

Less can be more, less can be generative: a counter-memory from nature, mythology, science, technology and art (1)

Esu sleeps in the courtyard, it is too small for him/Esu sleeps in the bedroom; it is still too small for him/Esu sleeps inside the kernel of a palm fruit; now he has space large enough for him to sleep in

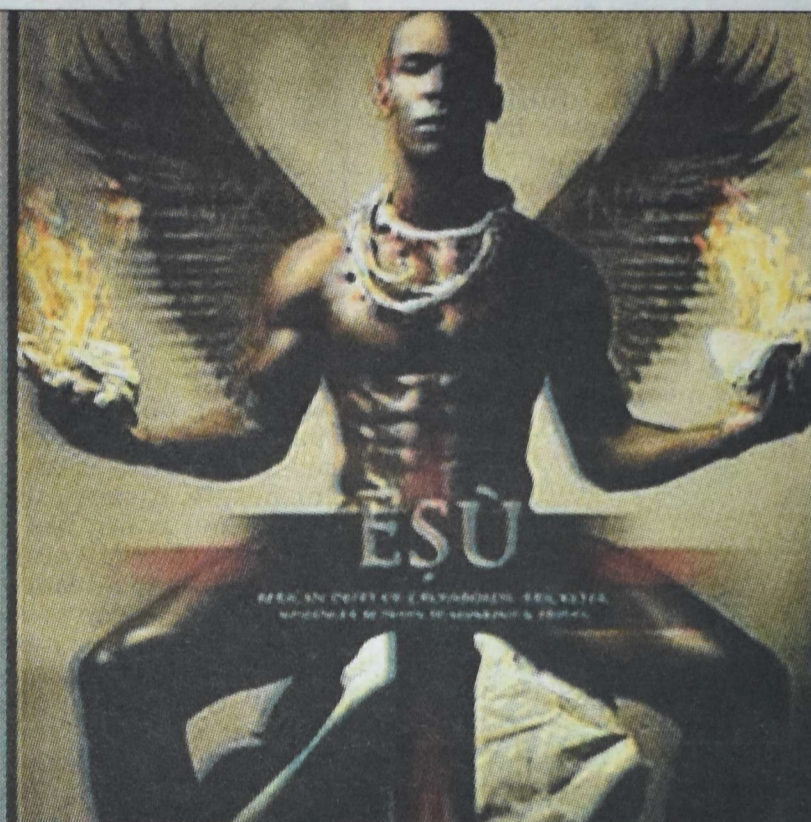
From praise chants to Esu, the trickster god of fate, contradiction and paradox

Less is more
Ludwig Mies van der Rohe



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• Esu, god of fate, contradiction and paradox: he sleeps inside a palm kernel and finds space large enough to sleep!

If, as the well known saying goes, too much of anything is bad, too little of everything is worse. Who prays for less of health, wealth, life, beauty, luck or fortune? Between abundance and scarcity, every woman and man alive in the world will gladly choose abundance. It seems a universal trait, doesn't it, that we all pray for abundance and give thanks for it if it comes our way. Between having one child or two children and having five to eight, most of us would choose the latter, including people who do not have the material means to raise their children in comfort or in adequacy and security of life's many necessities. As a matter of fact, and at least in our society and many other developing nations of the world, the poorer the man or woman, the larger the number of children desired. There is no doubt about it: most people alive now and that have ever lived almost always prefer/preferred abundance to scarcity, more to less.

Postcolonial or neocolonial Nigeria seems to have taken the application or realization of this truism much further than possibly any other society on the planet, with the possible exception of America. Thus, like the Americans, our obsession, our delight in number, size and scale is extreme to the point of being self-defining. The manifestations or expressions of this observation are legion. The previous ruling party, the PDP, used to boast that it was the biggest ruling party in Africa, even if it was also probably the worst and most decadent ruling party in the African continent and possibly in the world. Now, ideologues and opportunistic and sedulous supporters of the new ruling party, the APC, have taken up and appropriated that boastful and empty claim of being the biggest party of all. We have thirty-six states or mini-countries and against the charge by many concerned patriots that this number is too large to be sustained by the pressure of our population size, there are loud and clamant demands for still more states to be created. Too often we read smug, self-satisfied accounts claiming that Nollywood, the national video film industry, now produces more films per annum than any national film industry in the world save Hollywood. But this claim leaves out the fact that we also produce more trashy films than any other country in the world. We have far many more universities now than any other country in the African continent, and yet in the same period that we consummated this "achievement", the ranking of our universities has taken a nose dive not only in the world at large but also among the universities of or in Africa.

