

WHEN I compared Muhammadu Buhari and Donald Trump as political leaders last week, it was not my first time of comparing Nigerian and American political affairs in this column. For instance, in a series last year, I had compared the electioneering campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Trump with that of our own Buhari and Jonathan in 2015. Before then and over the years, I had written columns devoted to this same habit of occasionally comparing politicians and political affairs of America with their counterparts in Nigeria. In all these cases, I did not in the least think that what I was doing could be likened to comparing Doncaster Rovers, the current leaders of the English Third Division or League with Chelsea Football Club, the current leaders of the Premiership League. Rather than this, I thought of my comparison of the Nigerian president with his American counterpart in the framework of what happens in the English F.A. Cup competition. What does this mean?

Well, as the aficionados of English professional soccer know, all the teams in all the leagues of English soccer have a right to compete for the F.A. Cup. Indeed sometimes, teams from the lower divisions or leagues not only get to the semifinals and finals of the F.A. Cup competition, they actually win the coveted trophy! In other words, as it obtains in the all-comers' F.A. Cup jamboree, my comparison of politics in Nigeria and the U.S. in this column has always been based on the strong conviction that all the countries of the world have a right to aspire to the best that our common earth can give to its diverse nations and regions without regard to how rich and "developed" a country is or is not. This in effect means that just as we can and should compare Nigeria with the United States, so should we compare Nigeria with Botswana, a country which, by the way, has a higher life expectancy at birth statistic than Nigeria. As Chinua Achebe famously put it in the words of the epigraph to this piece, "let the eagle eat and let the kite eat; whoever says the other should not eat, may its beak break!"

Fundamentally then, at the bottom of all the comparisons I have made in this column between Nigeria and America is a humanistic rationale whose assumption is that all human beings and the nations into which they are born and/or assert their collective belonging and identity are equal. In a two-part series that begins this week and comes to an end next week, I wish to reflect on the ethical, ideological and political dimensions of this rationale which, against all the circumstantial evidence against its claim, vigorously declares that all the nations, more precisely, *all the peoples* of our planetary community are irreducibly equal. But having made this categorical assertion, there is a lot left to be said.

If it is the case that Nigerians think a lot about America and all the time make comparisons between the affairs of that country and our own, Najja pundits in general do not know - or talk much about - the three ideological, political and discursive camps into which their attitudes and ideas about America and Americans are based. What are these three discursive and ideological camps?

First, there is the leftist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist and anti-racist camp. To those who, like this columnist, belong to this camp, it is above everything else defined by is a more or less permanent watchfulness over the influence of America in the world. Adherents of this camp are especially watchful over how America's great influence in Nigeria's influence and the West Africa sub-region can be used to consolidate American economic, military and political interests throughout the African continent. We shall

In defence - and clarification - of comparing Nigeria with the United States (1)

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Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*



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• "Let the eagle eat and let the kite eat; whoever says the other should not eat, may its beak break!"

come back to this group or camp later in the discussion since, as a matter of fact, it is the group to which this writer belongs, the group whose central ideological and philosophical ideas have shaped most of my activities and moral and emotional investments throughout my intellectual and political adulthood.

We can only very briefly or succinctly deal with the two other camps or groups since, though distinct, they are rather like two sides of the same coin. On one side of this "coin" is what I would describe as the mainstream of heavily pro-American, free-market politicians and pundits in our political affairs. To the thousands of members of this group, America is the ideal and idealized vision of where the future of the world lies, together with Nigeria's prospects in that world. The most effective expression of the sheer political and ideological influence of this camp may be gauged from the fact that from 1999 to date, all the constitutions and proposed constitutional amendments in our country have been based on the American institutions, most especially the American presidential system. There are occasional calls for us to go back to the parliamentary or "Westminster model" of governance, but such calls are routinely ignored by the mainstream of our political elites.

