

Unpopular Essays

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"UNLIKE the others, Asika had a remedial factor. He was the only theoretician in the group! The big drag about Nigerian governments is that they do not see the need to inform as they perform. The function of explanation has never been seen as an obligation".

"HE might not have distinguished himself in the performance front, but he never tired of talking, of explaining. He even tried to explain away his inability to perform. And that is what gave rise to Asika's Theory of Progressive Irrelevance."

to ask whether the implied dissolution of the Ibos as an interest group was fair, especially as no similar efforts were being applied to other ethnic groups.

It would also have been important to probe whether such a move (or plan of action) was realisable. I do not think it was.

But Asika also bothered himself with realisable theories. There was this thing about the right of Nigerian citizens living in the

there is an ecumenical movement for the union of all the churches. Why shouldn't there be a movement for the union of all schools where there are no doctrinal differences?..... The desire for choice which you spoke of is a hang-over from the days of sectarian and government schools, when the government lavished its resources on running one government secondary school here at Umuahia while the missions struggled to run their few show pieces and the rest of the school population were left to the enterprise of private school proprietors. This desire for choice, will, we argue, disappear in time.

Education was one area where Asika's thoughts coincided with the way he carried on. There was a complete take over of formal education by the state.

Asika also showed a keen perception of the nature of such problems and was very ruthless in the implementation of his policy. Officials who did not believe in it were promptly removed.

The issue of press freedom was another area where Asika showed proper perception..... at least at the level of thought:

"In regard to government ownership of the press, I have said that even in the so-called democratic Western world, it is obvious that freedom of the press is the freedom of those who are able to organise, to mobilise the resources necessary to become newspaper publishers. The great majority of the public either cannot own newspapers or cannot have their opinions published in them, or cannot afford to buy newspapers. No one can deny that the same considerations apply here. Therefore, an unbridled application of what we understand as the freedom of the press would mean handing over the development of our processes of opinion formation to a limited group of persons who may have the means and the leisure (but not necessarily, the patriotic commitment) to publish newspapers."

One cannot agree more. We have tried Asika and found him guilty of the worst types of human weaknesses, but his thoughts are not guilty as charged.

THE THING ABOUT UKPABI ASIKA

THE press interview had almost run its course when a saucy reporter decided to carry his youthful humour a little far. The lad wondered aloud why the administrator's stomach had grown fatter than it normally was. Ukpabi Asika, a brief and portly figure sitting relaxed in front of the news men he had just spent an hour drilling, remained silent on an embarrassing moment. He pulled hard on his cigarette before grunting an answer into the microphone. "Strains of office!" he said.

On a more serious note, Ukpabi Asika's term of office as administrator of the East Central State was a strain. Never in the history of this country had a regional governor been so thoroughly disliked by the people he administered.

And most of the allegations levelled against him are being substantiated on a daily basis by the findings of commissions of enquiry set up to probe the style and content of his rule. Like his colleagues in positions of authority, Asika has been repeatedly found guilty of corruption and irresponsible conduct.

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THE THEORY OF PROGRESSIVE IRRELEVANCE

And that is what gave rise to Asika's Theory of Progressive Irrelevance. It was supposed to be an

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affirmation of unquantifiable success, a useful abstraction.

"There will be time enough to record the more mundane achievements of my government in the areas of physical rehabilitation, reconstruction, governmental organisation and performance, progressive legislations and so on," the administrator once explained. "But what I consider to be my 'concret achievement' is the fact that individual Nigerians of Ibo origin are now able to exercise and enjoy their rights as citizens without reference to me, in spite of me, rather

than because of me — a phenomenon which I have once described as 'my progressive irrelevance to the reintegration process'.

This I consider to be my greatest achievement in public life."

As a foundation to his theory of progressive irrelevance, Asika had first of all insisted, "I have always made it clear that I have never pretended to the non-descript

position of 'the leader of the Ibos'. To my mind, leadership of ethnic groups, in the manner it is traditionally understood in this country was something to be meticulously avoided especially in our post-war situation.

"As I understood the problem, the Ibos were not sheep to be led to pasture. The problem was to ensure that they found their feet once more as citizens along with the rest of the population. The problem was to de-escalate rather than otherwise, to reintegrate these Nigerians into the national style

and psychology as individual citizens rather than as a group. To direct and orient them to national purposes, institutions and leaders in such a way that their national identification would not depend on the mediation of the 'leader of the Ibos'."

Asika's thought on rehabilitating the Ibos was never contested, never discussed. But this non-debate was certainly, not an indication of poor quality of thought (a lot more trivial things are daily being discussed especially where religion has been indicated). Rather, it served as a pointer to a serious short-coming of the intelligentsia in Nigeria. Their impatience with ideas.

The Theory of Pro-

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gressive Irrelevance raised so many questions, the debate on which should have provided good copy for newspapers. For example, for people who are interested in ethnic politics, it would have been useful

communities, the right to send our children to Anglican, Catholic or Methodist schools.

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