Perhaps at this point in the present discussion, dear reader, it is important for me to let it be known that it is not a platitudinous jeremiad about Nigeria's obsession with number and size that I intend in this piece. This obsession is certainly worthy of critique in its own right, most of all in its most debatable expression in the boastful claim that we are "the giant of Africa" simply

because we are the most populous nation in the African continent. But far beyond platitudes, what I have in mind in this piece is a conversation in which size, number and scale might be put into conversation with their opposites - smallness, littleness and even minuteness - so as to show that our national obsession with size is not a "natural" or logical effect of our peculiarity as an African nation but is part of an ideological system that our political and social elites deliberately promote in order to run our society as their fiefdom, their modern day slave plantation or makeshift refugee camp.

There are many discursive steps to take toward a convincing demonstration of the veracity of this claim. The first step is show, in line with the two epigraphs to this essay, that in many aspects of nature, society, mythology, science, technology and art, less often leads or conduces to more; indeed, it is far more generative than gigantic or super scale and size. Moreover, it is precisely because even though it is little known or talked about, this idea that "less is more" or "small is big" pervades so many areas of life and society that I am calling it a "counter-memory" of humankind. The idea is "counter" to the apparently universal belief that abundance and bountifulness are always to be preferred to scarcity and want. Precisely what do I have in mind in this act of reclaiming this counter-memory that we may simply call "less is more"? To answer this question, we must go to our two epigraphs, one at a time.

First of all, I readily admit it. For a long time that lasted over about a decade, although I was greatly fascinated by the paradox, the enigma of the first epigraph to this essay, I did not really understand the profound meaning of the idea of Esu at last finding a space large enough for him to sleep in inside a palm nut kernel when much larger

spaces like the bedroom and even the courtyard had been too "small" for him. This "meaning" is of course the idea of germination in human life in particular and all existence in general: inside the infinitely small space of a kernel or a seed, life can and is often regenerated on an almost limitless scale. Thus, in a literal and rather trivial sense, the space inside a kernel is small; but in a metaphoric and extraordinarily consequential sense, this same space is vast beyond measure.

A similar notion of infinitely small spaces and their inverse vastness is the founding basis of a large sub-discipline of the science of physics, especially so-called "particle" or subatomic physics. The spaces and entities studied and tapped for their powers in this branch of physics are so small, so minute that they cannot only not be seen by the human eye, they can be apprehended and explored only by super-microscopes powered by high-speed electron magnifiers. Moreover, this process has led to what is now known as "nanofabrication", a process that measures and uses possibilities made available by spatial and temporal measurements of one billionth of a second or of a meter. To normal or "ordinary" human sensory and temporal perception, a hundredth of a second or a meter is already mind-boggling. But a billionth? Yes, that is what "nanofabrication" and "nanotechnology" have now made not only possible but a vital part of scientific and technological modernity or even postmodernity. The mapping of the human genome and indeed, cloning and other spectacular forms of gene splicing in use in fields as diverse as agribusiness in the production of super harvests from genetically modified crops; resonant imaging that makes it possible to probe into the innermost recesses of human

organs and tissues; and the digital revolution in the production, storage and reproduction of words, images, texts and sounds endlessly in 21st century Information Technology (IT): all these fields and processes are made possible by "nanofabrication", the ultimate scientific and technological realization of the mythology of Esu's preference for infinitely small spaces that generate bountiful harvests that are not limited by time and space. Germination and regeneration through and by small seeds is for all time and all places, including seemingly desolate regions like arid deserts and frigid arctic zones.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the man from whom comes the second epigraph to this piece, was a world famous architect who was a leader of a so-called "minimalist" movement in modern art and architecture. To the baroque splendors and ornate excesses of feudal and early modern bourgeois architectures, van der Rohe and his followers substituted an austere minimalism that in form, style and function placed emphasis on as little as possible in materials, space and decorations used in the construction of both public buildings and individual dwellings. In modern African drama and literature, the greatest practitioners of minimalism are South African playwrights who were forced by the rigors of apartheid censorship and repression to use as few actors and performers as possible so as to be able to quickly disband and escape when they were raided by the regime's goon squads. What arose from necessity became a great artistic achievement when opponents of the regime in theatre and performance created two- or three-character plays that used techniques of plays-within-the-play and role-switching to create the impression that many characters, many performers were

on the stage when the actual number of the cast was one or two.

One of my personal favorites in the many expressions of this minimalist principle of "less is more" in the domain of philosophy and theory is the idea present in fields of knowledge and ideas as diverse as semiotics, structuralism and poststructuralism that the generation of reference and meaning takes place through a very limited set of rules and procedures whose combinations are however endless. On this account, if you know and can "play" astutely with the few rules and procedures, you can generate reference and meaning endlessly. What is particularly exciting about this "theory" is the contention that though experts may be able to expound on its operations more than laymen and women, by the very structure of our brains and minds as human beings, we are wired to create, change, play with, revise and renew meaning and reference as much as we like or are compelled by circumstances and/or intention. In other words, every woman and man is a potential activator or beneficiary of this principle of "less is more". Halleluia!

