Kanuri and the Shuwa Arab, are said to have become so mixed-up, particularly as a result of the 19th century jihads, that they lived mixed in the same polities, notably the northerly emirates of the Sokoto Caliphate and in Borno. The story making up this fairy tale narrates the rise of the Fulani who are said to have established a Muslim state ruled from Sokoto, which, alongside Borno, fell into, what even before the British conquest, could be identified as the "Far North" alongside a "Middle Belt" and a "South". But the gist of this fairy tale is that the political entities which provided the building blocks of colonial Nigeria under the British were basically ethnic polities: or in other words relatively distinct and monolithic tribes, under natural rulers.

The second fairy tale is made up of the story of how the British conquered these ethnic polities by using superior military firepower; and by gimmicks and tricks. According to this tale, the very serious and crucial internal economic, social, and political, developments within these polities which made the conquest possible, and relatively easy, were of marginal, or even of no significance. The gist of this tale is that our pre-colonial politics were overwhelmed and defeated by superior European military technology.

The third fairy tale is that the independence of this country was won by these ethnic groups, now grouped into three regions, producing political parties and political leaders, namely the NCNC from among the Igbos; the Action Group from the Yoruba, and NPC from the Hausa-Fulani; who led the struggle for independence. In this fairy tale, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo and Ahmadu Bello are placed on the same pedestal, as the leaders of these regional parties who fought for our independence and established our first independent governments. Alongside these are placed leading figure from among the minority ethnic groups like Eyo Ita, Anthony Enahoro, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Joseph Tarka, Patrick Dokotri, Udo Udoma and others who are seen to have emerged to lead their ethnic group or coalition of ethnic groups to fight for independence. Recognition is also given to others like Sa'ad Zungur, Raji Abdallah, Michael Imoudu, Yarima Balla, Nduka Eze, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and of course Mallam Aminu Kano, who do not easily fit the didactic purpose of this third fairy tale.

## **Reality**

The stories in these three fairy tales, widespread with different em-

phases, have become established as common sense in the current discourse on the national question in this country. But fairy tales are entertaining and may even be educative but they are tales, they are fiction. A whole country, even a community, or a family, cannot hope to survive, prosper and shape its destiny in this world, if its perception of what it is, and how it has come into being, is made of a set of fairy tales: no matter how plausible or widely accepted these fairy tales may be. Grasping the realities of one's historical experience, and contemporary circumstances, no matter how harsh, uncomplimentary, multi-faceted, and complex these realities are, provides the only basis for ensuring one's survival and developing the capacity for self-determination.

It is not for nothing that over one hundred and eighty years ago, Muhammadu Bello (1781-1837) while over-throwing governments and building new ones, wrote the 212 pages of the *Infaq al-Maisur*, carefully reconstructing the history of this part of Africa, particularly the tumultuous events he was taking a leading part in. He opened that study by declaring that the human being is ennobled by the study of history. This is because the human mind is brought into touch with the complex reality of the nature and context of human existence through the systematic reconstruction of the historical process.

It is not for nothing that almost a century after Bello, another revolutionary, thousands of miles away, Mao Tse Tung (1892-1976), also immersed in the task of overthrowing an old system and building a new one, said emphatically, that no political party can lead a great revolutionary movement to victory without its having revolutionary theory, a knowledge of history and a sound grasp of the practical movement.

Moving beyond the fairy tales about our history and coming face-to-face with it, as Bello and Mao were able to do, and proclaimed the necessity for, is an essential prerequisite for taking our destiny into our hands, individually and collectively.

What this dusty and dense cobweb of fairy tales obscures about how our country came into being, and its real nature and meaning in the world today, cannot be grasped unless we move beyond these tales and grasp the reality of our historical experience.

## **Polities**

In the first place, the evidence available from all part of this country shows that the sovereign kingdoms, chiefdoms, city-states and village-confederations which the British conquered to establish the colony of Nigeria, were not ethnic entities, with the Yoruba, Edos, Katafs, Efiks, Fulanis, Nupes and Idomas, etc., etc., each having their own sovereign politics or sets

of polities. Even before the 18th and 19th centuries, ethnic solidarity, as conceived in contemporary Nigerian political discourse, has never been an important factor in the establishment and the maintenance of polities. Ethnic solidarity certainly featured in the political vocabulary, with its prominence varying with the issues and context of political contestation and political struggles. But for more important and permanent factors in the establishment and survival of the sovereign kingdoms, city-states, chiefdoms and village confederations of pre-colonial Nigeria, even before the 18th and 19th centuries, were migration and settlement patterns; the nature of the division of labour; the nodal points of the networks of occupations, and communications; the growth and decline of centres of hegemonic cultural and religious practices; and the political cement provided by the imperatives of territoriality.