I wish I didn't have to say this, but there is no way of avoiding it: this ideologically and politically dominant group of Nigerians are extremely and opportunistically slavish in their imitation and appropriation of the institutions and val-

ues of American presidentialism. Apart from the questionable political salience of the things they so much like to imitate and appropriate from the American system, there is also the fact that running our political order like the American order is far too costly for a developing nation like Nigeria. Waste and squandering in Nigerian political affairs are in the main due to corruption, but part of it comes from the belief of our rulers that our president and state governors should have all the material trappings of power, prestige and authority that their American counterparts have. A pox on all these "follow-follow", "Americana" Nigerian political elites!

We come now to the third group which, as I have earlier observed, is the other side of the coin of sedulous popular and elite love for and imitation of all things American. This is the ordinary woman's and man's "Americana", one in which the dream, the lifelong aspiration is to go to America, to live there permanently if possible, to go on a long visit at the very least. In this aspiration, this sublime yearning, most Nigerians are like virtually all the ordinary citizens of all the nations of the world: everyone wants to go to America, everyone wants to see Disneyland and the Statue of Liberty in the New York harbor. It so happens that though this "Americana" yearning is mostly a lower middle class phenomenon, it in fact pervades all the rungs of the social ladder. You can find it among lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers, accountants and

bank managers as much as you can also find it among mechanics, tailors, barbers, and shoemakers. And even among fraudsters, crooks and "419ers". For those who have not read it, I strongly recommend Chimamanda Adichie's brilliant novel, *Americanah*, in which this craving for all things American, this drive to go to America by any and all means, is the driving engine of plot structure and character development in the narrative.

Let me repeat it: I place myself as a columnist and public intellectual among the first of the three groups I have been profiling in this discussion, this being the camp of left-wing anti-imperialists, anti-capitalists and anti-racists. Without going too much into details of personal biography, I should perhaps reveal here that it was in America itself that, as a graduate student in the early 1970s, I first entered the ranks of this camp - on a lifelong basis. This fact is worthy of emphasis because most Nigerian leftists and socialists don't seem to recognize and acknowledge the historic fact that many of us were in fact "converted" to socialism and anti-imperialism in the United States itself. Even far more portentous is the fact that a great number of socialists and anti-imperialists in Nigeria do not know, or make very little of the fact that there are class struggles in the United States, that there are, indeed, strong, sophisticated and determined movements of anti-imperialists, anti-capitalists and anti-racists in America. It is one thing to doubt whether this camp will ever come to power in America or even come to a

position where its ideas and perspectives will exercise significant or even decisive influence; but it is another thing entirely to ignore the fact that long before anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism arrived in our region of the world, there had been several generations of this ideological and intellectual formation in the political and economic history of the United States. Of course, the home-grown movement the country itself is by far more rooted, more promising than what any other traditions of socialism and anti-imperialism can offer us, but this does not mean that we should adopt a philistine slogan - as many Nigerian comrades do - that no good can come out of "the belly of the beast".

If the readers of this piece did not notice that in the sentence in the paragraph preceding this one where the word "converted" is bracketed wherein I stated that it was in the United States that I was first converted to socialism, let me now draw attention to this fact. Why bracket the word, "converted" in that sentence? Well, firstly because I think we should leave the work of "conversion" to the evangelical proselytizers - there is simply too much "conversion" going on in our country right now, without the slightest sign that we are becoming a more humane and godly nation. More significantly, I wish to take "conversion" out of the discourse here because that was not what happened when, at about the age of 24, I became, then and forever, a leftist, a socialist humanist. And neither is it what I am trying to do in this piece in focusing on the younger generation. In other words, I seek not to convert but to persuade, not to preach but to argue rationally and methodically. My adherence to socialism is not based on allegiance to an abstract principle or dogma. Yes, I am proudly and assertively a socialist, making this declaration at a time, a period when it has gone out of fashion to say that one is a socialist, especially in Nigeria. But fundamentally, my allegiance is to the interests, the betterment of human beings, especially hundreds of millions who are needlessly made to suffer because political and social elites run the affairs of this nation and this world in their own selfish and corrupt interests.

