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# Tales from our political history

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The emergence of two rival chairs of the Nigerian Governors' Forum (NGF) from the same meeting reminds me of two tragicomical incidents in Nigeria's recent political history. One took place sometime in 1992 and the other in June 1999. I have chosen to reproduce my account of the second incident as I presented it in this column on Thursday, October 5, 1999. Below is a slightly edited version of that report:

The 1999 general election had produced, in one of the states of the South South geopolitical zone, an executive governor that belonged to the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and a House of Assembly that was shared almost equally between the ruling PDP and the All People's Party (APP). The House had 25 members: 13 for PDP and 12 for APP. The expectation was that the PDP would produce the Speaker and, perhaps, also the Deputy Speaker. But this expectation was dashed.

As was the practice, and as was expected in this particular case, the state executive governor proposed candidates for the post of Speaker and Deputy Speaker. The governor did not expect any problem as he had, behind him, the party leadership

in the state, party rules and sanctions, numerical superiority in the House and, above all, state power and power of material endowment, preferment and conferment. The PDP legislators thanked the governor, assuring him of future support. They also congratulated themselves. On the eve of the inauguration of the House, the PDP legislators held a party and prepared for the election, or rather ratification. They went to bed quite happy with themselves. They were hardly worried about the absence of one of their colleagues: perhaps he had other "pressing matters", they concluded.

At about the same time as the 12 of the 13 PDP legislators were going to bed, the 13th was getting up from meditation in another part of the state capital. He had locked himself up in his room for about 10 hours. Now, he was ready to go out and act. It was already late, almost midnight, but the young man knew that this mission was one that could be accomplished under three hours and that if he was successful, it would be a historic political event in the state.

We may now introduce our young man. He was, by Nigerian and African standards, a well educated man. But his knowledge and wisdom were derived not from schools and books alone. He was street wise. Which means that although he could speak English and argue political theory and practice, he could, also, if the need arose, remove his coat, tie and shirt to settle a difficult practical question physically. During General Ibrahim Babangida's Third Republic (1990 – 1993) he was the Deputy Speaker of the State House of Assembly which was controlled by his party, the Social Democratic Party (SDP). He had, in that brief dispensation, showed his skills in the way he dealt with the executive which was controlled by the National Republican Convention (NRC). His party, PDP, owed a lot to him.

During the negotiations, bargaining and horse-trading that characterized General Abdulsalami Abubakar's transition, our young man joined the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and pledged to work hard to see that the party won the legislative and gubernatorial contests in the state. In return, he requested the party to allow him contest one of the two legislative seats reserved for the state capital in the State House of Assembly; and if he won, and his party had a majority in the House, to be returned as Deputy Speaker. Everyone admitted that our subject's request was a modest and humble one: The party leadership accepted. But it was either the party

leadership reneged on its promise or the young man thought there was an agreement where there was none. For, as soon as PDP won the gubernatorial and legislative elections in the state, the party leadership, working closely with the new governor, chose other legislators for the leadership of the House. This unexpected turn of events was the cause of the former Deputy Speaker's meditation.

The young man emerged from his house and headed into the night. Ten minutes later he was in the house of one of the leaders of the opposition All People's Party (APP). He went straight to the point. "Is your party interested in the speakership of the House?", the young man asked the APP leader. The latter was surprised at the question: so he answered the visitor with a question: "How can we be interested in the speakership when your party has a majority in the House?". The visitor was annoyed: "Man, I ask if your party has someone who is capable and qualified to become Speaker of the House of Assembly later this morning?". The host knew the visitor was serious. He answered in the affirmative. "Are you sure all the other APP members will vote for him?", the young man asked. The APP man again replied in the affirmative.

The visitor then announced the strategy. "Let your party nominate and vote for me for the position of Deputy Speaker. Then I vote for your nominee as Speaker. Every other thing should wait till after our election". He went home, and prepared for the crucial meeting of the House of Assembly later that day. To cut a long story short, when the House assembled to elect its presiding officers, the PDP confidently nominated its candidate for speakership. APP nominated its candidate. If the party line was strictly followed PDP's nominee would win by a majority of one. But when it came to the turn of our young man to vote, he did the "Southsouth show". He took deliberately slow steps, walked left, turned right, swung in a circle, and finally, cast his vote for the APP. He, in turn, was voted Deputy Speaker.

The other incident took place sometime in 1992 during the last phase of (military president) General Ibrahim Babagida's tortuous political transition to civil rule, precisely during the presidential primaries in one of the Southeastern states. Now, recall that only two government – created parties were in the political contest; but only one of the parties, two personages and one deity are relevant in this

narrative. The first personage was a presidential aspirant in the party (call him **Mazi Okafor**); the second personage was a freelance local political mobiliser (call him **Mazi Okoye**); and the deity may simply be called **Alusi**. Mazi Okafor was advised to seek and procure Mazi Okoye's mobilisational skills in the primaries he was about to face. Mazi Okafor, accordingly, invited Mazi Okoye for discussion and negotiation.

The two personages were old hands in the game and they were both crooks. So the deal was easily concluded: Mazi Okafor was to deliver a huge sum of money to Mazi Okoye before the primaries. In return Mazi Okoye would ensure, by all means necessary, that not less than 95 percent of the delegates would vote for Mazi Okafor. Since there was nothing like "trust" in this game, the two politicians agreed to seal the deal before **Alusi**, the deity. They went to the shrine. The required oath, as expected, was taken in Igbo.

The simple oath was: "That I, Mazi Okoye, will ensure that our papers (that is ballot papers) are dropped for Mazi Okafor. Should I fail, Alusi should take my life". Now, in Igbo language **akwukwo** which featured in the oath could mean either **leaf** or **paper/book**. Mazi Okoye used this in designing his strategy. He collected the money, took the oath (in Igbo language), gave "peanuts" to the "boys" and kept the bulk of the money for himself. But mobilized no one, not even himself.

On the day of the primaries Mazi Okoye ate a sumptuous breakfast, wore his best chieftaincy attire and proceeded to the voting centre. On the way he plucked a leaf and held it in his left hand. At the voting centre, collected the ballot paper and entered the voting booth. Here he lifted the leaf and whispered: "Mazi Okafor, I am dropping your **akwukwo** for you". He dropped the leaf in the ballot box. Thereafter, he checked the ballot paper, put his mark against the name of Mazi Okafor's opponent, and dropped the paper (another akwukwo) in the ballot box.

Mazi Okoye emerged from the booth, waved to his "boys" and went home. To cut a long story short, Mazi Okafor lost heavily. Everyone, including Mazi Okafor, expected **Alusi** to deal ruthlessly with Mazi Okoye. But the latter was confident that nothing would happen to him – since he did exactly as the oath demanded. That was 21 years ago. Just before I started this article my enquiries revealed that Mazi Okoye

was "alive, hale and hearty." Now, mentally integrate these two stories – the one on speakership election and the one on presidential primaries. The composite story you obtain is a rough picture of what took place recently in the NGF election. A little refinement and re-arrangement will give you a perfect picture. In both narratives, "democracy" won. Didn't it?