### **Challenge**

By the 18th century, even the importance of political charters of ancestral rights, as the basis of sovereign political authority, had been eroded and the polities in which this played an important role were facing serious crises.

Migrations and more extensive divisions of labour; broader trading and communication networks, and more universal cultural, religious, and juridical beliefs and practices, were undermining these kingdoms, chiefdoms, city-states, village confederations, whose bonds of political community were based on claims about ancestors. This was taking place from the Lower Niger Basin, the Cross-River Basin the Awka-Orlu Upland, right across to the South-West Coastline and its hinterland, to the Sokoto Rima-Basin, the Chad Basin and the Bauchi Plateau. In fact almost all over Nigeria. The emergence of the *jama'a* of the Shehu Usman Dan Fodio was one of the best known of these challenges. But the activities of the Aro merchants and lawyers; the Nri and Awka priests, diviners and itinerant artisans, the *tor agbande* in the Middle Benue Basin; and the *ako* in the Niger-Benue Confluence Area; were also examples of this challenge to political charters of ancestral rights as the basis of sovereign political authority.

### **Delusions**

The kingdoms, chiefdoms, city-states and village confederations which the British conquered were not sovereign ethnic political blocs, which can now be brought back into existence if Nigeria is dismembered; or which can provide the basis for political entities out of which a Nigerian confederation or commonwealth of independent states can be created. There was no Hausa-Fulani polity, or set of polities, which can be resurrected if Nigeria is broken-up. There was no Yoruba polity, or set of polities, which can be

resurrected if Nigeria is dismembered. There were no Kataf, Sayawa, Tiv, Bajju, Jukun, Chamba, Ijaw, Itsekiri, or Urhobo, polity, or sets of polities, which can be resurrected if Nigeria is broken-up.

For most of the 19th century, the Yorubas belonged to different sovereign polities, which were hostile or openly at war with each other, in a complex pattern of alliances, which involved diplomatic economic, and military cooperation between some of these polities and neighbouring polities like Bida, Benin, and Igala.

The Sokoto Caliphate, throughout its existence, had as its most serious and persistent enemies, polities made up largely of populations and rulers who were Hausa and Fulani, like Kebbi, Katsina (Maradi), Gobir (Tsibiri) and Ningi. Within the emirates of the Caliphate itself, devastating civil wars, for example, in Bauchi in 1881; in Bida in 1881-82, in Kano in 1893-95 and in Muri throughout most of the 1890s, did not pitch one ethnic group against another, but represented political conflicts within the same ethnic group or groups.

But not only were ethnic groups **not** the building block of Nigeria, which can be separated when the cement and plaster nationally binding us is removed; but even religion did not produce monolithic political entities in pre-colonial Nigeria.

The historic significance of the Sokoto Caliphate, should not obscure the fact, that that polity was only one out of over a dozen sovereign Muslim polities in the 19th century. For not only were there Kebbi, Gobir, Katsina, (Maradi) Abuja and Ningi; there was Borno under the Kanemi Sheikhs and Rabeh. There were also the principality of Balde under Hayatu b. Sa'id, and its offshoot the Immate of Burmi, under Mallam Jibrilla. Not only were these three other states in conflict with the rulers of the Sokoto Caliphate, but any reading of the correspondence of the emirs and caliphs of the Sokoto polity, in the late 19th century, shows that their fear of Rabeh, of Hayatu, and Mallam Jibrilla was stronger than their fear of the *nasara*. Beyond the sahel, and savannah, sovereign Muslim polities also existed right down to the coast, in the form of the kingdom of Eko (Lagos), and the city-states of Ibadan, and other successor state of the Alafinate of Oyo. The rulers there, and most of the citizens were Muslim or identified themselves as Muslims, whatever other ritual practices they carried out. Among the Ekiti village confederations and in parts of the area occupied by northern Edo-speaking people, small Muslim polities also existed.

