

Opinion

Humanism and its enemies

By Edwin Madunagu

FIRST met Leo Igwe a couple of years ago when he came to the free library I oversee in Calabar to do some research. From the type of books he consulted in the library and the books and papers he had with him, I guessed he was interested in philosophy, sociology and human rights. Later, I learnt from him that he was working for a higher degree or diploma at the University of Calabar. I also learnt that, simultaneously, he was active in a human rights organization called the Nigerian Humanist Movement. I developed interest in his research not only because of his academic interest but also because he kept all the simple rules of the library including not making noise, and putting off his cell phones.

Humility was not a requirement for admission into the library, but I observed that the young man was particularly humble in his dealings with both the library workers and other library users. The only "complaint" by some workers was that Igwe looked "too serious". I agreed that the man looked serious, unlike so many of the people we received; but I did not agree that his seriousness was "too much". In any case, when Leo Igwe sought audience with me his request was promptly granted. He told me he was organizing a number of seminars on child abuse in Cross River and Akwa Ibom states as well as a national conference on human rights. I have forgotten the theme of the conference, but I think it was to take place in Ibadan.

I could not personally attend Leo Igwe's events, but I encouraged the young persons around me to attend and participate actively. Our interest in the seminars was strong on account of its specific subject, namely: rescuing, and defending the rights of, children accused of "witchcraft". Unrescued or undefended, these named "child witches" faced gruesome death or serious permanent disfigurement carried out, of course, criminally or extra-judicially. The victims of the anti-witchcraft "crusades" were mainly children from poor families and the campaigners were usually fundamentalist church groups, aided and abetted by the victims' parents and older family members who, in almost all the cases, ini-

tially identified the "child witches" and then invited churches to "deliver" their "evil" children.

Available records show that almost all the seminars organized by the Nigerian Humanist Movement in the period under review attracted hostile physical reactions from fundamentalist church organizations. No seminar ended without attack or threatened attack. Security agents almost always intervened, dispersing participants and their attackers, and making arrests. It is significant that, in each case, most of the persons arrested were organizers and participants. The injured were also mainly organizers and participants. I learnt that Igwe was always arrested, or injured, or both. My investigation shows that each seminar was peaceful before it was attacked by armed invaders or people planted inside the venue.

One of the pro-child seminars held in Calabar embarrassingly drafted me from the sidelines. It happened like this: In addition to the public library, I ran a programme aimed at developing anti-sexist, anti-patriarchal and critical consciousness in adolescent boys. As we all should know, the prime victims of patriarchy or patriarchal system are women and children (of both sexes). Other victims include strangers, the poor, the "outcasts" and the minorities (ethnic and religious). You will therefore appreciate why the adolescent participants in our conscientisation programme were interested in Igwe's pro-child seminar and why I encouraged them to attend and participate actively.

The young persons arrived at the venue quite early and took their seats. Shortly after the event opened, something sounding like a war-song was heard approaching the building. Soon the singers appeared: they were religious fundamentalists whose mission was clearly to disrupt the seminar and force the organizers to pack up and go. But they could not achieve their objective because as soon as the young persons inside the hall heard the noise outside, they moved to prevent the war singers from gaining entry. A shouting match ensued and this soon degenerated into minor scuffles.

As the shouting and scuffles were going

on, some of the boys inside - the defenders - noticed that two of the "attackers" were their classmates and colleagues in the conscientisation programme I described above. The attackers also made the discovery. This mutual recognition helped to defuse the situation, and the seminar managed to continue. But the incident was thoroughly embarrassing. At the end of it all, I initiated a special group discussion of the experience. Here, "attackers" and "defenders" of the pro-child seminar sat down and explained the positions they took. It was not difficult to reach a consensus, namely, that the attackers were misinformed and misled. I insisted that there should be no assault on anyone's religious sensibilities; that the matter was simply a conflict between science and superstition - one of the subject matters of humanism. It was a sobering session of criticism and self-criticism as well as practical application of all we had been learning, teaching, advocating, and propagating on fundamental human rights in general and the rights of women and children in particular.

