

Dialectics of development

By Edwin Madunagu

ON January 13, 1986, General Ibrahim Babangida, as military President of Nigeria, inaugurated a 17-member committee in Abuja. Called the Political Bureau, the committee of 15 men and two women was charged with the responsibility of producing a sociopolitical "blueprint" for Nigeria's projected return to civilian democratic rule.

In addition to drawing up a programme of country-wide tours, debates, public hearings, seminars and workshops, the Bureau commissioned a number of leading academics in Nigeria to prepare and present ideas, reflections and prescriptions on selected topics considered central to its work. Topics allocated included aspects of Nigeria's history, political economy; political system; party system; electoral system; education and politics; philosophy of governance; fundamental human rights and state responsibility; state and religion; the national question and geo-political structure; etc.

Sometimes last year, more than 20 years after the Bureau had been disbanded, I had reason to go back to the commissioned papers. One of the papers I read again, in full, was *Education and politics*, submitted by Otonti Amadi Nduka, then Professor of Philosophical Education at the University of Port Harcourt. Professor Nduka's paper was a pleasure to me then, at the Bureau; and even a greater pleasure to me now. Its pleasure, in 1986, derived from its lucidity, critical stance, brilliance and boldness. Beyond this, the paper, in parts upheld some of the positions I held tenaciously in the Bureau's international debates. The pleasure now is that the paper retains its full force.

That paper, via the Political Bureau was, of course, not my first encounter with Otonti Nduka. A decade earlier in 1976, an important book had come out in Nigeria. Titled *Nigeria: Economy and Society*, it was edited by Gavin William, a visiting lecturer at the University of Ibadan, and published by Rex Collings, London. Nduka, who was then a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy of Education at the University of Ibadan, was

the author of a chapter in that book. I found Nduka's contribution very educative and radical. It carried the title: *Colonial education and Nigeria society*.

Professor Nduka however, went beyond the title. He went from the colonial to the post-colonial and ended thus: "In practice, our educational institutions do not reflect the declared commitment of the Second National Development Plan 'to establish a just and egalitarian society'. Instead, they reflect Nigeria's commitment to capitalism, under which education is used to create a class society rather than an egalitarian one". Our political movement adopted the book as a "prescribed text" for our self-education, political intervention and mobilisation.

Between these two essays (one in 1976 and the other in 1986), and thereafter, I have read quite a number of other essays and articles written by Otonti Nduka on the theme I may call *dialectics of development* - by which I mean the dialectical relationships between elements that constitute development. Professor Nduka identifies education as I do, as one of the key elements. I have found Nduka's intellectual productions educative and yet deep and thought-provoking; progressive and patriotic, yet non-doctrinaire. It was against this background that I came into possession, a few weeks ago, of his new book, a collection of essays, titled *The Roots of African Underdevelopment and Other Essays*, and published by Spectrum Books in 2006 on the occasion of the author's 80th birthday.

The 265-page book has 12 chapters divided into two parts. Part I, *The roots of African underdevelopment*, covers the first three chapters which may be read as three sections of a long, but single essay. Part II, *Lectures and Papers*, takes up the last nine chapters. There is an Appendix which carries a list of Nduka's writings (58 of them). The nine chapters in Part II are, in the order they are presented: In praise of

infinitesimal calculus (1987); *The Nigerian Revolution: What Revolution?* (1975); *The face of capitalism* (1975); *Philosophy; the weakest link in chain of national development* (1992); *Education and Politics* (1986); *In search of a national goal* (1986); *The Nigerian value system: the weakest link in the chain of national development* (1992); *The essence and value of education* (1997); and *rationality and technological development* (1990).

It is also expected that Chapter 5 (*What revolution?*) and Chapter 6 (*The face of capitalism*) would be read as a single, two-part, critique of the Nigerian society and political economy. They were written in September 1975, shortly after the overthrow of General Yakubu Gowon's government. The successor regime was that of General Murtala Muhammed - a regime which, on coming to power on July 29, 1975, was immediately proclaimed by several "people as a revolution".

