

NIGERIAN UNITY AND NIGERIAN HISTORY:  
THE BASIS OF OUR SELF-DETERMINATION AND  
OUR SURVIVAL

By

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Zaria.

The Sixth Bala Mohammed Memorial Lecture, Conference  
Hall, Shukura Hotel, Sokoto, Friday, 10th July, 1992.



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The subject of this lecture is simple and straight forward. It is, Nigerian Unity and Nigerian History: The Basis of our Self-Determination and our Survival. It deals with matters and issues which can only be faced squarely and fruitfully, if they are examined together, in substance, and in their motion. Nigerian unity, which is the core of the subject of this lecture, is a product of Nigerian history, which is its inseparable framework. This history, which came to produce the sovereign multi-national state known as Nigeria from 1st October, 1960, has always significantly involved contests over the issue of self-determination, at various levels, and in various forms, before colonialism, under colonialism and after colonialism. This self-determination, as an ideal, and as a reality, has always been crucial to our capacity for survival and progress, over the centuries, and up to today. So, all aspects of the subject to this lecture are inseparable. Nigerian unity is inseparable from Nigerian history.

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Any deliberations over Nigerian unity outside the context of Nigerian history, in its substance and in its motion, are superficial and sterile. Nigerian history is also inseparable from the issue of self-determination, because the struggle for and the exercise of self-determination have for centuries constituted so much of its content, and have shaped its form. The issue of self-determination itself is inseparable from that of survival because the exercise of self-determination has always been a crucial element in the capacity of any people to ensure its survival.

#### BALA AND NIGERIAN UNITY

I believe that the person, in the honour of whose memory this lecture is being delivered, here today, whose example it is intended to cherish, would approve of this subject and the approach to it. If he had been alive and I had consulted him, he would have written, or phoned, and, in his inimitable and engaging style, would say, in Hausa: Ka ragargaza su! Wayar da kan jama'a! [Demolish their positions! Enlighten the people!] This person was, of course, our brother, comrade and friend, Dr. Bala Mohammed who was assassinated exactly eleven years ago, on another Friday, 10th July, 1981. He was assassinated because he was a committed Nigerian patriot; a deeply progressive intellectual; and an articulate and combative militant



of the People's Redemption Party, who was playing a key role in seeing to the principled implementation of some of the party's most important programmes of mass political education, land reform, and the forging of Nigerian unity on a progressive political platform, by its Kaduna and Kano State Governments. The issue of Nigerian unity is therefore a most appropriate one for this sixth lecture honouring the memory of this martyr, who made the supreme sacrifice eleven years ago, because he stood firmly for the coming together of the Twelve Progressive Governors from all parts of this country, against the divisive politics of the ruling NPN federal regime.

### CONDITIONS

It is necessary to be very clear from the beginning as to the nature of what we are talking about here. Nigerian unity is not an abstract thing existing in the minds of some people. It is not a figment of somebody's imagination. Like the unity of other countries, of other polities, and indeed of all communities at all levels, it is not just made up of legal and constitutional enactments. It is made up of a network of human relationships. These relationships are real. There are ecological relationships, economic relationships, social relationships, cultural relationships, psychological relationships and political relationships.



Right now, these relationships are been strained and battered by the intensity and scale of the decline in the living conditions of almost all the people of Nigeria, except a handful. This devastation of the lives of Nigerians is a direct result of the economic crisis the country fell into from the early eighties and particularly due to the policies of the Structural Adjustment Programme imposed by the present regime, over the last six years.

There is no need for me to go into any details on the current devastation of the living standards of the people of this country and this battering of the network of relationship that constitute the basis of the Nigerian polity. You know, in the physical and psychological sufferings of your daily lives, that bad as things were before, they had worsened this year since Thursday, 5th March 1992, when the government suddenly and drastically devalued the naira by about eighty per cent. The living conditions of all of us have further sunk, at all levels and in all spheres. In the last four months the prices of most foodstuff and other essential consumer items have almost doubled, while the cash income of wage and salary earners has not increased in any way. Even the few farmers who have managed to have foodstuff to sell, at the higher prices, are serving as mere conveyor belts, as they pass the large amounts of naira they collect to buy essential agricultural inputs and consumer items, at much higher prices than before. One of the most cynical lies peddled about by the beneficiaries of SAP is that higher food prices meant higher real income to



the farmers; as if the farmers themselves do not eat, buy salt, soap, clothing, hoes, nails, fertiliser, blankets, drugs and other essentials, at prices often higher than what they get from their crops.