I have, since the event narrated above, been following the activities of the Nigerian Humanist Movement and Leo Igwe's media advocacies and contributions to public debates. It was with this interest that I read Igwe's letter to the editor of *The Guardian* published in the paper's issue of Monday, September 12, 2011 with the caption: CAC, please register our humanist group. In this letter the founder of the Nigerian Humanist Movement complained that the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) had, up to the date of his letter, refused to "approve the incorporation of our humanist group". According to the letter the group had initially sought for registration in 2003. On that occasion they were advised by their lawyer that the government of Nigeria did not, as a matter of policy, register any organization with "Movement" or "Action" in its name. The reasons, they were told, was that these words sounded "revolutionary". Leo Igwe and his humanist group were urged to search for another, preferably "non-revolutionary", name.

The humanist group went to work and produced several alternatives: the Nigerian Humanist Association, the Nigerian Hu-

manist Society, and the Association of Nigerian Humanists, among others. By their research, no other organization in Nigeria had registered any of these names with the Corporate Affairs Commission. But none of these alternative names was acceptable to the commission. When the humanist group protested, it was advised by the commission to adopt one of the names and re-apply, making sure that it did not include too many objectives. The group re-applied with the name, Humanist Association of Nigeria, and two objectives: "to promote human rights" and "to promote reason, science and free thought". In response to the fresh application the commission objected to the second objective and asked that it be re-phrased. To simplify matters, the group's lawyer advised that the second objective be dropped altogether. The clients accepted.

The humanist group then re-applied, including only one objective, namely, to promote human rights. In its response, the commission complained that this lone objective was "too vague". It was at this stage that Leo Igwe, the founder of the group, decided to appeal to the Nigerian public through *The Guardian*. He asked: "What makes the name, Humanist Association of Nigeria, vague? Is it the name humanist or association or Nigeria that is vague? Or is it that nobody at CAC knows the meaning of the word "humanist"? I really don't think this is the case. Instead I guess that there must be someone at CAC opposed to our registration. Or CAC has decided as a matter of policy not to register any humanist body in Nigeria? I would like the CAC to come straight on this issue. Is it that a humanist body cannot be registered in Nigeria?"

My feeling on reading this letter was that the Corporate Affairs Commission would be embarrassed and would immediately issue the humanist group a registration - with some "explanation" which blames the group. Either this, or the Commission would make allegations bordering or criminality against the group. I believed, however, that a *prima facie* case of ideological prejudice - institutional or personal - had been established against the Commission. • To be continued next Thursday.

Opinion

Humanism and its enemies (2)

By Edwin Madunagu

LAST Thursday, in the opening segment of this article, I introduced the Humanist Movement of Nigerian and its founder and leader, Leo Igwe. I narrated my encounter with Igwe and those activities of the group that I closely monitored. I ended with the public protest letter written by Igwe to the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) concerning the refusal of the Commission to register the humanist group. I concluded from that letter that a *prima facie case of prejudice*, ideological or otherwise, personal or institutional, had been established against the Commission. For the avoidance of doubt, prejudice is hereby defined, simply, as: "injury or damage resulting from some judgment or action of another in disregard of one's rights; preconceived judgment or opinion formed without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge; an irrational attitude or hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics."

I was still waiting to know the result of Igwe's petition when I saw a response, not from the Corporate Affairs Commission, but from a reader, by name Ukachikwu Dibia. The response came via a letter to the editor of *The Guardian*, titled "*Leo and his humanist group*" and published in the paper's issue of Thursday, September 22, 2011. Dibia's response to Igwe's protest was another instance and example of *prejudice*, a much more obvious and direct one. I recommend that piece, together with Igwe's protest that provoked it, for academic tutorials in *social prejudices of the sexist and patriarchal kind*. And I must say that my present article has been provoked more by Dibia's prejudices than by Igwe's simple protest.

