

Opinion

Revolution and humanism: Clarifications

By Edwin Madunagu

I THOUGHT I had settled accounts with Damola Awoyokun. But I was grossly mistaken. Unknown to me, it all began on February 17, 2011 when my piece, *Explosions in the African continent*, appeared in this column. This was followed three weeks later, on March 10, 2011, by *Further lessons from North Africa*. The article was followed, just a week later, on March 17, 2011, by *Reflections on the Libyan catastrophe*. More than six months later, on September 29, 2011, I wrote *Libya and the new imperialism*. It was then Awoyokun intervened with his piece, *Libya, Madunagu and false imperialism*, which came out in this newspaper on October 25, 2011. My response to Awoyokun was published on November 17, 2011. It was titled *Revisiting "Libya and the new imperialism"*.

With the response to Awoyokun - which took the form of clarification and elaboration of the arguments that provoked this distant compatriot - I thought I had settled accounts with him. But, as I said earlier, I was grossly mistaken. This was demonstrated in his recent letter-to-the-editor which appeared in this newspaper's issue of Wednesday, February 29, 2012, and titled *Madunagu and Syria*. In that short piece Awoyokun renewed, or rather continued, his criticism of what he perceives as my position on the violent political developments in Africa and the Middle East in the past one year. But Awoyokun's latest piece was not a reaction to what I actually said or wrote but a critical anticipation of a position I would likely take on another theatre of war and human suffering: Syria.

Awoyokun's short letter is one of the two "pegs" for the "further clarifications" I intend to make in the present piece. I reproduce the letter in full: "We are waiting to read what our renown Dr. Edwin Madunagu has to say about the current horror show in Syria, and how China and Russia are holding solutions from the UN Security Council hostage. When there is a call for international military intervention in a crisis like this one, just like in Libya or Ivory Coast, to mention some recent examples, our indefatigable columnist can be trusted to treat us to the same old tiresome tropes of western hegemony, neo-colonialism,

imperialism so the room for fact-fed, ideologically-neutral and objective analysis is forever lost".

That was Awoyokun's opening paragraph. In the second paragraph he said: "Madunagu in this column titled *Libya and the new imperialism* (*The Guardian*, Thursday, September 29, 2011) accused members of the Security Council (including our own Prof. Joy Ugwu) of fraud and taking bribes to further western territorial aggrandizement by passing resolution 1973 when Libyans were wailing in a similar hell Syrians are currently in. Madunagu has condemned the concept of international community as a Western fraud, he condemned Western hegemony, he has celebrated the emergence of China as a counterweight to West's imposed international order". Awoyokun then concluded with this anticipation. "We are waiting to hear from him how he squares all these with the events in Syria. Syria, Madunagu may like to know, is an oil nation too".

In my earlier response to Awoyokun, as well as in my articles that provoked him, I built my arguments around the concepts of revolution, imperialism, new imperialism, capitalism, international community, hegemony, domination, independence, and categorical imperative. I defined, elaborated and illustrated all these concepts. But, as you can see from his letter, Awoyokun summarily dismisses the concepts as the "same old tiresome tropes". I am therefore in a dilemma: How do I proceed in a debate with someone who not only summarily dismisses the pillars of my argument, but also dismisses history and dialectics?

With Damola Awoyokun, I now find myself in a situation I often joke about: Two friends - call them A and B - decided to settle their dispute by means of a boxing duel. But, first of all, they agreed to set up the rules. A told B: "You must not hit my eyes, since I use them to see you, my opponent; you should not hit the side of my chest covering my heart, since that will automatically send me out of this world; and you should not hit me below the belt for reasons you should know". His opponent looked at him for what seemed like eternity, and then walked away - explaining to on-lookers that his friend simply did not want to fight. I shall, however, not walk away from Awoyokun.

Let me at this point make some personal declarations. I am a revolutionary socialist. I am also a humanist. I was a humanist before I became a revolutionary; and my humanism has deepened and enriched my revolutionary convictions. I can speak of revolutionary humanism with conviction. These open declarations, which can be confirmed or refuted by those who know me, are necessary because Awoyokun has sought to portray me as a person without human feelings. This is gross misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Beyond these declarations about my person I should also say that the revolutionary ideology to which I subscribe - and which I have promoted in Nigeria as a Nigerian for almost 40 years - is humanistic in the deepest sense of the term. I shall, of course, return to this.

Awoyokun's letter, as I had earlier said, is one of the two "pegs" of the present "clarification of clarification". For the other "peg" I refer the reader to the three-part article that appeared in this column on October 13, 20 and 27, 2011, titled *Humanism and its enemies*. In that article I criticized Okachikwu Dibia's position on Leo Igwe's protest over the refusal (or delay) of the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) to register the *Humanist Movement of Nigeria*. Leo Igwe's protest had appeared in letter's column of *The Guardian* of September 12, 2011, and Dibia's criticism of it had appeared 10 days later, in the same column, on September 22, 2011. Then, on February 27, 2012, just two days before Awoyokun's letter reproduced above, Okachikwu Dibia came out with the piece *Homosexuality and the humanist movement*. In this opinion article Dibia criticized my October 2011 criticism of his September 2011 criticism of Igwe's protest.