It is necessary at this point to say with as much emphasis as possible that these reflections are not limited to and by ultramodern, millennial scientific, technological and artistic developments. Thus, I do declare that the idea that less is more and can be regenerative, that life can be enriched and or renewed by wanting and consuming as little as possible has always been around in nearly all the cultures of the world. Nearly all the great thinkers, visionaries and moral reformers of the world made it a habit, an obligation on themselves and their followers, to want and own as little as possible. And there is a saying, an adage that is found in almost all the folklores of the world that says that the only real and true way to be "rich" is to want, need and own as little as possible. The late Ulli Beier used to say that the real "Babalawos" or "Dibias" of our traditional precolonial societies never made accumulation of wealth their passion or mission in life. Jesus famously asked of all those who wished to follow him and be his disciples to sell off all their belongings and like him, take the vows of poverty.

I am not romanticizing poverty and condemning wealth and abundance as values in and of themselves, compatriots. It is the worship, the idolatry of money and wealth that I identify as an obsession foisted on all in our society by our political, social and religious elites that I condemn and unmask in this piece. More specifically, it is the perpetration and perpetuation of this idolatry of money and wealth through our national obsession with number and size that I explore and condemn. We do not deal in small, modest numbers and scale, compatriots. Looting that is countable in millions and not in billions does not get our attention and concern. With us, wastage and squandermania that do not astonish in their scale do not cause outcry and outrage. In next week's concluding piece in the series, we shall link this obsession to the hegemonic ideology of a demographically and socially tiny elite that sees the country as its fiefdom.

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Less can be more, less can be generative: a counter-memory from nature, mythology, science, technology and art (2)

Oro p'esi je [The answer, the solution, is beggared by the discourse, the story] A Yoruba adage, typically invoked to indicate an epistemological conundrum

SOME aspects of our national obsession with number, size and scale can be engaged by the straightforward argument that since it is well known that a reduction in size and numbers often leads to greater efficiency and savings on costs, it is in our national interest to substantially trim down on the size of many of our institutions and publicly financed utilities and parastatals. Unquestionably, this argument applies to such things as the number or size of governmental cabinets in Nigeria and officeholders on the public payroll, compared to much bigger and more populous countries like India and the United States both of which have much smaller ministerial cabinets than we have. Indeed, in the early, euphoric days of Buhari's presidency when Nigerians and the whole world expected much from Buhari and the APC, this was precisely the advice given to the president by the so-called Transition Committee chaired by Ahmed Joda. Mr. Joda and members of his committee were chosen by Buhari. But as we all know, Buhari completely ignored that recommendation of the Transition Committee. Similarly, the boast that we often hear about Nollywood being a producer of more films than any other country in the world with the exception of America's Hollywood, this boast would be well served by the critical observation that the cultural health of our national film industry would be greatly improved if we produced a lesser number of films of much greater quality than what presently defines the typical Nollywood film at the present time.

But then, what of aspects of our national craze for numbers and size that cannot be queried by considerations of functional efficiency and/or cultural or artistic merit? Churches and mosques are the fastest growing and ever expanding institutions in this country. Indeed, the head of one of our biggest evangelical Christian ministries, Adebayo of the RCCG, has called for Nigeria to be so saturated by and with churches that there will come a time when there will be a church within five minutes' walking distance everywhere in the country. Whatever anyone thinks of this idea, it cannot be interrogated by considerations of cost efficiency. Millions of churches as compared with a few hundred thousand? Who is to tell Adebayo and the fraternity of our warrior evangelists how many churches are needed for the battle with Satan and his devilish hordes? The same limitation applies to the bragging rights that we Nigerians have established about the size of our population throughout our continent and the African diaspora worldwide: these bragging rights cannot be subjected to the scrutiny of efficiency or logical rationality.



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For if you make an exception for the periodic geo-ethnic verbal and political skirmishes that we have on the results of our national censuses, it is a moot point whether Nigeria would be better as a small nation that is no bigger than Gabon or a huge nation that is inching ever closer to the 200 million population mark.

I make these qualifications in this concluding piece to the series that began in this column two weeks ago in order to underscore the crucial fact that my main concern in the series is not really the usual one of the vital need to substantially reduce or even end the waste, the mismanagement and the squandermania that are endemic to governance and public affairs in our country. By this, I do not mean to suggest or imply that this criticism has been so bandied around that it is no longer useful. Far from such a complacent acceptance of things as they are rather than striving for things as they *could* or ought to be, I actually believe that the battle against mismanagement

and squandermania must be continuously and tirelessly fought in our country. Which is why, on the pages of this column, I have seized every chance that comes my way to remind Nigerians of the outrage in a declaration made by Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the former Finance Minister under President Goodluck Jonathan, that she would be satisfied if by the end of her tenure she would have managed to reduce waste and mismanagement in the Nigerian system by as little as 4%. No, no and no, compatriots, the battle for cost effectiveness and functional rationality in the corporate affairs of this country has not ended nor is it about to end soon!