Dibia's letter can be divided roughly into three segments, which, for convenience, I shall label as follows: *Prejudiced understanding of humanism; Rhetorics of prejudice; and Pre-pretentious advocacies*. As painful as it is, I have to admit that many Nigerian men and, unfortunately, perhaps, even as many Nigerian

women, think like Dibia. But for this sad fact I would not have considered Dibia's letter deserving of response, whatever the height of the provocation I felt. I may also add that it does not matter if tomorrow Dibia recants or denies his letter, or pleads that he was "misquoted" or "misunderstood". His original letter was essentially a "group" statement. It went beyond him. Perhaps those who have so far publicly responded to Dibia's provocation share my feelings. I shall appreciate their responses after presenting Dibia's case.

In the first segment of his letter (prejudiced understanding of humanism), Dibia said: "From my own thinking and given Leo's ideas and antecedents, CAC may have refused to register his humanist group because his group may be out to despoil Africa, starting from Nigeria by encouraging limitless freedom of thought, reasons and indeed actions. They may be here to promote illicit behaviours that are un-African. Such behaviours include limitless sex, lesbianism, gayism, legalisation of prostitution and abortion as well as indecent dressing in the public, that is, wearing bedroom clothes in the public. Already Leo and his likes have succeeded in Nigeria to encourage nude dressing as a way of expressing immorality and call it human rights". Continuing, he said: "They forget that in Africa, sex is a respected secret affair that must not be done in front of cameras, like the Americans and Europeans do. It is animal right to advocate Western values in an un-Western environment. *Leo's anti-African sentiments must be checked*" (emphasis mine).

Following this, in the second segment (rhetorics of prejudice), Ukachikwu Dibia asked: "If he (that is, Igwe) is not anti-Africa, have many times have we seen him seriously advocate for free quality and compulsory education for African children? Has he ever seriously advocated against poor leadership that had remained the biggest problem towards Nigeria and indeed Africa's development? What is Leo doing about the *inhuman level of poverty* in our land? (emphasis mine). How far has he strongly been against corruption in

Africa and indeed Nigeria? Why he is not seriously worried about the huge waste that is the hallmark of Nigeria's economic management efforts? Can't Leo be decent for once? How does his mind work? What does he want to get by telling Nigerians to always behave amoral? Was it immorality that made America or Europe or Asia to be developed? Which came first in their efforts towards development: limitless freedom or creative hardwork?"

Ukachikwu Dibia ended his letter with this pretentious social advocacy (the third segment): "My point is that as an African, Africa's development must spring from who we are and move on to who we want to be and everything must give glory to God. Every meaningful development must be environmentally, originality, morality and identity compliant. Therefore Africa should have African development, not European development or Asian or Arabic development. This is the fundamental error that must be corrected in thinking of development in Africa. *Leo's brand of humanism, if it is described as above, must be stopped in its tracks*" (emphasis mine).

A couple of immediate observations can be made on this open letter. At the close of the first segment, and later, at the end of the third, the writer called for action against Leo Igwe. His exact words, which I underlined, were: "Leo's anti-African sentiment must be checked" and "Leo's brand of humanism, if it is described as above, must be stopped in its tracks". The question is: Who is being invited to "check Igwe's anti-African sentiment" and "stop his brand of humanism in its tracks"? The Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC)? The Nigerian state? Individuals, mobs or assassins? I suspect the writer was actually issuing the invitation or incitement to the Nigerian state and its agencies, including CAC. In any case the content and tone of the letter suggest that the method advocated to "check Igwe" and "stop him in his tracks" is the *fascist* one.

Again, for the avoidance of doubt, I would, in the context of this discussion, define a method as *fascist* if it is illegal and unconstitutional and is being adopted because the entities em-

ploying it have not been able to achieve their objective(s) by any legal or constitutional means. As severely limited as it is, the range of fundamental human rights enshrined in Chapter 4 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) completely protects Leo Igwe and the Humanist Movement of Nigeria in what we see them do and what we hear them say. They are also protected by the United Nations Charter on Human Rights (1948); the African Union Charter, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, just to list a few of the Conventions.

