

# Plot and plotlessness in the "Buhari script" of politics and history: reflections (1)

LET'S get the formal elements of dramatic theory and cultural criticism out of the way of easy, enthralling comprehension of the reflections and observations in this essay. Only in conventional or "classical" dramas is plot a clearly discernible feature of a play. In more daring or more experimental plays, there are usually no discernible plots, so much so that such plays are said to be *plotless*. Plays with plots are easier to write and understand than plays without plots. That's because plots make it easy for the playwright to divide the action of the drama into acts and scenes whose unfolding or development readers and audiences can easily follow. In contrast, scripts or plays that are plotless pose significant challenges of understanding and emotional connection for readers and audiences because they show no pattern of logic and plausibility to readers, audiences and sometimes even the actors performing the plotless script. All the same, plotless plays have one great philosophical advantage over plays with plots: they seem closer to life as it is lived and experienced by individuals and collectivities. This is because until the day a woman or man dies, the "plot" of his or her experience is known to nobody, least of all to herself or himself.

One day, someone will write a play or a novel about the life and times of Muhammadu Buhari. Or a historical novel. Or a work of biographical non-fiction. In all probability, this will take place after all of us of the present living generation are gone. But it is also possible that this may happen sooner than usual, perhaps a few years from now in the script of a Nollywood film. All the ingredients for such a script are there aplenty: a charismatic professional warrior and politician with acts, declarations and controversies to fill the plot of a play, a novel or a non-fictional work full to the brim; membership of a very small group of men (no women; they are all men) who rose to dominant, hegemonic positions as both military and civilian rulers; dedicated, passionate followers and supporters ready to die for him and equally passionate enemies and opponents who think that his rule now and in the past presented our country with some of its most frightening crises; a personality as inscrutable and enigmatic as it is also as easy to confront and perhaps understand as a book written for children in a kindergarten class. Yes, Muhammadu Buhari is a fascinating subject for a play, a novel, a non-fictional biography. Indeed, already such a work has been written, but since it was written and published before the "second coming" of the president, it leaves out a lot that will undoubtedly great influence a future "Buhari script of history and politics".

In this column this week and next week, I provide an outline of plot and plotlessness in this imagined "Buhari script" of the future. On the basis of the explanation that I have given above on scripts with plots and those without plots, the outline that I provide herein will have a strong plot, together with its constitutive acts and scenes. All the same, I will not entirely leave out plotless forces and tendencies, if only because such aspects seem to constantly emerge from nowhere to complicate the drama of Muhammadu Buhari and Nigeria. Please note that the observations and reflections I provide in this column this week and next week around this "Buhari script" are carefully selected parts or segments of a whole, a totality that is simply impossible to ever effectively cover in any work of drama, fiction, or non-fictional biography. In other words, since both lit-

*History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake*  
Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce, *Ulysses*

*I belong to everybody; I belong to nobody*  
Muhammadu Buhari, upon assuming office as elected president in May 2015



(259)

Talakawa Liberation Herald  
BIODUN JEYIFO



•Buhari, "I belong to everybody and I belong to nobody". Really?

erally and philosophically we can never fully or exhaustively apprehend or represent the fullness and the totality of one life, all one can do is be extremely careful and felicitous in what one selects and/or leaves out in the totality that is life. With this caveat in mind then, here is an outline of the "Buhari script" broken down into its components: one prologue, three acts and one epilogue.

**Prologue:** December 1983 – August 1985: the Rise and Fall of an Enigma

For about twenty months, Buhari is absolutist military dictator unlike no other dictator in Nigeria up to that time and since then, to go by the distinctive acts and expressions of his rule. These include but are not limited to an announced intention to abolish usurious capitalism in Nigeria through the institution of "Islamic banking" principles as the normative center of the financial services industry; rejection of tutelage under the IMF and the World Bank, primarily through a disciplined and rapid repayment of the country's foreign debt; declaration of war against indiscipline and corruption in public life, governmental and non-governmental; Decrees No 2 and 4, unequalled as the most draconian military decrees in the country's legal and political history, one decree dismissing "truth" as a factor in any published account or report of the activities of the regime that shows it in a bad light and the other

decree backdating prosecution and punishment for a crime that was not a crime when it was committed.

