

Opinion

Reviews and clarifications

By Edwin Madunaga

THOSE, like me, that are not *experts* or *authorities* in any field of knowledge but are compelled by the nature of their commitments and daily engagements to “dabble” into virtually all subjects, usually “cultivate” – or, rather, may consider “cultivating” – teachers in critical areas of their needs. The learners will, of course, not always announce their “cultivated” teachers or let the fact of their being “cultivated” be known to the teachers. Rather, the learners follow their teachers through available mediums other than the classroom. Furthermore, the teachers cultivated in any field need not be – in fact, should not be – the only teachers in that field; the important thing is that the “cultivated” teachers are followed as closely as a diligent student follows his or her teachers in classroom settings.

But, then: just as a learner in classroom setting can disagree with his or her teacher, a student in the type of “distance – learning” we are talking about can disagree with his or her “cultivated” teacher. The only difference is that in the latter situation the learner is freer since the teacher, in most cases, is unaware of the relationship into which he or she has been “cultivated”, and there is absolutely no sanction for such disagreements. In the academic discipline called *History* my cultivated teachers include Professor Obaro Ikime, a frontline academic, an activist public intellectual and an ordained clergy in the Anglican Church. I am happy that Ikime survived the critical health condition he passed through a couple of years ago – just as he survived his shocking incarceration in 1990 by the military regime. I am also happy he survived his premature retirement from Ibadan shortly after regaining his freedom.

Obaro Ikime’s main areas of interest – or rather, the areas I have found most useful – are ethnic relationships and Niger Delta history. Whenever he applies the knowledge he has acquired in his studies in these areas to a contemporary national issue and takes a public position Ikime becomes truly *controversial*. It is this attribute, as much as his intellect, that led me to cultivate him.

This essay is however not about Ikime or the process of “cultivating” him, but about his ideas. I recalled some of them when I started the current review of my series of essays on *popular-democratic restructuring*. The particular publica-

tion that came to my mind was the collection of his lectures and seminar papers titled *History, Historians and the Nation*.

In the *series of articles*, which ended last Thursday, I proposed a popular – democratic restructuring of Nigeria’s system of governance and political economy. The main features of the proposed structure are *collective presidency with rotational headship at the federal level; regional integration, grassroots development with popular control and participation; and genuine anti-poverty and employment programmes through the redeployment of the nation’s resources to the masses*.

This column has consistently argued the impossibility of ethnic separation in Nigeria – peacefully or through war. But this is not an argument against the existence and reality of ethnic marginalisation in the country. The holistic popular-democratic restructuring I have proposed is aimed, *in part*, at addressing and redressing this marginalisation. To see, *prima facie*, how far my restructuring proposal can advance my objective, I conducted a quick research on the number and distribution of Nigeria’s ethnic groups. I consulted old and new sources. One of the newest listings came from the late Chief Anthony Enahoro and the Movement for National Reformation (MNR), which he led. This listing appears to have been adopted by the pro-National Conference (PRONACO), which in 2006, produced a draft constitution for the country. The shortest list I saw in my brief research has 42 ethnic groups while the longest has about 200. The Enahoro – MNR – PRONACO list, one of the longest, has less than 200.

Now, why did I go through this exercise? I had, in my popular – democratic restructuring, proposed the recognition (and empowerment) of local government areas and their council wards as centres of grassroots development and popular-democratic practice. In this setting I believe that ethnic and geopolitical marginalisation will begin to decline *provided*: governments at various levels are not controlled, or at least not dominated, by predators; and *provided*: a real war on corruption and state robbery is engaged.

To assess my claim objectively, you should not confuse concepts like “regional integration” and “local autonomy” with “ethnic separa-

tion”. My research convinced me, once again, that the Nigerian population is so ethnically integrated that almost all local government areas in the country are mixed in population. Therefore? There simply has to be ethnic co-habitation – however far the geopolitical restructuring goes. Ethnic co-existence must therefore be held as a fundamental principle of national existence and development.

It was at this point that Obaro Ikime “spoke” to me through his book, *History, the historian and the nation: the Voice of a Nigerian historian*, a collection of 15 of his lectures and papers, first published in 2006. The particular paper to which I make reference here appears as Chapter 13 of the book. It is titled *Inter-ethnic harmony and the development of Delta State*. It was presented at a “Retreat of Political Office holders and Permanent Secretaries” in Delta State government held in Warri from May 31 to June 2, 2000”. Ikime was invited by the state government to deliver the paper.

