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political transition in Nigeria: 1993-2003

commentaries on selected themes

Kayode Samuel



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National Library of Nigeria

Kayode Samuel

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Dedication

To:

Adesina Sambo, PhD

and

Jide Maiye, PhD

Two mentors who departed too soon.

Foreword

The period covered in this collection of essays was one during which Nigeria witnessed poignant challenges to her political, social and economic structures and institutions. The major actors of these years have in their various ways characterised the nation's history either for good or for ill – or as the case may be, both. Some have offered accounts; many have not. Yet it is important that someone in the mould of the author, Mr. Kayode Samuel has been able to document these experiences in an instructional manner that would serve as a constant reminder about a colourful past.

As commentaries on events and trends in our nation's evolution, the essays provide varied perspectives of what can at best be described as an unstable past. There are certainly lessons to be learnt from the events and developments that the book has focused on. Historians tell us that the past shapes the future. Our nation has been through a lot of changes and it is important that we all work hand in hand to ensure that we do not experience a re-occurrence of some of the lapses of the past.

Writings of this nature help us in the task of ensuring that we never forget the past. They also constantly help to remind us to work assiduously to shape the future for the coming generations, to whom we owe a lot. Our nation's democracy is young and vulnerable. Yet the experience of the first eight years under President Olusegun Obasanjo show that our democracy has undergone – and survived – sometimes excruciating political surgery that would no doubt strengthen her endurance.

These may be described as both precarious and exciting times and it could only take a brilliant and insightful writer such as the author to be able to succinctly capture that era. It is worth pointing out that these essays are informed commentaries on the various groups and factions as well as the international community. No doubt, the essays would help readers to understand some of the major political issues that confronted the nation during those years and also serve as a compass for circumnavigating the twists and turns of this young democracy in an election year.

As a believer in the Nigerian Project one has no doubt that the various perspectives raised in this collection of essays will serve as indicators on how far we have climbed up the democracy ladder and how we need to avoid the pitfalls of the past so as to be able to complete this journey to greatness.

Students of history and political science in particular would find a companion in these essays and Nigerians in general would find that the analysis of events possibly answer some of the nagging questions on the state of the nation and re-assure the reader on the future prospects of Africa's largest nation.

Otunba Gbenga Daniel
Governor of Ogun State, Nigeria
January 2007

National Library of Nigeria

Preface

This is a collection of essays on a remarkable and turbulent period in the political history of Nigeria. Although written between 1999 and 2003, the focus of these essays reaches far behind that period to the crises of the annulment of the June 12 1993 Presidential elections and its horrendous aftermath. The annulment marked a defining moment whose impact still haunts Nigeria's democratic experiment to date.

The decade between 1993 and 2003 were truly years of transition for Nigeria. The first five years of those years were spent in the throes of a brutal military dictatorship while the last five years witnessed the tentative beginnings of democratic rule. Hopefully, these unsure beginnings are now reaching maturation and the Nigerian democratization project could be said to be moving towards its consolidation.

The essays presented in this volume seek to offer both the general and professional reader an insight into the issues, currents and trends that defined this watershed decade and its sequel, of which the current political dispensation is a part. As Nigeria moves towards yet another significant milestone in the evolution of its post-military politics, there is a need for insights that aid understanding of current and contemporary issues.

Contained in this volume is a collection of commentaries that in their totality serves both as a timely guide and a cautionary reflection on the issues that are defining the current phase of the Nigerian democratisation project on the eve of the 2007 general elections. The insights offered in these pages should help the general reader in understanding the present situation in Nigeria and assist everyone interested in Nigeria in making some sense out of what often appears as a profound confusion.

I have been most fortunate to benefit from the friendship and guidance of a lot of people that I have met in the course of gaining the insights shared in this book. It would be impossible to recall all of them by name in these brief notes. However I wish to thank specifically Professor John Moibi Amoda under whose mentorship my critical instincts were honed; Mr. Sam Amuka, publisher of the *Vanguard* Newspapers who provided the outlet for these writings; Dr. Segun Akinluyi, former Presidential speechwriter and a great tutor of the writing arts;

Colonel Lawan Gwadabe (rtd) whom I met at a period that coincided with the onset of this momentous transition; Dr Olatokunbo Awolowo Dosumu who afforded me a space for the initial reflection; and of course my brother and current boss Otunba Gbenga Daniel, Governor of Ogun State, who graciously agreed to write the foreword to this book and whose encouragement has been most useful in bringing this entire project to fruition.

My gratitude also goes to my parents, Femi and Adanma Samuel, my dear wife Ronke and our children, Simi, Oyinkan and 'Sope. I thank all those who ensured that this book got out- Jide Ajani, the Political Editor of *Vanguard*; Tunde Awe, the Librarian; Professor Dafe Otodo, Stella Okoh, Kola Fagbohun, Kunle Sokunbi and Bunmi Adekunbi who helped immensely with the production of this book. Last but not the least I thank Tayo Agunbiade, whose idea it was that I consolidate my writings into book form and who served as my researcher and literary agent.