There is great stuff for drama and irony here: Buhari is immensely popular; Buhari is immensely unpopular and always. Forever unsmiling in his public appearances, he gives the impression that he does not care whether he is popular and/or unpopular. In all probability, in time his unpopularity would have far overshadowed his popularity; but we will never know for sure because he was deposed before any of his decisive "Buharist" ideas and principles could become dominant or even regulative. Outstanding scandal: the 53 suitcases smuggling embarrassment that involved Buhari's personal ADC and for which no one was punished, disciplined or held accountable.

**Act One: 1985 – 2015:** Decades in the Wilderness and the Origins of the Buhari Myth

Without any precedent before him, Buhari stands as a candidate in nationwide presidential elections three times, losing badly in each of these elections. With each loss, his bitterness increases, his threat of Armageddon escalates. A distinct regional and religious colouration marks this threat, reaching a climax in the infamous "baboon and the dog will be soaked in blood" speech of April 2015. These are dog days for the former military dictator, days in the wilderness in which only his most

ardent supporters and followers remain with him in a political party - the CPC - that was quite easily the most parochial and unimaginative of the country's ruling class political parties. But precisely because of these very factors, Buhari's political profile becomes somewhat legendary, if not mythical: he comes to signify and embody an untested anti-establishment populism, and he stands out as the one military ruler who cut a completely different figure from the seeming normative decadence, emptiness and imposture of the other former military rulers and leaders.

Meanwhile, the enigma in our Prologue continues: Who really is Buhari? Would the country have been in much better circumstances if his military rule had not been cut short by the pro-IMF, pro-World Bank, barawo regime of Babangida and the forgettable reigns of Abacha and Abdulsalami? Have the years and decades mellowed him, or is he still the absolutist hegemon for whom even the truth shall not set his opponents and his critics free?

**Act Two: May 2015 – October 2017** - The Second Coming and the Destruction of a Myth

Buhari returns to power as civilian ruler on the wave of a massive popularity that seems to be built on his almost mythical renown for incorruptibility, steadfastness and willfulness. On top of these qualities, his popularity becomes solidified nationwide, far beyond his enduring, restrictive location in parochialism and regionalism. His circle of ardent admirers, supporters and followers grows immensely and there arises an almost beatific hope that in Buhari the country has at last found the messiah for whom it had been looking for so long. The romance, the euphoria lasts for about eighteen months.

In this 18-month period the plot thickens, as the popular saying puts it. The "plot" extends to the international community that massively buys into the Buhari legend, promising him all the help he would need to fight corruption to a bitter end. Politically and electorally, the replacement of the CPC with the winning mega-party, the APC, brings Buhari into an institutional setting that he had never cared to really understand, let alone master: coalition building and disciplined, effective party-formation. And also, for the first time ever, his war against indiscipline and corruption is put to the test as it had never been when he was a military dictator and a voice crying in the wilderness. Corruption fights back tenaciously, primarily in the law courts but also in the arena of the country's national and state legislatures. Buhari and his Attorney General seem grievously unprepared and unskilled in compari-

son with the bastions of corruption in the judiciary and the legislature. As cases of breathtaking stealing and looting are revealed, so do the dozens of cases of stealing and looting that defy Buhari, his AGF and the anti-graft agencies multiply. But worse was still to come.

The *coup de grace*, so to say, came when it began to be apparent that Buhari's war against corruption was directed primarily, if not exclusively, at past misdeeds by opposition politicians and that corruption in his own party and administration was not only tolerated but openly condoned in some cases. The effective date of demystification when the Buhari myth or legend suffered its fatal blow was October 2017 in the "Mainagate" scandal. Before or simultaneously with Mainagate, there were the cases of the former SGF, Babachir David Lawal and the former Director General of the National Security Administration, Ayodele Oke. And others known, rumored and unknown.