In spite of the passion it generated, the 1975 coup turned out not to be a revolution "not just because General Murtala Muhammed's career was prematurely terminated through assassination but largely because there was no clearly defined path along which we were being led. If there had been such a path perhaps his successor, General Olusegun Obasanjo, would have taken off from where he left" (page 167). This is an extremely charitable assessment by Otonti Nduka.

Professor Nduka's method of presentation is didactic. You may say that this didactic approach is expected, given Nduka's long tenure as a teacher - at various levels of formal and informal education. But I know that this needs not be so. Nduka's method should be acknowledged as a positive attribute. I know many "learned" people who cannot communi-

cate, or teach, let alone popularise.

What comes forth from this book is the image of Professor Otonti Nduka as an exceptional "public educator". Not an ivory-tower educator, but a committed and active educator for change. He does not pose as a strategist or tactician for that inevitable sociopolitical "rupture" (which I may call "revolutionary break") by which the new emerges from the old. He did not pose as a "political expert". Perhaps he is; but he did not pose as one. And this is good for the book, and for the author. It has, among other advantages, saved the book and its author from possible diversionary, and ultimately unhelpful, criticisms - including mine, perhaps!

In the Preface to the book under review Professor Nduka repeats that "the ultimate aim of my teaching, research and publications over the years has been the critical examination of the principles, ideas and values of the indigenous cultures in juxtaposition with those of the dominant Western culture, with a view to identifying and advocating those principles and values that are conducive to the successful modernisation of the Nigerian society". Nduka's claim is fully supported by this book. It is also supported by his public service and community activities which already have a history of 45 years, and are continuing. Indeed this review had been inspired, in part, by the need to bear public testimony to Nduka's claim and commend his consistent commitment to the development of education and the intellect.

Strictly on account of space constraint, I shall, in the rest of this first part of my review, and in the concluding part, next Thursday, focus - not in the order they are listed - on Part I (the three chapters); Chapters 5 and six (taken together); Chapter 8 (*Education and Politics*), and Chapter 10 (*The Nigerian value system*). My approach will be to isolate some of Nduka's main theses, and briefly comment on them. Chapter

8 is considered below, while Part I and Chapter 10 will be taken up next Thursday.

In Chapter 8, *Education and Politics*, Nduka's commissioned contribution to the 1986 National Political debate, the author said: "In short, in any society there could never at any time be a philosophical or ideological vacuum. Furthermore, for a country such as Nigeria, the philosophical/ideological exercise could hardly be completed without the society having thought and taken decisions on such issues as whether it wants a religious or secular state, a democratic and egalitarian or elitist and/or feudal society, a traditional and backward-looking society or scientifically-oriented and technological one. These and similar ideas will provide the parameters for the articulation of the society's derivative philosophy of government" (page 155).

This critique summarises Professor Nduka's attitude to the question of "philosophy of government" on which the Political Bureau sought the opinions of Nigerians. Taking a long view of history - which is also the philosophical view - I agree with Nduka: "Society" has to decide on the basic question of guiding philosophy or ideology - from which will be distilled a "philosophy of government". But then in almost every epoch it is the most virile social forces, the dominant forces, that lead the nation when it is not possible for the society as a whole (to use Leon Trotsky's formulation) to "gather itself as a lion preparing to leap". Mind you, I am not talking of "vanguardism" or "rulership". I talk of leadership. A popular and liberating ideology must develop and become dominant nationally; it will aspire to lead the nation, and then, with time, and struggle, become the "national ideology". The society cannot, as body, as if in a meeting, decided on a "national ideology".

A final quote from Nduka: "While churches, mosques and religious organisations are springing up everywhere like mushrooms, the mass of Nigerians are weighed down by illiteracy, ignorance, poverty and superstition". (page 164).
•To be concluded.