The traders and artisans, in all nooks and corners of Nigeria, are also increasingly impoverished conveyor belts, even when they manage to sell or to get work to do. In most cases they have less and less to sell and less and less to do.

All this is taking place in an economy which six years of SAP has left with fewer and fewer jobs in any productive enterprise.

### T H R E A T S

This explosive inflation, and worsening employment are destroying families and communities and undermining the foundation of the network of human relationships which constitute the concrete reality known as Nigeria. The issue of the survival of most of us, individually and collectively is what we are facing in a stark fashion, unbelievable even a few years ago.

It is not just the farmer in Goronyo, Ondo or Nembe who is facing the issue of individual and collective survival more starkly than before. It is not just the trader or roadside mechanic in Jalingo, Tafawa Balewa, Calabar or Kano who is traumatised by the devastating economic decline of the country. Even the industrialist,



at the core of Nigerian manufacturing industries, that is at Ikeja, increasingly faces the issue of survival. At the 25th Annual General Meeting of the Ikeja branch of the Manufacturers' Association of Nigeria, on Thursday, 2nd July 1992, this is what the captains of what has remained of our industries said:

"With the astronomical interest rate, depreciating naira, capacity under-utilisation, diminishing number of consumers (we have our) hands full coping with the problems of survival".

It is in the context of the harsh reality of these conditions of life, both material and psychological, of the overwhelming majority of our people that we have to place the increasingly vocal calls for the break-up of this country or the initiating of this process of dismemberment by turning our federation into a confederation.

#### THE FORCES

These calls for the break-up of Nigeria, are being made alongside the emergence of political forces, both military and civilian, who are working towards this dismemberment. The broadcast by Major Orkar announcing the abortive coup of April 1990, is only the most serious and dramatic expression of these forces.

Other political forces are raising the issue of the prospects of the break-up of this country as part of the systematic campaign to prevent a hand-over of power to a fully civilian federal government in 1993.



These forces are most likely being encouraged by elements within the present regime. These elements cannot face the prospects of being out of power. They are determined to stay, even if it means fostering a level of national insecurity, through encouraging or allowing, incessant and violent communal strife; which can be used to advocate that a regime under General Babangida, in one form or another, has to continue, in order to "save the country" from disintegration. The violent communal conflict in Kaduna State starting from Zangon Kataf from 15th May 1992 seem to be connected with this desperate political project. If it actually is, then we are likely to see more of this type of violence in the next six months.

The abject failure of the present regime to, bring about the beginning of economic recovery and to demonstrate a sincere commitment to a democratic and stabilising succession, has created a situation in which political forces have emerged who are calling for a national conference to ensure that such succession takes place and also to review the basis of Nigerian unity. These calling for these steps base their position on the right of the nationalities of Nigeria to self-determination. This position which does point towards the possibility of the dismemberment of this country, has been developed in that way in the statement of Alhaji Tanko Yakasai, published in the New Nigerian of Monday, 6th July 1992. Tanko Yakasai has earlier



been involved in the attempts at holding a national conference at which the issue of whether this country should stay as one or be broken-up was clearly one of the items on the agenda.

NO ANSWERS!

There is no doubt whatsoever that the current economic and political conditions in this country threaten the individual and collective survival of all of us. The present military regime has explicitly admitted that it has no idea as to what to do to revive the economy; and implicitly, from its manoeuvres, it has admitted that at the political level its "answer" is to maintain power in the same hands, which means it has no answer to the political crises it embodies and generates. Over the economy, President Babangida said so in his seminal Daily Times interview of May, 1992. He said

"Frankly, I have kept on asking our economists why it is that the economy of this country has not collapsed up till now? Surely, it is not our knowledge, it is not our theories. It is not anything that we have read. I still have not found an answer. The Nigerian economy has defied all economic theories and I think we should be grateful that we have a society such as this."