Martin Luther King, one of the greatest anti-imperialists and anti-racists of recent American and global history did not seek to make any conversions in his extraordinarily eloquent speeches and writings, even though he was a man of the cloth. Betsy Sanders, the vastly popular and openly leftist candidate in the last U.S. presidential elections did not "preach"; he sought to persuade, to convince the poor and disadvantaged tens of millions in America to rise up and act in their own interest. I am persuaded by the examples of these two figures - among dozens of other figures that I could invoke - that comparing America with Nigeria and any other country in Africa and the world is not only helpful but necessary. In next week's concluding essay in the series begun with this piece, in order to draw attention to certain unknown or forgotten aspects of the crises of the reproduction of social and cultural capital in our world, I will focus specifically on a comparison between Nigeria and the United States in the field of the tertiary educational system that is in place in each respective country. As we shall see, quite justifiably, American higher education is celebrated as one of the most developed in the world. But that is not the whole picture; in the United States, there are contradictions of extremely unjust, mediocre and irrelevant education as we find in Nigerian tertiary education. Doncaster Rovers is, or should be right there with Chelsea Football Club.

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In defence - and clarification - of comparing Nigeria with the United States (2)

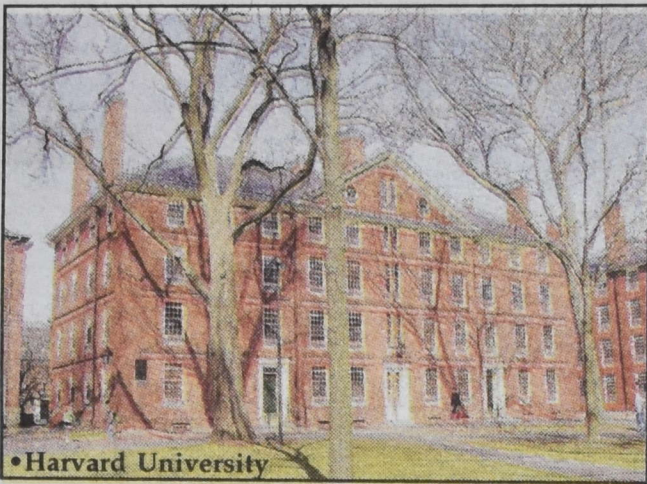
Let the eagle perch and let the kite perch; whoever says the other should not perch, may its beak break!

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

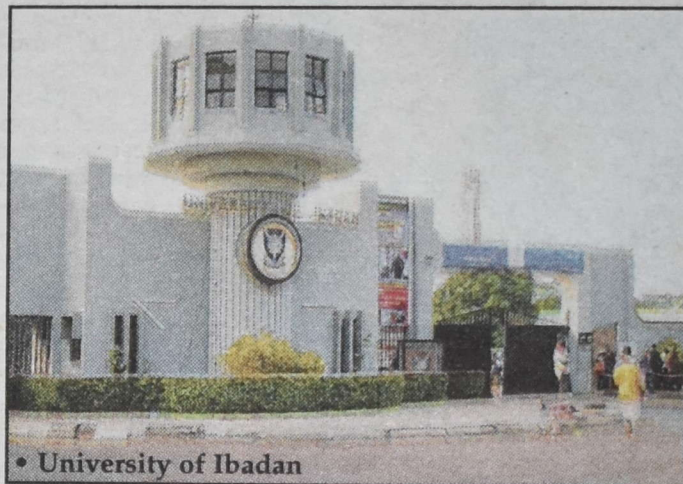


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• Harvard University



• University of Ibadan

• "Let the eagle perch and let the kite perch; whichever says the other should not perch, may its beak break!"

reflect on exactly what I mean - and do not mean - by the phrase, the term "higher learning". In essence, it is not the *certificatethat* you are given with the successful completion of your studies. Neither is it the elaborate ceremonies arranged to formally mark that act of certification. I make these observations because, rather intriguingly, Nigerians and Americans love certification and graduation or "commencement" ceremonies endlessly, perhaps more than any other nations in the world. I swear that in the last three and half decades when I have been going back and forth between Nigeria and the US, nothing else has struck me as so similar, so identical in the folkways of both countries than this love of certification and graduation ceremonies! But anyone who has ever had anything to do with teaching and mentoring students in institutions of higher learning knows that the "real thing" lies elsewhere and not in mere certification, not in festive ceremonies in which political, economic and social dignitaries converge with the graduating students and their families in rituals that are so surreal, so spectacular that they often seem to be taking place in film, in a Hollywood high melodrama!