THIS is the second part of my review of Professor Otonti Nduka's book, *The roots of African underdevelopment and other essays*.

The central argument in Chapter 2, titled *African traditional systems of thought and their repercussions on Africa's development*, can be found in this passage: "Whereas in the Western system of thought events are generally explained in terms of mechanical principles (e.g. lightning and electricity; disease and viruses, poisons; etc), in the African traditional systems of thought, they are generally explained by the use of magical, animistic, and above all, personal idiom (e.g. lightning and the god of thunder and lightning; disease and the evil and occult activities of enemies, anger of the gods or ancestral spirits; etc)" (page 30).

That is the first step of Nduka's thesis. He then argues that the "use and lack of use of mechanical principles" is at the "heart of the difference between the two systems of thought: the Western system of thought is by and large scientific while African traditional thought is non-scientific" (page 30). From here he moves to the heart of his thesis: "The ability or inability to use mechanical principles is at the root of development or underdevelopment respectively" (page 31).

As "explosive" as his thesis is, my initial comment will be brief, and in form of a question: How far does "African traditional thought" still dominate social, political, economic and cultural life in African societies, in general, and Nigeria, in particular? How central is "African traditional thought in the reproduction of African societies, (and Nigeria, in particular) at the present time? In other words, in relation to Africa and Nigeria, are we talking of the past, or the present, or from then till now? I am impressed by Nduka's thesis, and I would vote for it as a scientific resolution. But my position on it would be stronger and more robust if I got definitive answers to my questions.

Nduka does not accept that the main difference between the traditional African cultures and scientifically oriented cultures is that the former are "closed" (that

is lacking awareness of alternatives), while the latter are "open". He however asserts that "there is one characteristic which scientifically oriented cultures share with open societies, but not with traditional societies, namely, the adoption of a critical attitude towards beliefs, theories and customs" (page 32).

The author then re-states his main thesis: "Indeed, the contrast between, on the one hand, the religious mythologies and the theories of causation based on witchcraft, spirits, etc, and on the other, the cosmologies based on such concepts as gravity, electromagnetism, relativity, quanta, protons, neutrons, etc, is, in our view, one of the truest reflections of the difference between an undeveloped and a developed society" (page 33). This is a generalisation of the thesis sketched in the preceding paragraph. Incidentally, I have no hesitation completely accepting the thesis in this form. But when formulated concretely, with reference to particular societies or countries, in particular historical periods, my earlier questions will apply.

The author draws attention to the "developmental gap between the industrialised (mainly Western) societies and the traditional societies of sub-Saharan Africa". This gap, according to Nduka, has been widening since the 16th century and had, in fact, existed even before the imposition of colonialism on sub-Saharan African societies. "The existence of this gap," he says, is "traceable largely to the limitations of the systems of thought characteristic of transitional societies in general and of sub-Saharan African Societies in particular. It is difficult to see how sub-Saharan Africa can escape from the prevalent poverty, ignorance and disease without radical changes in the intellectual and other foundations of such societies" (page 40).

This is an intellectually bold argument and I am persuaded by it. I hope however that it is understood, as Professor

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Nduka does, that it is not the "entire society" or "all of us" that are responsible for the past and prevailing situation in sub-Saharan Africa, or Nigeria. The responsibility is also not simply that of the governmental "leadership" or indeterminate "elites". The responsibility falls on the ruling social forces and classes, national and international, whose interests - ironically - correspond to the perpetuation of underdevelopment.

While, conceding that "as a result of the colonial encounter, certain changes have taken place in the socioeconomic fabric of sub-Saharan African societies," Professor Nduka argues that the "basic foundations of those traditional societies have seen little change, and hence the poignancy of Walter Rodney's lament that the most decisive failure of colonialism in Africa was its failure to change the technology of agricultural production" (pages 40-41). The author then quotes one of Rodney's lamentations: "The vast majority of Africans went into colonialism with a hoe and came out of it with a hoe" (page 41). He then asks: "But whose fault was it, in the first place, that the plough, the tractor, scientific agriculture, etc were not invented? How receptive were indigenous people to such changes?" (page 41)

My comment here is also a question: How inclined were the colonialists to developing more advanced, and modern technology in a political economy that they dominated so completely and for a long time? And a corollary: What "degree of freedom" did the "indigenous people" have in matching their will against the will and interests of the colonialists in matters of development of science and technology?