While I shall be selective in presenting some key propositions contained in the paper – dictated by my immediate need – I commend the entire paper, indeed the whole book, to the reader. I shall, before long, attempt a more systematic appreciation of this book. In the *inter-ethnic harmony and the development of Delta State*, Ikime said: “I am an Isoko man – and proud to be so, though both in Nigeria and in Delta State, I belong to a minority group. I did not make myself an Isoko man. God did. We all need to remember this truth as we relate one to another”. I would add: Ikime also did not decide who would be his neighbour. Ikime’s declaration appears in the subsection titled *Inter-ethnic disharmonies in Delta State*.

Ethnic conflicts, disharmonies and tensions, were, of course, not caused by particular governments in office but various governments have worsened and exploited them in various ways, or insensitively ignored them. Ethnic tensions and conflicts “vitiating meaningful development” and “they arise usually, though not always, when a peoples sense of justice is outraged” (emphasis Ikime’s). Ikime goes on to tell us that whatever else he says “with regard to the subject of ethnic disharmony, this aspect of the peoples’ sense of justice being outraged is the core of my submission”. He

copiously elaborates and illustrates this proposition.

All ethnic groups – big and small, developed and under-developed, advantaged and disadvantaged – “are a product of history”, submits Ikime. “Historical events have created all the basic human groupings – countries, religions, classes – and all the loyalties that attach to these. It is the events recorded in history that have generated all the emotions, the values, the ideals, that make life meaningful, that have given men (and women) something to live for, struggle over, die for”. (This is a quote from sources, which were not named in the version of the paper I possess). Ikime’s “attitude to inter-ethnic and inter-group tensions and conflicts is determined by knowledge that in inter-group relations, we are not dealing with saints and sinners, but with sinners all!” Again, the author goes on to elaborate.

Obaro Ikime offers this fundamental proposition: “Quite a bit of the inter-ethnic tensions of today have their roots in History. Our peoples need to know that history. It is not that knowledge of that history would remove the tensions and conflicts. It is, rather, that both people and government can more meaningfully seek accommodation when they have knowledge that some of their present problems are the unintended results of History, not the criminal machinations of their neighbours, it is often easier to elicit a greater willingness to seek justice and accommodation without loss of face”. And further down: “Empires rise and fall. Those advantaged by today’s political arrangements could lose that advantage when those political arrangements change. A constant reference to the day when circumstances favoured one group over another cannot, and does not, solve the problems of today. If anything, such constant reference intensifies that problems.”

What is in a name?, asks Ikime. Quite a lot, he argues: “The names we give to political groupings like local governments can be problematic and conducive to strife and so inimical to development”. The location of the headquarters of geopolitical entities can cause the same problem. While not opposing the continuing existence of the traditional institution, Ikime strongly argues that the role and authority of traditional rulers in governance should be *localised* and the headship of traditional rulers’ councils should be *rotational*. I agree, and thank Obaro Ikime.

• To be continued next Thursday.

Opinion

Reviews and clarifications (2)

By Edwin Madunagu

LAST Thursday, in the first segment, I presented some ideas on peaceful ethnic coexistence (apologies to Cold War rhetorics) from Professor Obaro Ikime's *History, the historian and the nation*. The conclusion therefrom and from what I had previously said on the subject, is that whatever geo-political structure is adopted in the country, whatever grouping or re-grouping you may think of, there will be no entity however small, where the population is not mixed: 'indigene' and 'non-indigene' and even "first-come indigene" and 'latter day indigene'. Implication? The impossibility of ethnic separation, as I have continued to insist. The proposed *popular-democratic restructuring* is a response to "ethnic disharmonies" and various forms of marginalisation.

In continuing this review, I would like to bring up a published book and a private communication. First, the book: *People-Centred Democracy in Nigeria? The search for alternative systems of governance at the grassroots*. The title immediately recommended it for another reading. Published in the year 2000, this collection of workshop papers by experts in the field was edited by Professors Adebayo Adedeji and Bamidele Ayo who also contributed to the 17-chapter book. The workshop from which the book emanated was organised by the African Centre for Development and Strategic Studies (ACDESS) in 1997 in search for a "socio-political system that will make Nigeria respond to the demands of the modern age". It was a "follow-up to the Centre's 1993-94 studies of the role of indigenous modes of social and political organisations, especially community-based organisations and other grassroots institutions, in the governance of various ethnic groups in Nigeria until recently".

The particular segment I re-examined closely was Chapter 4 on account of its survey of the history of local government in Nigeria from 1950 to 1997 "during which its fortunes rose and fell". The chapter, titled *Yesterday's hope and today's disillusionment: Whither local government in Nigeria?*, was presented by Tunde Ojofeitimi. The twin-conclusion I drew from Ojofeitimi's paper was that local government in Nigeria has hardly existed as stipulated in the country's successive Constitutions since independence, and that the only attempts to make the local government system exist as a tier of government came from the colonial administrations and military regimes

after independence.