In a situation such as this when our individual and collective survival as persons, families, communities, nationalities, nations, and as a country, is threatened, the issue of our right to self-determination to ensure our survival naturally comes to the front. As long as



we do not have powerful civilian democratic political parties, and other political organisations of civil society, entrenched and dominant in this country, we shall always wake up in the morning expecting to hear another Orkar who next time may have more devastating impact. In this situation, people will naturally want to exercise their right of self-determination to at least attempt to ensure their security.

But the question we have to face is, in what entity can we exercise this right to self-determination which can ensure our survival in this historical epoch in which we live?

#### HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

This is where we have to locate the issue squarely and concretely in our history. For we know that the struggle for self-determination has been fought for, won and lost, by our ancestors, organised in the independent hunting and gathering bands of the State Age; in the semi-sedentary, farming, fishing and pastoral lineages and class of the early Iron age; in the village communities; village confederations; city-states and feudal kingdoms, and other polities of subsequent historical epochs. These communities and polities have throughout our history fragmented and integrated in the course of the complex patterns taken by various forms of political contests, many



of which involve the issue of self-determination.

But by the end of the second decade of the 20th century all the polities of the area that came to form Nigeria had lost their sovereignty and the exercise of their right to self-determination, because of their subjugation by the British. This subjugation took various forms. In some instances treaty relationships were entered into before the actual conquest. But in all cases the British explicitly and formally succeeded in destroying the sovereignty of these polities, whether they were composed of groupings of sub-nationalities or of separate nationalities. The reality was that our people, lost the exercise of their right to self-determination because they failed due to economic, political, cultural and social factors to organise themselves to defeat British imperialist penetration and invasion. There is no need to shed tears now over this historic failure of our grand-parents and great-grand parents. But that failure to defeat imperialism has meant that the way they had exercised their right to self-determination was clearly profoundly flawed. The British were able to pick them up one-by-one, even in the larger polities like the



Sokoto Caliphate, Borno, Benin, Ibadan and Calabar. This failure meant that with the fact of the British conquest and the establishment over our polities of a British colony and protectorate, our polities, on whatever basis they were organised lost their sovereignty, and our people lost the capacity to exercise their right to self-determination, not because of the maxim-gun, as some people want us to believe, but because of the grave limitations of our economies, societies and political systems, including the way our people exercised their right to self-determination.

With the British conquest, hitherto sovereign territorial rights of the pre-colonial polities and citizenry, over Nembeland, the land of the Oba of Benin, the dar-as-Islam of the Sokoto Caliphate or of Borno; Urhoboland, Tivland, Katafland, Kasar Kebbi or Kasar Yawuri, for example all ceased to exist. What replaced these in law and in reality was the British colonial territory of the Colony and Protectorate of Southern and Northern Nigeria. This territory was not inhabited by citizens of the Kingdom of Eko (Lagos) or of the Mwhvul Chieftdom for example, but by subjects, colonial subjects of the British crown!

### INDEPENDENCE

This situation of the colonial demolishing our rights to our land and our status as citizens was only reversed when our grand parents and parents embarked



alongside others in West Africa, Africa and the rest of the colonised world, in the struggle to regain our rights to self-determination; that is in the struggle for independence. This struggle was embarked upon, not by Ijaws, Urhobos, Hausas, Kanuri's Yorubas, Idomas, Numana's, or Fulanis, but by Nigerians who were also Ijaws, Urhobos, Hausas, etc. The earliest forms of this struggle from the 1920s was even embarked upon on a pan-Negro and pan-Islamic basis, through the inspiration of Garveyist and Mahdist movements. Later on, organisations like the Congress of British West Africa, the West African Students Union (WASU) emerged. But it was the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), the Nigerian Trade Union Congress, the Union of Students, and National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons who organised and led the struggle for independence which regained for us the exercise of our right to self-determination formally enacted in the independence achieved on 1st October 1960.