Is Buhari's capitulation to the "superior" power of corruption - as symbolized in the Maina, Lawal and Oke cases - only a setback or is it a more fundamental symptom that his 20-month military rule didn't and couldn't have revealed? My own honest and frank answer is: it is not a mere setback, it is a constitutive, defining aspect of his rule. I admit that this is not so much a statement of fact as it is an interpretation of history, *my* interpretation of history. I wish I was wrong or that time and events will prove me wrong; but deep down, my instincts tell me that only now are we, at last, beginning to see the real as opposed to the legendary or mythical Buhari.

**Act Three: November 2017 -** Back to the Future - the Party, the Polity, the Economy

Right on the heels of the Mainagate scandal, the third act in the unfolding drama of the Buhari script of history and politics started with the spate of massacres of farmers and their communities by well-armed herdsmen toward the end of last year into the first few days and weeks of the new year. Fortuitously, it so happened that this development almost exactly coincided with both open and surreptitious launching of the reelection campaign of Buhari for the presidential elections of 2019. The slowness, the unpreparedness and the clumsiness with which Buhari himself, his administration and the security agencies responded to these killings have left most Nigerians stunned and fearful of the forebodings thrown up by these spectral massacres. Either Buhari does not know Nigeria or Nigeria does not know Buhari. Is this the man we elected with a massive mandate in 2015? Has he changed? Or has he always been the same man hidden behind the encrustation of larger-than-life myth and legend?

Famously, in the very first remark that he made upon assuming office in May 2015 Buhari uttered the then enigmatic words that constitute the second epigraph to this piece: "I belong to everybody; I belong to nobody". You belong to everybody, Mr. President? To big cattle ranchers and to itinerant cattle rearers? To farmers and herdsmen? To those who voted for you in 2015 and those who did not vote for you? To the North and the South? To unitarists and federalists? To those who want devolution of power and those who don't?

Really? You belong to both farmers and herdsmen, Mr. President? To the cabal and the nation and its millions of talakawa?

•To be continued.

Biodun Jeyifo  
bjeyifo@fas.harvard.edu

# Plot and plotlessness in the "Buhari script" of politics and history: reflections (2)

Epilogue – 2019 and Beyond: Myth and Counter-Myth; Plot and Plotlessness

**B**UHARI stands for the presidential elections of 2019; he does not stand for the presidential elections of 2019. Either way, the spell has been decisively broken and the Buhari myth or legend is completely in ruins. Nobody, absolutely nobody thinks anymore that Buhari is the messiah Nigerians have been waiting for; nobody, absolutely nobody thinks any longer that Buhari is God's answer to the plague of corruption in our country; nobody, absolutely nobody thinks anymore that Buhari is a fair-minded ruler who will do justice to all Nigerians regardless of their ethnicity, religion, region and social status. The myth, the legend has been completely shattered and things are no longer anything remotely close to what Nigerians and the world felt and thought about Muhammadu Buhari in 2015. Thus, the Buhari script of history and politics is very different in its Epilogue than the script in any of its earlier segments: the prologue, the first, second and third acts. And there are different versions of this Epilogue that is itself so different from the other parts of the Buhari script of the future.

In one version of this Epilogue, the real person that has emerged from the ruins of the shattered Buhari myth has liberated himself from the emotional and psychological burdens of the myth. It is no small thing to no longer have a heroic, larger-than-life reputation and profile but Buhari has reconciled himself to the change with grace and wit. His little-known sense of humour is now known by all and sundry. He retires to his farm in Daura and enjoys his last years basking in the love and the solicitude of dotting children and grandchildren. He is at peace with himself and the world. He receives few visitors and seldom travels out of the country, but the most consistent and devoted of his supporters and followers still sing his praises to Nigeria and the world and Buhari finds this consoling and comforting. To these supporters and followers, he is still "Sai Buhari". And thanks to the much better health that he now enjoys beyond the battles with the recurrent and debilitating ill-health crises of the eighth decade of his life, he is now less gaunt-looking, less morose-looking, even though he is frailer in general appearance and demeanor. Politics? No, now he has no time or stomach for politics at all.