Therefore, far from there existing a single muslim political community in Nigeria before the colonial conquest, there were over one dozen Muslim polities that existed, and were often more bitterly hostile to one another than

they were to the non-Muslim polities, or to the *nasara*. To believe that a single Muslim polity can be resurrected, when Nigeria is broken-up, or turned into a confederation is a delusion.

Certainly, Islamic beliefs and practices have played and continues to play an important role in determining the basis of political conduct in many parts of this country. But these beliefs and practices were never uniform, homogenous or monolithic. In spite of their common basis and roots, they reflected the diversity of the traditions, culture, historical experience, location and immediate circumstances of the various communities.

Therefore, the British colony of Nigeria was not an amalgam of Muslim, Christian and Animist, ethnic and religious blocks, which can be separated and set up as new states once the country is broken-up. No amount of "ethnic cleansing" or "religious cleansing", no matter how brutal, can bring about this separation, because the country has not been constituted by ethnic and religious blocs. All this will bring about is mutual genocide, or collective suicide; in whatever way one wants to view it.

### **Viability**

In fact one of the most powerful impression one gets from the internal, primary, source material of Nigerian history in the 18th and 19th centuries is that the impact of intensive migration; extensive cultural, religious and economic intermashing, and of external trade, made the existing polities unviable at an increasingly rapid rate during these centuries. The search for the bases of new polities to replace the existing ones seemed to have pre-occupied the Aro merchants and Nri priests as much as it did the Kano and Borno merchants and intelligentsia. The relationship between the leaders of the Tiv *tar*, the Wukari aristocracy, and Hausa traders, went far beyond mutual exchanges, into the issue of finding a new bases for political communities, to take into account the new economic and demographic and cultural realities in the Middle Benue Basin in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The reality we have to face up to was that, the British conquered us not because they had the maxim-gun, and we did not, but because the kingdoms, chiefdoms, city-states and village-confederations were weakening due to, primarily, internal factors and limitations. Slavery and the slave trade; intensely particularistic communal and feudal autochtony; and parasitical mercantilism, were some of these factors.

It is not insignificant that of all the polities of Africa in the late nineteenth century it was only Ethiopia which successfully defeated a European invasion and remained independent. The factors behind this were complex and not yet very clear. But one thing that stands was that while its rulers taxed the slave trade passing through their territory, they did not allow

slavery within their domain, in any significant way.

Menelik, and the other Ethiopian rulers around him, mobilised their country's ancient tradition of independent African Christianity to defeat a European army decisively enough to save their country from colonisation. The example of Ethiopia calls into question the basis of the fairy tales about our defeat been due to superior military technology. It shows the greater significance of internal factors; particularly the capacity to arouse the patriotic capacity of the citizens of a polity for ensuring its survival and self-determination.

The Ethiopian example also challenges the simplistic identification of Christianity in 19th century Africa with imperialist penetration, invasion and conquest. The Ethiopians leaders who had a Christian state when the British were worshipping big stones, and the Italians were worshipping the statutes of their dead rulers; drew on the patriotism of their Christian, Muslim and Animist citizens to defeat the Italians at Adowa. The historical reality was that before Christianity had reached most of Europe, they had as a christian states in the sixth century A.D., provided a sanctuary for a section the early Muslim community who had left Arabia due to persecution. The political culture and practices which led to this were of course part of the intense engagement of the rulers of Ethiopia in the politics of ancient Arabia. But, they may also explain why the European powers were not able to use the large Muslim population of Ethiopia against the Christian Shoan aristocracy, when that aristocracy rallied around Menelik to save the polity from European colonisation.

The main point here is that the relative ease with which the pre- colonial polities of Nigeria were conquered by the British was not primarily due to the maxim-gun. These polities, when faced with European penetration, invasion and conquest suffered from fatal internal weaknesses which made the task for imperialism relatively easy. In fact, the evidence is that they were largely, and increasingly, unviable, and whether the British had invaded or not, they were likely to be replaced.

To assume that dismembering Nigeria, or turning it into a confederation or a commonwealth of independent states, by resurrecting some of these polities, with some adaptations, will produce viable political entities capable of exercising even a measure of sovereignty in the 21st century, is just an illusion, and a dangerous illusion!

### **Independence.**

In fact, the actual way the movement for Nigerian independence emerged, took-off, and attained sovereign nationhood for this country, shows that the old bonds of political community had been superseded and European

colonialism and the resistance to it had produced stronger and more viable bonds.