I do not wish to argue that higher learning does not take place, or cannot take place side by side with certification and the surreal ceremonies of "commencement" or graduation. My point is that higher learning, when it is actually taking place, when it is protected and assured by vast financial and infrastructural investments and the dedicated work of teachers and mentors, higher learning is one of the greatest means of the reproduction of intellectual and cultural capital from generation to generation. Let me state this in as simple and uncomplicated a

manner as possible: in and through higher learning, the high-level mental and professional skills and capacities that every single society in contemporary global civilization needs to survive are safeguarded from deterioration and attrition. And there is also this important thing about higher learning, distinct from though related to the needs of reproduction of intellectual and cultural capital: it develops and nurtures critical thinking as an inestimable end in itself. As a teacher in institutions of higher learning all my adult life, I testify that this is perhaps the greatest professional satisfaction that one gets as a mentor: young, fledgling students take up hints and suggestions that you give them; and they take these hints and suggestions much farther than you had yourself thought...

Let us stay with the issue of the social reproduction of intellectual and cultural capital. Perhaps after my coming retirement, in a memoir about my experience as a teacher, I shall reflect on the finer points of the cultivation of critical thinking through higher learning. For now, and in the context of the present discussion, my focus is on how certification and the ceremonialization of being or becoming certified as graduates have brought unprecedented crises to higher learning in Nigeria and America. The crises have different expressions and consequences in each of the two countries, but so also do they have surprising similarities. In what follows, I will first deal with the similarities before concluding the discussion with reflections on the huge and instructive differences.

In America, it is called the "corporatization" of the university. Simply stated, this means, as the term implies, that all universities in America, public and private, are

more and more run exactly like business corporations are run. The fees are getting astronomical, causing students from poor backgrounds to get into huge debts in order to get university education; administrators are getting much higher salaries and emoluments and are becoming more influential, more decisive than academics in running the affairs of colleges and universities; and students and their parents are behaving like *consumers* who must get their money's worth in their dealings with their teachers and professors. In Nigeria, in slightly different circumstances, the same basic processes are taking place in our tertiary educational institutions. As federal and state funding for public universities and polytechnics get into a freefall with no bottom in sight, private universities that charge astronomical fees are increasing exponentially, to the point where they now vastly outnumber the state-financed public universities. As a consequence of these developments in higher education in Nigeria and America, university education is more and more tied to certification as the visible, tangible index of the exchange value of what has been learnt in the marketplace of economic and commercial transactions. To emphasize my sense of how very similar these developments are in Nigeria and America, let me reveal here how much I have been struck with how greatly diplomas or certificates - the document, the paper - are cherished in the two countries. It is as if both what you now "know" as a graduate, what you can provide potential employers and the world as the end product of your university education is somehow fetishized in your certificate.

There are many books, monographs and documentary films on the current dire consequences and

equally troubling future prospects of these developments in American higher education. Two of my personal favorites in the vast body of print, electronic and digital materials on the subject are the book, *The University in Ruin*, by the late Bill Readings and the stunning documentary, "Ivory Tower" by Andrew Rossi. There are tens of scholarly articles and dozens of journalistic writings on the Nigerian version of the same crisis in our educational system, but we have nothing approaching the seriousness and the concern with which the Americans are engaging the crises in their own tertiary educational system. This, for me, is symptomatic of the chasm that separates how the two countries, especially scions of their respective national intelligentsia, are approaching crises that have similar roots in the capitalist organization of higher learning on a global scale in the new millennium.

