

viewpoint

Biafra, June 12 and Nigeria's future (2)



Chido Onumah
conumah@hotmail.com

FOR a people in search of a meaningful national identity, I worry when we miss any opportunity – no matter how insignificant – to solidify the bonds of nationhood. Undoubtedly, those who have appropriated political power and those who have had the privilege of overseeing the affairs of the country have been our greatest undoing.

Some of us held out hope – the visible shortcomings notwithstanding – that the National Conference would offer an opportunity to focus on the fundamental defects of Nigeria. That optimism was based on the belief that if we took away the other options – descent into anarchy and, perhaps, another civil war or a revolutionary upheaval – a “peaceful” national dialogue was the way to go.

Why is it that we are unwilling to address the fundamental question of our existence as a country, considering our history and the seeming lack of agreement on what the future should look like? It seems, for us in Nigeria, that we want to make omelette without breaking eggs. If we can't agree on how to co-exist peacefully, then, we must find an amicable way to “dissolve” this union. Truth is that if we don't, and allow these crises to fester, Nigeria could sooner or later dissolve like sugar in a tea cup and the consequences will be grave for all parties.

There have been many flashpoints in the turbulent history of Nigeria. I think, however, that three issues – without attempting to downplay others, like the Tiv Riots of 1960

and 1964, the first military coup of January 15, 1966, the 12-Day Revolution of Isaac Adaka Boro which led to the declaration of the Niger Delta Republic on February 23, 1966, the Maj. Gideon Orkar-led coup of April 22, 1990, the murder of the Ogoni 9 by the Nigerian state on November 10, 1995 – stand out: the civil war, the June 12 crisis and the current onslaught by Boko Haram. And each time we think we have laid the threat to rest, it rears its ugly head. Yet, we hide our heads in the sand like the proverbial ostrich, hoping against hope that somehow our fault lines and the tension they generate will vanish overnight.

There were reasons for Biafra, even if there are disagreements about what precipitated the internecine civil war that followed and how the crisis and its aftermath were managed. There were reasons for the annulment of the presidential election of June 12, 1993, no matter how unconscionable we think the annulment was. There are reasons for the actions of Boko Haram, even if we find its activities loathsome.

Part of the narrative of the Nigerian tragedy is economic. The near collapse of the Nigerian state and its structures, particularly security and law enforcement – a phenomenon rooted in many years of bad leadership and corruption – has not only bred poverty, alienation and disillusionment of the masses across the country, it has turned the country into a carcass and a veritable meal for vultures of every hue. And each day, there are new vultures ready to feast on this carcass.

But, if we focus on the preceding, we miss the big picture. For me, the underlying

reason for the flashpoints in Nigeria is that we have not come to a collective agreement about what Nigeria is or what it should be. And until we do, we will not be able to make progress as a country. Nigerians did not create Nigeria. So, if we want to make it work, if we want to counter the different centrifugal forces that seek to rip it at the seams, we must go back to fundamentals. We were handed an unjust and skewed state. Our first task ought to be how to fix the distortion.

Nobody could have put this dilemma better than a former attorney-general of the federation, the late Chief Bola Ige, who noted in his 1998 speech titled, Towards the Beckoning Glory of the 21st Century, that “There are two basic questions that must be answered by all of us, Nigerians. One, do we want to remain as one country? Two, if the answer is yes, under what conditions?”

There is no need for equivocation. Like Ige, I believe strongly that “we” have to answer these questions. Except that for me, in the 21st century, after 100 years of amalgamation and 54 years of independence, the “we” do not necessarily have to be the “we” that existed before 1914, but the “we” that have called Nigeria the Motherland in the last 100 years. I have argued repeatedly that we can build civic nationalities where ethnic nationalities currently exist. All it takes is sacrifice and the willingness to make it work.

There are those who assume, wrongly, that the first part of the question is taken for granted; that after 100 years of marriage and 54 years of raising a family there is no need to question the sanctity of a marriage whether it is working for the partners or not. Unfortunately, while we can make the analogy, we must face the reality that the

amalgamation of Nigeria is different in many ways from a marriage between two lovers.

In the case of Nigeria, it was a forced marriage as is the practice amongst some families in the country; the lovers had no say or the opportunity to understand each other, let alone appreciate and love each other. While it works in some cases, in our own case, it hasn't worked; and like many forced marriages, the parents (the colonialists) got their desire while the couple (Nigerians) are left with the hope that their problems and disagreements will sort themselves out.

Perhaps, if the citizens of the different ethnic nationalities in 1914 were involved in the creation of Nigeria, they would have decided the terms of their co-existence and would have long got used to their obligations in the union. The fallout of this seeming lack of accountability are Biafra, June 12 and Boko Haram, amongst others; each event leading to further disaffection and division in the country.

Like Ige, “I do not belong to the group of Nigerians deluding themselves that we can keep Nigeria forever as it is.” If we can't and do not want to live together as a people, we should be open and honest enough to sit at a table for an open discussion on the way forward.

I don't wish for a national conference that is convoked – usually by a foreign power or “the international community” – when parties to a conflict have exhausted every bloody option, but that is the road Nigeria is travelling currently; a road of mutually assured destruction.

Concluded.

conumah@hotmail.com; Twitter: @conumah