In Chapter 3, *African underdevelopment: the Nigerian case*, Nduka narrows the focus of the arguments in Chapter 2 to Nigeria. His thesis: "We shall begin by eliminating or putting in relatively subordi-

nate positions, certain factors which had claimed pride of place in previous assessments of the roots of African and specifically Nigerian development/underdevelopment". First, he dismisses the geographical thesis as having little relevance in the Nigerian case. "Whatever might have happened geographically from the dawn of human history till around 1472, when Europeans began to dominate the world including the colonisation of Nigeria and the rest of Africa," Nduka asserts, "hardly explains the fact of Nigerian underdevelopment since 1960" (page 55).

The author continues: "Nigerians neither need to re-invent the wheel nor writing, to name only two such factors. In spite of the claims of Walter Rodney and others that Europe underdeveloped Africa, the phenomenal advances made by previously colonised countries such as the Asian Tigers (Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea, etc) belie the real estate thesis and also calls to question the related European colonialism incubus factor. Indeed, a converse factor is: *How Nigerians underdeveloped Nigeria*. The same is true *mutatis mutandis* with respect to most sub-Saharan African countries" (page 55-56).

My comment: I have no problem endorsing the thesis that Nigerians underdeveloped Nigeria. But not all Nigerians. The responsibility is almost class specific. And the class forces concerned are driven by interests which coincide with imperialist interest. The result is an alliance which has dominated Nigeria and "most sub-Saharan African countries" since formal independence. Furthermore, we have to remember, in celebrating the "Asian Tigers", that more goes into development than technology and growth. Income distribution, egalitarianism, national independence, production of popular needs against production for profit, etc, are also ingredients. We must also not forget the strategic geopolitical importance of the "Asian tigers" to the centres of global capitalism. For instance, it was not for the love of Europeans and Japanese that the rulers of

America committed themselves to lifting up Western Europe and Japan after the devastation of World War II.

Further down we meet a thesis that runs through the entire book: "Nigerian underdevelopment will persist for a long time to come until a more determined effort is made to lift the incubus of ignorance from the mass of Nigerians by means of a determined effort to bring education, scientific knowledge and general enlightenment within the reach of all citizens, old and young, male and female" (page 57).

I was struck by the simplicity of this thesis. Simple, yet complete and categorical. Some people may say that there is nothing new in the thesis: that everyone knows about it, that it is trivial. Let such people place Nduka's imperative in the context of current global "dictatorship of the market", neoliberal economic regime and globalisation - the forerunners of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) - and say whether the present "world order" supports Nduka's thesis or not. It does not; Nduka's thesis runs counter to the present "world order" and the logic of that order. And yet Nduka's thesis is categorical!

For Nduka's thesis to move to a central position in Nigeria's national agenda, political leadership definitively more patriotic, more people-oriented, more progressive, more democratic, more scientifically and technologically inclined, and less rapacious, has to come to the "driving seat" of the nation's governance. I am happy that the ideas and persuasions of Professor Otonti Nduka, a product of the Niger Delta, coincide with mine on this categorical imperative. (page 61)

I am still left with one chapter I would like to review: Chapter 10, *The Nigerian value system: The weakest link in the chain of national development*, a keynote address delivered by Professor Nduka at the Annual Conference of Committee of Provosts of Colleges of Education held at Okene, Kogi State, in the second week of September, 1992. I shall, in no distant future, do the review and, hence, properly conclude this interesting encounter with Otonti Amadi Nduka.