The initial thrust of the movement was pan-Negro, pan-Islamic and pan-African. These dimensions have remained important up to today. But the actual political struggle was waged by movements, parties and organisations organised on a West African and a Nigerian basis, namely the Congress of British West Africa, the West African Students Union (WASU), the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), the Nigerian Trade Union Congress, the Nigerian Students Union and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). The regional political parties and the leaderships of the Action Group and the NPC emerged, with a lot of British inducement, only after the struggle for independence has been won, in order to contain and counter its strong nationalist, anti-imperialist and pan-African thrust.

The early NCNC under the leadership of Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Sa'ad Zungur, Michael Imoudu, Raji Abdallah, and others had, taking off with the powerful 1945 General Strike, covered the whole country and shaken the British, The Zikist press organs, significantly the *West African Pilot* and the NCNC's radical offshoots like the NEPA, the NEPU and the Zikist Movement were arousing millions of ordinary Nigerian youth to demand for an independent, sovereign and united Nigeria. Far from Zik, Awo and the Sardauna being the three leaders of the three regional current of the nationalist movements, Awo and Sardauna actually became politically important as part of a regionalist counter-reaction against what Zik had stood for, for over fifteen years before their emergence. Equating the role of the early Zik, with that of Awolowo and Sardauna, is just part of the fairy tale intended to make it appear that Nigerian independence was won by regional and tribal parties and leaders; when in fact these elements came up after the independence had been won in principle. This is not to desecrate the role of these undoubted giants of Nigerian political history, particularly in these days when so many midgets are being encouraged to use the billions they have stolen to pose as giants and to debase civilian democratic politics in this country. The historical fact, however, remains that tribal organisations regional parties and religious movements did not win independence for this country. Our independence was won by *Nigerian* movements and organisations, which were part and parcel of a broad West African, and pan-African movement for independence; which were also a part of a world wide struggle of the colonised and oppressed peoples for liberation.

In Nigeria the struggle for independence was not conducted by Efiks, Nupes, Yorubas, Hausa's, Idomas, Angas or Ogonis, but by Nigerians who were also Efiks, Nupes Yoruba, Hausas, Idomas, Angas, Ogonis, etc. etc. With the British conquest the hitherto sovereign territorial rights of the

citizenry and governments of the pre-colonial polities of Nigeria were revoked. There was no longer Urhoboland, the *Kasar Kebbi*, Tivland, Oyoland, or Jukunland, or Katafland, or the *dar-al-Islam* of Sokoto or Borno. These ceased to exist and were replaced by the British colonial territory of the colony and protectorate of Southern and Northern Nigeria, which was inhabited not by citizens of sovereign polities by colonial subjects of the British. It was the successful waging of the struggle for independence which restored to us our status of citizens and our right to our land and natural resources. But what was restored was ethically, politically and legally Nigerian citizenship and the Nigerian territory not the citizenship and territory of some pre-colonial polity which had been destroyed by the fact of the colonial conquest. What came into existence on 1st October 1960 was not Efikland, or Tivland or Kasar Yawuri or Kasar Zazzau or Katafland, or the *dar-al-Islam* but the territory of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, rights over which are, rightly, vested by the Land Use Act, in the people of Nigeria. But of course the historic association of the various nationalities with the territory they lived on before the colonial conquest has to be recognised; and the federal structure and the local government system provide a framework for democratically, and justly, ensuring this recognition. But this recognition should not in any way be construed to mean that 1st October, 1960 took us back to 31st December 1899!

### **Conclusion**

We need therefore to go beyond these, and other such, fairy tales, and come to terms with the complex reality of our historical experience, if we are to survive and influence our destiny. Far from trying to obscure and deny our history, by pretending that the tumultuous developments of the 19th and the 20th centuries never happened, we have to face up to them, and recognise what they mean about what we have come to be; and how this makes certain options imperative, and others just suicidal.

The termination of military rule in January 1993 should provide an opportunity for us to attempt a thorough review of our political experiences; build genuinely democratic political parties rooted in this political experience and forge ahead with the people of the rest of Africa towards West African and African integration at the political, economic and military levels. Our historical experience is that it was as a part, and parcel, of the West African and African movement for independence that we regained our sovereignty, the right to be citizens and the rights over our territory and its resources. It is only by deepening our absorption within this pan-African movement that we can ensure our individual and collective survival in the 21st century.