Dibia's letter has, expectedly provoked a number of angry responses. I have two of them, both of which appeared in *The Guardian* as letters to-the-editor. The first, under the title, *Leo and his humanist group* was sent on September 28, 2011, from London by Ade Bokini. Denouncing Dibia's campaign of hate, Bokini said that if the CAC had indeed refused to register Igwe's group on account of the prejudices canvassed, then the Commission is "clearly exposing the fragile nature of our secularism which our constitution guarantees." He then added: "Militant Islam is now on the rise, and, why not, when the likes of Dibia are out there advocating intolerance of any belief system different from theirs." Bokini was obviously referring to *Boko Haram*.

The second letter was as strong as the first. It was sent by Josh Kutichinsky who said he or she is "proudly of African descent living in France." It appeared on October 2, 2011. I select two statements from that letter: "To provide as a criticism of what you claim someone has done by citing what they haven't done is extraordinary"; "Science is excellent when it is well done, no matter who is the scientist"; and "Defending a person's right to a religious belief, for example, is not to promote that belief. Defending a person's right to a fair trial is not to condone illegal acts." I shall proceed from these responses next Thursday.

• To be continued next Thursday.

Opinion

Humanism and its enemies (3)

By Edwin Madunagu

THE story was once told of how Goebbels, Adolf Hitler's war-time Minister of Propaganda, drew his gun when he heard the word *Culture*. He was reacting to the power of culture in organising and executing resistance against domination, oppression, and genocide. We also learnt that a Russian Czar once decreed a ban on the word *progress*. The "maximum ruler" was simply frightened by the possibility of that type of change that could question and, perhaps, challenge his absolutism. So, why are some Nigerians, Nigerian groups and institutions frightened and driven to irrationality and incoherence by the mere mention of the words *humanism* and *humanist*?

My brief research here shows me that these two words - humanism and humanist - like "culture" and "progress" - used to drive fear into autocrats and fascists. But why should a Nigerian, insulated from power, be so frightened by these words in 2011? About three years and nine months ago, while Gani Fawehinmi was still with us, I wrote a two-part article, *The humanism of Gani Fawehinmi*. The article appeared in this column on January 31 and February 7, 2008. In the course of that essay, drawing from a modern book of reference, I defined *humanism* as "any system or mode of thought or action in which human interests, values, and dignity predominate". It is also a "philosophy that usually stresses an individual's dignity and capacity for self-realisation through reason". A humanist would therefore be a person whose thought and actions are dominated by "human welfare, values and dignity", and who "stresses an individual's dignity and worth and capacity for self-realisation".

I considered all "rival" descriptions of Gani Fawehinmi - radical politician, human rights activist, philanthropist, pro-democracy lawyer, revolutionary, socialist, etc - and concluded that if a single word was required to describe this extraordinary human being, a word that gives force to, and explains, and unites the various dimensions of his concerns and exertions, that word would be *humanist*. There is, however, none of these

appellations that Gani did not earn. It was for this reason that I once argued in a closed meeting of comrades that Gani should be persuaded against joining "Nigerian politics" and should not be drafted into it - for fear that his humanism could be plunged into crisis. I argued that Gani would be more useful to "us" and to Nigeria if he remained a "pure" humanist than if he joined an explicitly political movement. In the event I lost the debate, but Gani's humanism did not decline - as I feared.

Gani Fawehinmi was ethnically a Yorubaman. He was a devout and practising Moslem. But, as a lawyer and a human rights activist, he pursued or defended every case with equal professionalism and passion. Almost everyone came to him, and he received almost everyone: rich or poor (although for *humanistic* reasons, he was more inclined to the poor); man or woman, young or old; Moslem or Christian or "Others" or atheists; capitalist or worker; revolutionary or conservative; ruler or rebel; indigene or non-indigene; and all "tribes" and ethnic nationalities. The only persons who excluded themselves from Gani's world were unrepentant fascists. This exceptional human being was, and is, not just a study in *humanism*. His life is a definition, embodiment and description of humanism. As an intellectual and social movement, humanism can be traced back to the 14th century and to Western Europe. Since then it has expanded and grown. It has transformed and has developed several currents, trends and tendencies. But all the modern currents, trends and tendencies have some features in common, including: Defence of human rights, considered as *fundamental* (that is, irreducible) and *universal* (that is, non-sectarian); promotion of science as against superstition and sorcery; promotion of reason; and promotion of humanitarian spirit, attitudes and practices. To the best of my knowledge, the Humanist Movement of Nigeria and its leadership adhere to only these, and kindred, principles.