Another version of this Epilogue exists. In it, though the shattered Buhari myth is still in tatters, unbelievably and unfortunately the man that has emerged from the ruins still labours under the unreal, phantasmal burdens of the myth. He is unmoved by how Nigerians and the world now think and feel about him: the bitter disappointment; the widespread fear and even foreboding that his rule may set Nigerians further apart than they have ever been; the worry, the anxiety, the angst that the modern world is leaving the majority of Nigerians behind. Unmoved by such widespread thoughts and feelings of dread, Buhari himself and his supporters and followers in general live in a world of their own, very much like Trump and his diehard followers and supporters in America. Like Trump and the hordes of his most fanatical admirers in America, Buhari and his supporters are in



(260)

Talakawa Liberation Herald  
BIODUN JEYIFO



•Usman Yusuf, the reinstated Executive Director of the NHIS, "Even the truth shall not set you/us free?"

profound denial about the devastating aspects of his rule as an elected, civilian ruler: the ever-widening circles of poverty, joblessness, insecurity and suffering; the billions, even trillions of naira still being looted; the waste and squandermania still perpetrated unabated; the number of youths, women and children that remain economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized. The few scattered achievements are blown out of proportion and proposed as the dominant reality: an increase in the internal production of rice; the Boko Haram insurgency pushed back into its earlier preference for "hit-and-run" tactics, now seemingly unable to conquer, hold and control large swathes of territory; the arrest and prosecution of looters, most of them from previous administrations and opposition political parties. These are all touted as the "dividends" of Buhari and the APC's "change" mantra for which Nigerian and the world ought to celebrate Buhari while nearly everything else in this country is unraveling. Partial and misleading statistics, figures and data are trotted out by Buhari's spin doctors and image-makers to convince Nigerians and the world that what they are seeing is not what they are seeing, that truth is not truth but facts that everyone and anyone can manufacture out of thin air. In this

Trumpian or Buharian make-believe world, the Buhari script of history and politics departs totally from Nigeria as it really is for the vast majority of its peoples.

An even more frightening version of this Epilogue exists, compatriots. Here it is. The presidential elections of 2019 prove deadlocked, inconclusive. APC has imploded, a process that began before the elections; the different factions of the PDP are in total disarray; the smaller ruling class parties seem to have disappeared into the night of history; only the Kowa Party and the National Conscience Party are talking and making sense, though they do not have any electoral legitimacy to give them political salience and moral authority. The Left is weak, divided and politically irrelevant, though a few isolated voices are speaking coherently and passionately out of it and for it. The crisis is so deep and wide that it seems impossible to form a Government of National Unity (GNU) for which there are calls from all quarters of the political class. Law and order have completely broken down in many parts of the country and rampaging, marauding militias and gangs are having a field day virtually everywhere in the country. On only two previous occasions had the country's political order been so close to total breakdown: the crises of the early to mid-1960s that

ultimately led to the civil war of 1967-70 and the meltdown that led to the GNU headed by Ernest Shonekan after Babangida's cancellation of the electoral victory of M.K.O. Abiola in June 12, 1993. But this crisis of 2019 is deeper and wider than either of these previous instances: Buhari's personal situation is like the endgame "last stand" of Robert Mugabe (2017) and Jacob Zuma (2018) combined; the country's general condition is close to that of the Democratic Republic of the Congo of the Kabila (father and son) years.