The facts of our history show that our exercise of our right to self-determination in the sovereign pre-colonial polities led us into the chains of the slave trade and colonial domination and exploitation. We came to even loose the capacity to exercise that right. We only regained it, when we came together as Africans, West Africans, and as Nigerians. The right we have gained to have our own land which we call Nigeria, with a territorial integrity which we can defend and which is recognised in international law, is



a right which was not won by a Hausa struggle for independence, or an Ibibio struggle for independence or even a northern Nigerian or a southern Nigerian; or a muslim or a christian, struggle for independence. It was a right won by a Nigerian struggle for independence which was part and parcel of a West African, African and global struggle by all colonised and oppressed peoples. We ceased to be subjects and became citizens under international law, and regained the exercise of our right to self-determination because colonialism and our response to it produced among us Nigerians who organised and led a struggle which produced Nigeria on 1st October 1960.

This new sovereign polity can certainly be dismembered. And given the determination of Western imperialism to prevent the unity and emancipation of Africa and the restoration of the dignity of black people, powerful forces are already ranged to bring this dismemberment about.

But just as the pre-colonial exercise of our self-determination in separate polities failed to preserve our sovereignty, so it is certain that a reversal to a form of that, which the fragmentation of Nigeria will bring about will leave no room for the fragments to exercise any self-determination.



## CONCLUSION

The flaws and gross structural and operational defects of the economic and political systems we are suffering under are very serious. They certainly have come to threaten our individual and collective survival. But to think that these can be overcome by dismembering the Nigerian polity and replacing it with new polities based on the existing boundaries of our nationalities and sub-nationalities is a dangerous illusion. It is an illusion which fits in perfectly with what the West has in store for Africa and the rest of the Third World.

There are no doubt very articulate and well-connected Nigerians who look forward to ruling over oil-rich chiefdoms built around a few oil wells; or becoming heads of Muslim or Christian theocracies their warlords or gurus, when Nigeria is dismembered. But these people may not even live to attend their first U.N. session as heads of these post-Nigerian sovereign statelets, as the experience of Lebanon, Somalia, Ethiopia and Yugoslavia clearly shows. Moreover these statelets will not be able to exercise any right to self-determination beyond the right to facilitate the plunder of the human and natural resources of the area by Western imperialism.

The reality of our history, of our contemporary conditions, and position in the world, make it very clear that our capacity to exercise our right to self-determination to ensure our survival, progress and dignity, as individuals, as families, as communities, and as nationalities, can only be secured on the broad basis of this sovereign Nigerian polity established on 1st October 1960, or on new polities which have even broader west African and African bases of integration.



NB

The First Bala Mohammed Memorial Lecture was delivered on 10th July 1983 in Kaduna by Mallam Saleh Ladan, National Secretary, Polytechnic Senior Staff Association (POSSAN) on the subject of "The Assassination of Bala Mohammed and the Struggle of Workers and Intellectuals". The second Bala Mohammed Memorial Lecture was delivered 10th July 1985 by Mallam Umaru Aji, founding Director of the Kano State Mass Literacy Agency on the subject of "Mass Literacy Education and National Development." The Third Bala Mohammed Memorial Lecture was delivered on 10th July 1986 by Dr. Yahaya Abdullahi, Chairman, Kaduna State Land Investigation Commission (1979-1980) at Bauchi, on the subject "Political Stability and the Land Question in Nigeria". The Fourth Bala Mohammed Memorial lectures was delivered on 10th July, 1987 by Comrade Pascal Bafyau, General Secretary, Nigerian Union of Railwaymen in Zaria on the subject of "Transportation and Exploitation". The Fifth Bala Mohammed Memorial Lecture was delivered on 10th July 1988 by Mallam Lawan Danbazau, at Kano, on the subject of "The Struggle of the Common People of Nigeria Against Colonialism: 1945-1960".