Okachikwu Dibia is bitterly opposed to homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Beyond mere opposition, Dibia is an activist opponent of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. He is opposed not only to these practices, but also to all "unAfrican" practices including "limitless human rights", "limitless sex", "freedom to undress" (or "indecent dressing"). He believes, very strongly, that "in Nigeria where the law is very weak to guarantee equity in dealing with civil and criminal issues, advocating for more immorality and

corrupting values will quickly destroy Nigeria." (*Homosexuality and the humanist movement*).

My position on this particular matter, a position which I argued strongly in my three-part article, *Humanism and its enemies*, is that human rights should not be abridged, that upholding the rights of homosexuals is not the same as advocating or promoting homosexuality, that though one has the right to campaign against homosexuality and same-sex marriage, one would be committing treason to invite or incite the state to take unconstitutional measures against homosexuals. I also denounced "anti-witchcraft" campaign against children, as well as rape, sexual harassment and discrimination. I denounced patriarchy - a system and culture based on discrimination against women, children and "aliens". My language was strong, but not abusive.

Now, it should not be concluded that by bringing Awoyokun and Dibia together in the present article I am assuming that they share the same, or similar, or even compatible, world-view or political orientation. In fact, I have reasons to believe that they are far apart philosophically and politically. The only reason I am bringing them together here is that both of them, two articulate and educated Nigerians, have grossly misunderstood and misrepresented me in the public domain on two fundamental social questions on which I feel very strongly, namely *revolution and humanism*. And the mis-representation took place about the same time in the same influential newspaper.

In making the present "further clarifications", I wish to underline my long-held position, namely, that if someone claims that he or she has been misunderstood or misrepresented the fault may lie wholly or partly with the protester. So, the protester should also re-examine what he or she had said or written and the language and manner of delivery. But I have carefully gone over my debate with both Damola Awoyokun and Okachikwu Dibia - up to this point - and I am convinced I am not responsible for the misunderstanding and misrepresentation that are so glaring. I have listed and referenced all the articles and letters embodying the debates. While leaving the reader to form his or her own judgement, I shall attempt "further clarifications".

• *To be continued next Thursday.*

Opinion

Revolution and humanism: Clarifications (2)

By Edwin Madunagu

LAST Thursday, in the opening segment of this set of clarifications, I introduced the two publications that provoked this exercise. These were: a letter, *Madunagu and Syria* (Damola Awoyokun, *The Guardian*, February 29, 2012) and an opinion article, *Homosexuality and the humanist movement* (Okachikwu Dibia, *The Guardian*, February 27, 2012). Both were criticisms of my articles in this column. Awoyokun was angered by what he thinks is my position on the role of the new imperialism in the current political explosions in Africa and the Middle East, while Dibia rejected what he thinks is my position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage.

I use the expression "what he thinks" for both Awoyokun and Dibia because I still think that despite my repeated clarifications both compatriots have actually not understood my positions on two subjects about which I feel very strongly: *revolution and humanism*. Hence the need for these further clarifications. In this concluding segment, I intend, first of all, to state, as briefly and as clearly as possible, what I understand by *humanism and revolution*. I shall then summarise the views that provoked, and have continued to annoy Awoyokun. By the end of this exercise I would have answered Dibia's criticism in full. Any matter still unaddressed in Awoyokun's anger will be taken up when I appreciate the "Arab Spring" in the near future.

On humanism: Rosa Luxemburg once said, in one of her criticisms of certain policies of the Russian Revolution, that "freedom is always freedom for the opposition". Why? Because "the supporters of the government already have it". The same goes for human rights. Whenever you speak of human rights my mind goes to those that are *different*: the minorities (ethnic, religious, political, social, cultural, etc), the dissenters, the weak, the marginalised and the "wretched of the earth". Of course, human rights are important to everybody - strong or weak, poor or rich, female or male. As history frequently demonstrates, the strong, the rich and the powerful of today may desperately invoke human rights tomorrow. But the focus of freedom, in general, and human

rights, in particular, is those who are different: They were the origin of the entire concept of freedom. Beyond the above fundamental principle, or *article of faith*, which is at the centre of my understanding of humanism, I wish to align myself with a particular view of Leo Igwe on humanism: "Humanism is a human centred way of thinking and living. The humanist outlook is informed by reason, science and compassion. Homosexuality refers to sexual relationship between persons of the same sex. As an outlook that focuses on humanity, nothing human or related to human beings, including sexuality, is alien to the humanist outlook. That means, humanists, as a matter of principle, are committed to defending the rights of persons despite the race, religion, belief, ethnicity, nationality, sex or sexual orientation" (*Leo Igwe: Homosexuality and the humanist Movement; The Guardian, January 20, 2012*).