The private communication I mentioned was received from a female friend of mine. She is some years younger than I am, well-educated, well-read and well-travelled. In politics, my friend, who is a non-Nigerian living outside Nigeria, is an activist radical leftist, an internationalist and a feminist. She is a working professional and is married. She has a son who is also a radical leftist and presently a Marxist graduate student. I deliberately sketch the profile of my friend in these terms so that the reader may be assisted to form a mental picture of the lady in question. She has followed my column in *The Guardian* since 2005 or thereabout and she and her family have given me many valued and rare books. A couple of weeks ago I requested her to respond to the series of articles I had written on the *popular-democratic restructuring* I was proposing for Nigeria.

The response came. She touched on several aspects of the proposal including: the rotational presidency; equal representation in some state institutions; the five-tier governance structure; recent revolutionary upheavals across the globe (Social Forum, Occupy Movement, Arab Spring, etc) and a critique of my practice. I shall present, in summary, her responses on only the rotational presidency, equal representation, five-tier governance structure and her personal opinion of my practice. Other issues, as well as my ongoing discussion with her, will be shared in future - when necessary and appropriate.

On *Collective presidency with rotational headship* my friend said: "I am intrigued by the idea of the rotational presidency. I assume you are trying to encourage an ongoing conversation about this idea in Nigeria. So I think it would be useful to continue to bring in other outside voices, legitimators and those who opposed it, that is, to play out the conversation in print. I can imagine that since ideological divides here are even greater than in Switzerland it might not work. But it is interesting topic for sure, in some ways akin to parliamentary coalition governments".

On "equal representation" she said that with regards to giving "states with smaller populations" equal representation (such as in the Senate and the proposed collective presidency) most progressives she knew in countries that practise this principle (such as the United States of America) would be against it. Why? "Because (since) poor people tend to migrate

to large cities most of the larger states tend to be more liberal". She would therefore prefer more populous states having larger representations. In systems of equal representation, she says, progressive legislations are often blocked by smaller states with smaller populations but equal representations.

For this same reason (blockage of popular progressive choices by conservative preferences), she opposes the concept and practice of "electoral college".

On the *five-tier governmental structure*, my friend said she was "not won over", and "not only with regard to cost". Her argument: "In places where the state reaches down to the community level, the system seems to have created disaster". The examples she could immediately provide were the defunct Community Party regimes in eastern and central Europe, China and Cuba "where the party controls community life". The "worst example", according to her, was the Cultural Revolution in China. When she lived in Mexico, "the party controlled things down to the local high schools. So each time there was a change of party, a bunch of teachers would lose their jobs to members of the other party". But she conceded that, "municipal governments do set up parastatal bodies at the community level, e.g. neighbourhood citizen commissions of various kinds". The commissions, she said, "play an advisory role, sometimes a powerful one".

My friend, however, insisted that, "the more the state controls community life, the less that grassroots organising takes place". I agree. It is the danger of the state eventually controlling "community life", which my friend warned against that made me reject the idea of incorporating community-based organisations or local branches of non-governmental organisations into the local government structure. The suggestion was made by Dele Gege in an insightful paper, *Crafting an enduring local government system in Nigeria: A case for multi-tier local government structure* placed as Chapter 10 of *People-Centred Democracy in Nigeria?* My friend believes that, "it is essential that police be accountable to someone other than the government". She expectedly concluded her two-page communication on a personal note, and this relates to a discussion we have been having for a long time now. She acknowledged what she saw as "holding oneself to

one's principles" but sharply criticised "clinging tightly to them". Reading and absorbing this criticism was like chewing a glass bottle.

I have chosen to enter no self-defence in this period of *searching*. What self-defence when the mass misery that propelled me into *Left* politics has deepened much further than met it when I made my choice about four decades ago? I can only clarify and, thereafter, use others' counter-ideas and counter-propositions to interrogate my own ideas, principles and practices. It is in this spirit that I now announce that I have gratefully admitted, for self-interrogation, all suggestions and counter-ideas. I shall, however, offer the following clarifications and reminders.