But that is not what is central to my observations and arguments in this series. Nigerians of all socio-economic levels, geo-ethnic identities, ages and religious backgrounds are obsessed with size and number – that is what concerns me in this piece. This takes many forms and expressions: the number of new churches and mosques always and forever springing up; the



Ahmed Joda: He and the Transition Committee he chaired recommended a reduction in the size of the ministerial cabinet; President Buhari rejected the recommendation

number of films churned out by Nollywood every week; the number of new public and private universities coming into existence every year; the number of states and local governments already in existence and those being vigorously and ceaselessly canvassed; the number of totally redundant officeholders paid for and maintained on the public payroll. The list seems endless and sometimes assumes quite bizarre manifestations such as when – for a telling instance – the lanes of drivers and cars on our city streets or country highways suddenly balloon from one or two to half a dozen or more when something has caused a temporary blockage on the street or roadway. What am I saying about this extraordinary Nigerian proclivity or indeed, mania, for number and size? And what is the explanation for why it takes so many diverse forms?

If I told you that I have a completely satisfactory answer to these questions I lie and the truth is not in me, dear compatriots! I think and ask you to think also, dear reader: What is the connection between Adebayo and

his dream of a Nigeria in which there will be a church within five minutes of walking distance everywhere in the land and the uncontrolled and perhaps uncontrollable mushrooming of public and private universities and tertiary educational institutions? And the number of Nollywood films made every month, what relationship, causal or speculative, do they have with the uncountable number of ministers, senior special assistants, personal assistants and administrative aides to be found in every state in the federation? In our country, it is not an exaggeration to say that a new pastor or evangelist hears and answers the "call" every day! What does this have to do with the equally startling fact or statistic that mountains of uncollected garbage appear every day on the streets of most of our cities and towns?

Oro p'esi je: the

answer, the solution, is beggared by the discourse, the story. So goes the epigraph for this week's essay. This would seem to be where we are in the present discussion. Typically, in the epistemological branch of philosophy, when you come across a paradox or a conundrum, the way out is often provided by and through, not a logical answer, but the invocation of another paradox, another conundrum. In the special topic under discussion, this means that we must bring the overwhelming absence of habits and expressions of moderation, modesty and appreciation of smallness in the public affairs of the country into the conversation in order to present our obsession with huge size or large numbers with its reverse image. If this is the case, the question to ask is why Nigerians of all socio-economic groups and identities tend to think and behave on the assumption that moderation, modesty and discrete smallness have no place in our corporate, collective existence as a nation or a society. This is why, in the first essay in this series, I focused

extensively on the argument that less is not only paradoxically more, it actually is a pervasive feature of the state of things in nature, science, technology and art. If I am to be completely open about my intention in this series, I should admit that it is my hope that the readers will be prompted to reflect on aspects of life, nature, society, technology and art they know and are aware of in which the smallest units of measure yield the greatest harvests of pleasure, contentment, security, personal satisfaction or public good.

Why did Buhari reject the recommendation of the Ahmed Joda Transition of a much smaller ministerial cabinet? Why do all lovers, promoters and aficionados of Nollywood continue to argue that the significance of the national video film industry lies in as many trashy films as can be and are made? Why do the evangelical and Pentecostal warriors for Christ believe and act on the assumption that the more churches there are, the more barely trained pastors come forth every day the better? Why does the looting of our national coffers excite the interest and concern of Nigerians only if the numbers run into billions, not (just) millions of naira or even dollars? Compatriots, these questions have no easy, logical answers, especially when set into a relationship with one another. But as soon as you bring moderation, modesty and smallness into the picture, an illuminating clarification appears on the horizons of the mind and the psyche. One small church; one single university; or one Nollywood film: each one can offer more than what a hundred churches, universities or films if the potential that exists in even the tiniest of things is maximized. In other words, this Nigerian obsession for huge sizes and large numbers exist and endure because it keeps our country and its affairs in the present state in which waste, mismanagement and squandermania enrich and benefit the few at the expense of the vast majority of our peoples.

We must continue to invoke principles of cost effectiveness and rational management of resources and capacities in the face of the monumental corruption and squandermania that make life a hell for the majority of Nigerians in the midst of the plenty enjoyed by our political and economic elites. But far beyond this, there is the rediscovery of the counter-memory of how in nature, science, technology and art the smallest and tiniest units of time and space are often used to enrich life for the benefit of all. Start with and *within* yourself, compatriots. Forget the numbers and the sizes that obsess the multitudes; think only of small kernels and seeds that can germinate and multiply, endlessly. Nourish them; protect them; spread them; celebrate them.