I say "with a particular view of Leo Igwe" because it should not be construed that I agree with Igwe on everything he says or does about humanism, and conversely. It follows that I may not be in complete agreement with Igwe philosophically and ideologically. But, on the statement quoted above, I am one with him. How this agreement with him is accommodated in my general world-outlook, which I am aware is different from Igwe's, and how my practice of humanism, or responses to concrete situations requiring humanistic responses, may be different from Igwe's, are different questions entirely. All we need to note here is that a particular shared belief, when inserted into an ideological framework or world-outlook may produce something which is qualitatively different from the results of insertions into other frameworks.

Let me illustrate: As a revolutionary socialist I believe in "free education". But there are militant anti-socialists who also believe in "free education". And so? This clarification refers not only to Leo Igwe, the humanist, but to every person with whom I share partial agreement.

On revolution: Here I shall refer to two books of reference that are *modern* as well as *liberal*: *Columbia Encyclopaedia* (1993 edition) and *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics* (2003), edited by Iain Mclean and Alistair McMilan. The *Columbia Encyclopaedia* says that "in a political sense, a revolu-

tion is a fundamental and violent change in the values, political institutions, social structure, leadership, and policies of a society. The totality of change implicit in this definition distinguishes revolutions from coups, rebellions and wars of independence, which involve only partial change. Examples (of revolution) include: the French, Russian, Chinese, Cuban and Iranian revolutions."

The authors then proceeded to make some important statements, including the following: "Since Aristotle, economic inequality has been recognised as an important cause of revolution"; "Tocqueville pointed out that it was not absolute poverty but relative deprivation that contributed to revolutions"; "The fall of the old order also depends on the ruling elite losing its authority and self-confidence"; "Contemporary thinking about revolution is dominated by Marxist ideas: revolution is the means for removing reactionary classes from power and transferring power to progressive ones". The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics* says that revolution is the "overthrow of an established order, which will involve the transfer of state power from one leadership to another and may involve a radical restructuring of social and economic relations".

We can see that if we replace "may involve radical restructuring" with "will involve radical restructuring" in the second definition of revolution, then the two definitions will be mutually complementary and re-inforcing. I adopt the composite definition, which thus emerges as my definition of revolution.

It remains for me to say a word or two on *revolutionary humanism*. I described revolutionary humanism 10 years ago in my article, *Three humanist revolutions* (January 17, 2002). Two of them are of immediate relevance here: One was reconstructed from Paul, The Apostle, the other from Karl Marx. Paul, The Apostle, spoke of *Love* in the 13th Chapter of his first letter to the people of Corinth. Since the age of 15, the injunction in this passage has remained with me. You need to read *First Corinthians*, Chapter 13, in full. The injunction from Marx relates to the categorical imperative: "to overthrow all circumstances in which the human being is humiliated, enslaved, abandoned

and despised". (Check Marx's *Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction, 1844*).

I shall end these "further clarifications" with passages from two of my recent articles. The first has to do with the *new imperialism's* mission in Libya: "The new imperialism's military intervention in Libya through NATO, is a classic case of killing several birds with one stone: Getting Gaddafi, a "dangerous" and "unreliable" ally, out of the way; installing a "reliable" ally in a newly created protectorate; building new military bases along the Mediterranean and in the Sahara Desert; guaranteeing the flow of oil; and obtaining contracts worth trillions of dollars, over several years, to "rebuild Libya". (*Revisiting Libya and the imperialism*, November 17, 2011). As you can see: In Libya, the new imperialism had multiple objectives, not the flow of oil only. *The same for Syria*.

In the last paragraph of the same piece, I said: "My contention is not that attempts ought not to have been made by the Libyan people to remove Gaddafi from power. As I said in one of my earlier comments on this tragedy, the man ought to have been removed long ago. My contention is not that there should not have been an (external) intervention. What I am saying is that the intervention ought not to have been made for selfish interest and, in particular, not by the new imperialism. My contention is not that Gaddafi's regime was democratic or that democracy is not desirable in Libya. My contention is that the regime which NATO has now installed in Libya cannot be democratic..." I also said that what was going on in Libya was not a revolution (see the definition above). It was a popular uprising. *With minimal alteration what is said here about Libya can be said about Syria*.

Finally, in my very first article on these political explosions, I said: "Another lesson of the current explosions is that history has not drawn a curtain on any form of political struggle and any historically confirmed route to political power: revolutions, insurrections and coups *d'etat* are as firmly on the table as elections and selections. The main difference, between *now* and *then*, lies in the set of prospects and consequences of each route chosen or imposed" (*Explosions in the African continent*, February 17, 2011).

• *Concluded.*