The *Cultural Revolution* in China (1966-1970) was a *revolution in revolution*, to borrow from Régis Debré. It was what it was called: a Revolution, not a policy decision. It was a mass attempt from the grassroots, inspired (not instigated!) by Mao, to deepen the socialist revolution that triumphed in 1949 under his leadership. It was a revolutionary struggle to purge degeneracy, "reformism", unprincipled liberalism and bureaucratism from party and state. When the revolutionary upsurge began to threaten the revolutionary state itself, Mao mobilized the coercive apparatuses of the state to stop it. I offer no defences, no justification. I am only informing and explaining. Secondly, the one-party system, which the European Communist Party regimes operated, and which China and Cuba still operate, is not inherent in socialism, communism or Marxism.

You may recall the struggle waged by the Marxist *Opposition* in the Soviet Union and the struggle of Rosalind Luxembourg on five simultaneous fronts: against imperialism, left-wing reformism, left-wing dictatorship, anti-Semitism and sexism. In particular, you may recall that she (and much later, Trotsky) insisted that "freedom is always for the opposition, because supporters of government already have it", that the suppression of opposition parties would eventually lead to the suppression of dissenters in party and state and that to ban opposition parties was to ban "political life" from the country. For me, personally, the consecration of the one-party system in the Soviet Union was a fundamentally wrong turn in the development of the socialist revolution in the Soviet Union - with tragic consequences for the socialist movement worldwide. But what propagandists call the *collapse of Communism* makes no sense, not even as a short-hand formulation. What collapsed was the *Communist Party regimes*.

• Concluded

Reviews and projections (3)

By Edwin Madunagu

As stated at the beginning, the aim of this exercise – reviewing the past, and projecting into the future – is to generate more ideas for a renewed and more organised and effective popular-democratic political intervention in our country. As we have also indicated, the ideas being sought may come from any source – from the most committed and popular-democratic to the most cynical and power-bloc driven. Since all ideas cannot be taken up certain criteria of selection become particularly useful. They include clarity, representativeness and totalising power, where by the latter we mean the power to bring together a large number of things and phenomena, and long historical periods, under the telescope.

The ideas I seek include, in particular, criticisms previously directed at the Nigerian Left. I say “previously” because many actual and potential critics probably now believe that criticising the Left is useless, if not laughable. Why criticise an entity that is dead or is dying, or, at the very least, is in permanent disability? But as I insisted and demonstrated earlier in this column, the Left – the Nigerian Left, the global Left – is not dead and is not dying. It suffered severe setbacks. But we are now witnessing, globally and nationally, the Left’s gradual recovery and rejuvenation, and its call to service. This is not a new phenomenon either in human history or in nature.

Stanley Macebuh’s reference to the Nigerian Left in his three-part essay, *The Nigerian Mind* (*ThisDay* October 25, November 1, and November 8, 2009) reminded me of the critical need to include the critique of the Left in this “inventory of ideas”. Some of this class of criticisms came from outside the Left, others from inside. I shall illustrate the two types, starting with the former. Late in 1980 I read one of Professor Wole Soyinka’s numerous critiques of the *Nigerian Left*. It was in a publication jointly produced by the *Positive Review* and *Socialist Forum Collective*, both based in University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) and titled: “And

finally they killed him”, a collection of speeches delivered on Friday, June 27, 1980 at an event to mourn and pay tribute to Walter Rodney, the young activist-Marxist author of *Groundings with my brothers* and *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*, who had just been murdered in Guyana. Wole Soyinka critique is embodied in his contribution titled: *The man who was absent*.

In his critique, Soyinka said: “In an intellectual world rendered increasingly turgid by ideological mouthers and phrase-mongers, Walter Rodney stood out for lucidity, relevance, for a preference for actuality, its analysis and prescription over and above slavish cant. He proceeded from attested facts and analysis not, like many others, commencing with worn and untested frameworks – usually made of someone’s else summary, thesis, or even a bare out-of-context quotation onto which existing facts are then stretched, pruned, tortured and distorted to obtain a purely theoretical semi-fit. Walter Rodney was not the latter kind”.

I cannot now say how many responses Soyinka’s critique attracted from our movement at the time. But in November 1980 I responded to it. The response was delivered on the same campus in the preamble to a four-part lecture I delivered under the auspices of *The Alliance of Progressive Students* (ALPS) to mark the 31st anniversary of the brutal killing, in November 1949, of Nigerian miners by the colonial police at Iva Valley, Enugu. The lecture was later published in *Human Progress and Its Enemies*. In that response, I conceded as follows: “I am doubly impressed by this (Soyinka’s) critique. In the first place it is true of a large number of Nigeria’s radical intellectuals, although it is definitely not true of committed Marxist intellectuals, the largest collection of whom is in this part of the country. In the second place this critique of the “revolutionary Left” can be

made from a social-democratic, or even bourgeois, standpoint.”