As far as I know, the Humanist Movement of Nigeria admits people of all faiths and non-faiths. But the movement itself is, by defini-

tion, *secular*. Humanism is also, by definition, *non-partisan*. Humanism fills the *interstices* of politics, governance and the law. For instance, it joins in the defence of women against indignities, in the search of the weak and the poor for justice. It intervenes in those cases of sexist violence and dehumanisation where we are told it is difficult to secure justice - for instance, rape. Why then should humanism or the Nigerian Humanist Movement generate the type of violent hatred seen in Ukachikwu Dibia's letter, *Leo Igwe and his humanist group* (*The Guardian*, September 22, 2011)? Paradoxically, the reasons are in the movement's principles, practices and campaigns which one would have thought are not only inoffensive but also patently "democratic", "rational" and "pro-people". To appreciate this paradox one has to go back to Dibia's letter. Dibia accused Igwe and his humanist group of encouraging, among other things, "limitless freedom of thought, reason and indeed actions"; "illicit behaviours that are un-African"; "limitless sex, lesbianism, gayism, legalization of prostitution and abortion, as well as indecent dressing in the public". He also accused his chosen adversaries of encouraging or promoting pornography. "It is animal right", he declared, "to advocate Western values in an un-Western environment".

There are two ways the humanist group can begin a "defence" against these "charges". It can plead that it does not understand the charges, so as to compel the "prosecution" to re-formulate them because, as they now stand, most of them are either grotesque or meaningless. In the alternative, the group can simply plead "not guilty". This will compel the "prosecution" to open its case with evidence, witnesses and citations of relevant laws. Either method will lead to near-immediate collapse of the "prosecution" from its own internal contradictions and "lack of evidence". The accused will be discharged and acquitted under laws known to, or recognized by, the Nigerian state.

That will, however, not be the end of the case. The "defence" will now institute its own case against the "prosecution". The charges will include: "promoting falsehood and defama-

tion"; "attempting to abridge the Nigerian Constitution"; and "attempting to smuggle unknown laws into the Nigerian statute books". It would, perhaps, be superfluous to add "conspiracy to commit treason" or "reasonable conspiracy". The lawyers will determine the appropriateness of the treason charge, but I believe it should be included. The humanist group's case will succeed because the evidence is there in abundance; the witnesses will be more than necessary; and the laws are clear, very clear.

Again, this will not be the end of the case. The humanist group now has a duty to explain to the Nigerian public and to the world why it thinks the original charges against it were made. This is an important task - as important as the "court cases", if not more important - and therefore has to be performed in an appropriate way, in appropriate fora and in appropriate language. They must not commit the travesties of their persecutors. The central concept in this explanation is *prejudice*: religious or pseudo-religious prejudice, sexist prejudice, patriarchal prejudice and pre-science prejudice. Rhetorically, they should ask how their persecutors would view the recent open letter written by Leo Igwe to the Governor of Zamfara State, pleading that planned amputations of convicted citizens should not be carried out. (*The Guardian*, September 25, 2011).

Finally, the humanist group may wish to ask what its persecutors think of the group's campaign for the abolition of the death penalty. They could then quote two statements made by one of their defenders, namely, that "*defending a person's right to a religious belief, for example, is not to promote that belief*", and that "*defending a person's right to a fair trial is not to condone illegal acts*" (emphasis mine). I started this series with the embarrassing story of the refusal of the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) to register the Humanist Movement in Nigeria. I now add my voice to the plea that the Commission should perform its constitutional and patriotic duty and register the humanist group - if it had not already done so.

• Concluded.