## Concluding reflections

Let me remind you, compatriots, that since an epilogue is like a postscript that comes after all the actual and/or effective contents of a life or an experience have been reported, narrated or dramatized, none of the versions of the Epilogue outlined in this essay has happened or need ever happen. Buhari's term in office has not ended and things are still fluid as we move toward 2019. In other words, the Epilogue that I have outlined here is an *imagined* one; it has no compelling or inevitable plot. Indeed, we can say that it is necessarily plotless. As a matter of fact, in all likelihood, none of the versions of the Epilogue outlined in this piece will happen as detailed; the greater probability is that we will get combinations of parts of these versions, together with parts of other versions that we cannot even imagine at the present time. Time has not run out on us, on our country and its teeming disenfranchised and marginalized communities, groups and individuals. We can still avoid any or all of the frightening visions of the future that the rule of Muhammadu Buhari and the APC in particular and the entire political class in general has unleashed on our country. I would like to bring my reflections in this series to a close - but not a closure - on this matter of an open, *plotless* future.

Muhammadu Buhari, as a major protagonist in the drama of Nigeria and its post-independence rulers, is the ultimate if unwitting victim of plotlessness. Let me break this rather abstract observation into an easily understood proposition. Thus, I suggest that plotlessness implies an absence of control, an absence of certainty and of guarantees: if things can go wrong, they will probably go wrong. On the other hand, you might expect that things are going to end badly; they unexpectedly turn out well in the end. That's plotlessness for you.

The first coming of Buhari, 1983-85, was dogged by plotlessness, the ultimate expression of which was the coup that abruptly and unceremoniously

ended his dictatorship. In the foolish belief that he could impose his own will, his own "plot" on history and politics, Buhari went so far as to promulgate a decree against truth that more less made this declaration: even if what you publish against my regime is true, you cannot and must not publish it if it will bring disrepute to me and my regime. It is one thing to think and act foolishly; it is another thing to think that others will also think and act foolishly because you have decreed that they should so think and act. That, I submit, is the folly and the tragicomedy of Buhari's rule, both as a military dictator and an elected, civilian ruler.

Truth and plotlessness have also dogged the second coming of Buhari: Maina, Babachir Lawal, Ayodele Oke and now Usman Yusuf. Add to this list the repeated herdsman massacres of farmers and their communities. The great majority of Nigerians, North and South, are not with Buhari and his version of "truth" in these and other cases. Here is the ultimate effect of this division between himself and most Nigerians on the matter of truth that Buhari cannot seem to get: he will not change his mind or his action(s); and he will not explain things to anybody. That decree against truth of his first coming still has a profound, unbreakable grip on the president. Meanwhile, all the rationalizations, all the half-truths about Buhari's incorruptibility, his competence and willfulness are being relentlessly stripped of their power to persuade or to cajole. No man or woman can forever set himself or herself against truth and hope to get away with it. That's a fallacy, a Buharian fallacy.

I call it a *Buharian* fallacy but recognize that it is "Buharian" only because the current president is the ultimate avatar of this political and moral malaise that almost without exception afflicts virtually all our heads of states and a good number of our state chief executives, past and present. And in this respect and *only* in this respect, Buhari is more "honest" than all our other rulers: he does not pretend, he does not dissemble, he does not hypocritically preach about "truth". When and if he is exposed, he does not apologize and he does not change. He also does not accept responsibility for the consequences of his stolid indifference to truth. Those who still cling to the Buhari myth and blame the "cabal" for all the extraordinary acts and expressions insensitivity, callousness and power-drunkness that we have seen in the second coming of Buhari take note: Buhari is the one with the power, the one that must bear the responsibility.

Where do the Left, the progressives, the true patriots, the popular masses and those who fight on their side stand in all of this? Must we/they just place our/hopes on plotlessness? No! Plot has never gone out and will never go out of the picture, the narrative, the drama. Plot here implies planning, working and struggling for justice, fairness, equal opportunities - and truth. But this is the subject of another piece or another series.

Biodun Jeyifo  
bjeyifo@fas.harvard.edu