Today, I endorse Soyinka’s critique, as I endorsed it then. In fact, history itself has endorsed it. I also re-endorse my response, as I did then. I only need to add that in trying to avoid Wole Soyinka’s type of critique which is still very relevant – simply because it is true – one should not deliberately aspire to be “original”. You can surely stand on the shoulders of others (dead or alive), and see farther than they had seen, as one elder taught me. But you should be *creative*.

From the external critique (Soyinka’s) we move to the *internal* critique of the Nigerian Left. This will be illustrated with an “*Open letter to the Nigerian Left*” written by Comrade Eskor Toyo, a Professor of Economics, retired university teacher and current member of Board of Trustees of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). Eskor Toyo is a long-standing and prominent Nigerian Marxist intellectual and revolutionary socialist activist. This particular critique of his Comrades was written probably in the first half of 1983 but was published in *Review of African Political Economy* (ROAPE), Number 32, April 1985 (pages 85-89). That particular issue of ROAPE was devoted to *Intellectuals and the Left in Africa*. To appreciate Eskor Toyo’s critique, some historical background is necessary.

You may recall that five political parties were initially registered for participation in the politics of the Second Republic (1979-1983). These were the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), the Nigerian People’s Party (NPP), the Great Nigerian People’s Party (GNPP), and the People’s Redemption Party (PRP). The last was a radical leftist party and initially controlled two state governments – Kaduna and

Kano – and had visible presence both in the National Assembly and in some state legislatures. Some Nigerian Marxists, including Eskor Toyo, joined the PRP, some others sympathised and collaborated with it, some others were indifferent to it, while others were critical of it.

Some aspects of Eskor Toyo’s “Open Letter to the Nigerian Left” have been exhausted and resolved by history itself – Nigerian history and global history. The, however remain of historical importance. But some other aspects are still very relevant. The methodology is scientific and can therefore not be overtaken by events. Opening the letter Eskor Toyo said: “This letter is written to honour the political wisdom of Comrade Bala Mohammed, a genuine revolutionary combatant and a Marxist, who joined the People’s Redemption Party in order to be practical, identified himself with the correct faction of that party at a time when an inner-party struggle became inevitable, carried the banner in the front line against imperialism and local reaction, and went down fighting in the class struggle among the people”. This classical Marxist revolutionary tribute (and “call to arms”) was paid not only to Bala Mohammed, the Political Adviser to Abubakar Rimi of Kano State at the start of the Second Republic, but also to PRP, the platform he used. Bala Mohammed was assassinated in a counter-revolutionary mob action a few months into the regime.

After this straight forward tribute came the punch: “While all that happened, some of his ‘Marxist’ friends were writing some jaundiced stand-offish phrases against his revolutionary wisdom. The Marxists who sit in their arm-chairs to attack the PRP are not right. Of all the different ‘lines’ for Marxists in Nigeria, the most correct for the present phase is joining and working in the PRP” (emphasis mine). Eskor Toyo gave

six reasons for this position. The first two indicate the general direction. First: “The ‘Marxist’s are not doing politics at all who are not in the PRP. They are merely criticising the bourgeoisie, not mobilising the people against the bourgeoisie establishment (emphasis Eskor’s). The time for criticising the bourgeoisie in Nigeria is past. *One has to find the platform for going into action*”. (emphasis mine).

But Comrade Eskor did not mean that any platform would do. An acceptable platform had to be revolutionary. This leads us to his choice of PRP: “The programme of the PRP is definitely not merely a democratic one but a revolutionary one. The PRP by its programme seeks the total abolition of imperialism, feudalism and capitalism. It seeks the substitution for the present day neocolonial state of a new social order. This order is defined as one in which production relations are redefined to abolish exploitation of man by man. This new order is to be brought by a people’s state”. Then the lamentation: “Quite frankly, I do not know what else ‘Marxists’ say they want in the name of a revolutionary programme. I have the impression that they want the name ‘Marxism’ or ‘Leminism’ and some phrases such as ‘class struggle’ and ‘proletariat’ instead of a programme that the masses can understand. They want the verbal forms, not the essence of a revolutionary programme. The non-PRP ‘Marxists’ are infantile and subjective”.

By the time this critique came out, the military had taken over and the factionalised PRP, together with the other officially recognised political parties, had been proscribed. Although Eskor’s critique is 25 years old and although the world – including the Nigerian Left – has changed tremendously during the period, Eskors “Letter to the Nigerian Left” deserves to be critically studied or re-studied. I say ‘study’, rather than ‘read’, because you have to go back to concrete history to fully appreciate it.

• *This concludes the appreciation of internal and external critiques of the Nigerian Left. But Reviews and Projections continue.*