I could write a whole monograph, or even a book-length study on these differences between how the Americans are dealing with their own crises of higher education and how we in Nigeria are barely doing anything significant about it. One main and quite telling difference is that the American educational, economic and social elites are confronting the crises head on, with a view to saving what they can from the seemingly unstoppable march of "corporatization". Mighty struggles are being waged against the astronomical rises in fees, and against the takeover of the running of the universities by administrators whose first, second and third loyalty is to the profit margin and the satisfaction of students and their parents as "consumers". In all of these instances, you get a distinct feeling that the liberal and progressive elite in America knows, remembers and wants to preserve and even expand what was and is good in their country's system of higher learning. By contrast, this element seems to be completely missing in Nigeria. I have said that when Dr. Ogunbiyi and I went to NYU for graduate studies in the early 1970s, we had the solid foundation of the education we had received at UI as a bulwark for the challenges we faced in America. What are we, the educational elites in Nigeria, doing to salvage and reproduce what remains of that solid foundation for higher education? With the exception of small pockets of concern and protest by an organization like ASUU and a stellar educationist like Pai Obanya, there is deafening silence where there should be loud and unrelenting outcry over the slow death, the withering away of higher learning in our country.

Above all else is the bankruptcy and hypocrisy of our economic elites. They are forever complaining that mere and empty certification has replaced true, useful and employable education in our universities. They say for everyone to hear that the graduates being produced in our tertiary educational institutions are so mediocre, so bad that most of them are "unemployable". But they do absolutely nothing to respond to the crisis. In fact, many of them, as chairmen and members of the governing councils of the public universities, participate in the brazen looting of the meager funding provided by the state for the same universities that our economic and political elites lavishly pour scorn upon.

Why are the economic elites, the capitalist class in America deeply concerned about the crises of higher learning in their country while the same class in Nigeria couldn't care less? That is the question, compatriots!

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TWO weeks ago in this column, I wrote the first of the two-part series of which this week's piece is the concluding essay. Last week, the column was devoted to a tribute to my friend, Dr. Yemi Ogunbiyi, for his 70th birthday anniversary. Because a tribute is only really worthwhile when it is made at the appropriate time, last week I had to interrupt this series on comparisons between America and Nigeria. Now in returning to the series after the tribute to Dr. Ogunbiyi, I find it fortuitous that an untold part of my friendship with Yemi provides a very useful point of entry into this second and concluding installment on the series begun two weeks ago. Why is this so?

Well, as I promised in my concluding paragraph in that first essay in this series two weeks ago, my comparison in this concluding piece will shift to the field of higher learning in the tertiary educational system of Nigeria and America respectively. Now it so happens that after our undergraduate education at the University of Ibadan, (UI) Dr. Ogunbiyi and I had our postgraduate education in the US, in New York University (NYU) to be precise. I wish to start my observations and reflections in this piece on insights derived from that experience of Dr. Ogunbiyi and myself in which for us, higher learning in America came after the foundation laid by our education at UI. What exactly do I have in mind in making this observation?

In response to that question, I wish to say, unequivocally, that the foundation of and for higher learning that Yemi and I had received at UI was so solid that it consistently astonished our professors and mentors at NYU. This is not a boast, it is a statement of fact which, by the way, applied to all the graduates of the so-called first-generation universities in Nigeria that went abroad for advanced doctoral and postdoctoral studies, especially in America. Thus, if I speak specifically about the experience of myself and my friend at NYU, it is only because I wish to make use of the unassailable value of personal, biographical experience. This is why I wish to place the highest emphasis possible on the fact that at NYU, our professors were astonished by the fact that, (a) Yemi and I were much better prepared for the challenges and rigor of doctoral studies than most our American course mates that had had their undergraduate education in the US and, (b) by the fact that we finished our studies and got our Ph D's in record time, long before the average time that it takes to do all the necessary course work and write and defend your doctoral dissertation. Again, let me repeat: this experience was not peculiar to Yemi and I; it was common to most of the members of our generational cohort that went to America for higher learning armed with the tremendous advantage provided by the solid foundations of the undergraduate education that we had received at UI. Today, slightly more than a half century later, it saddens me immensely that deep, tectonic crises are rocking the foundations of higher learning in both Nigeria and the US and things are far from what they were then in both Nigerian and American higher education. This is the central issue that I wish to address in this concluding piece to the series begun two weeks ago in this column. What are the manifestations of these crises and how do they differentially but also similarly affect higher education in Nigeria and the US respectively?

At this point in the discussion, permit me to pause briefly to re-