Kayode Samuel
Abeokuta,
December 2006

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Global scene

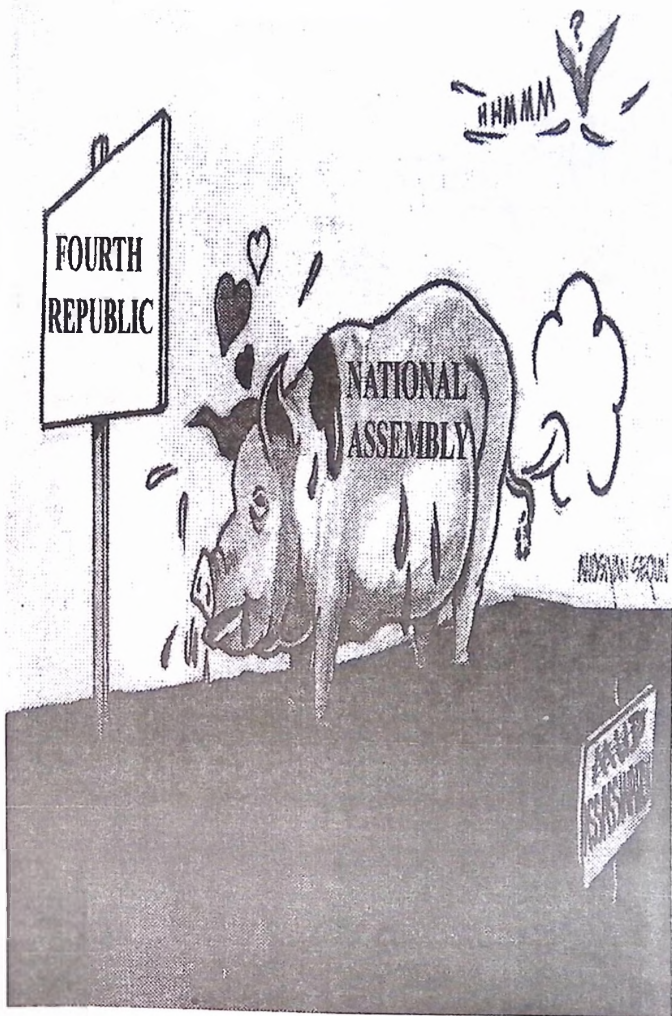
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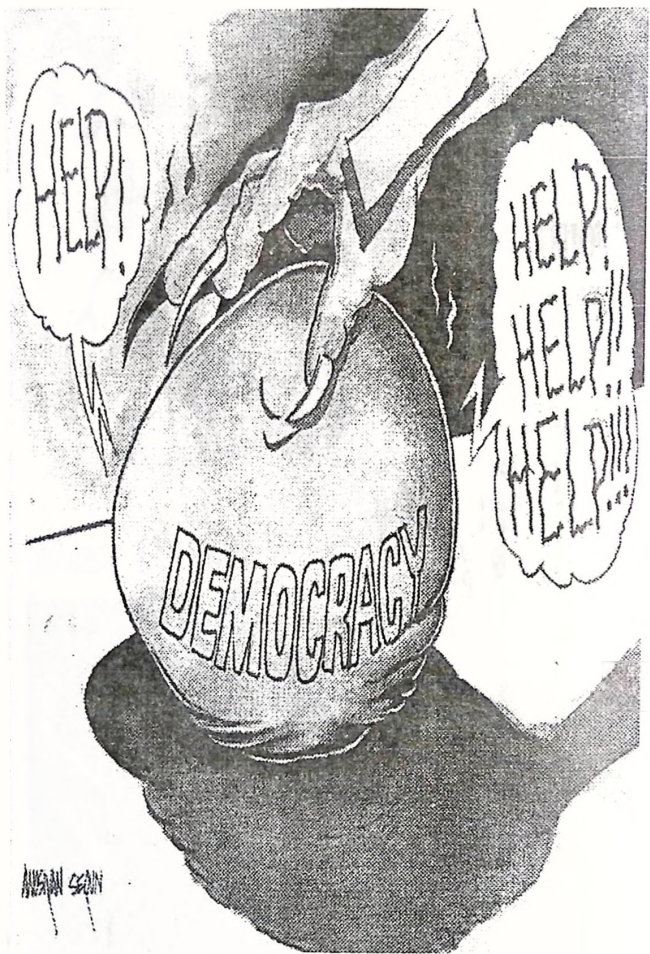
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A decorative banner with a textured, metallic appearance. The banner is shaped like a ribbon with pointed ends and is centered on the page. The word "POLITICS" is written in a bold, black, serif font across the center of the banner. Below the banner, there are two short, horizontal black lines, one on each side, positioned as if they are part of the banner's structure or are decorative elements.

POLITICS

General





Who is in control ?





Buhari and the anti-corruption bill

And so a sentence was handed down the other day in Abuja in the matter of Salisu Buhari. Not surprisingly, it turned out to be no more than a slap on the wrist. It was also a slap in the face of anyone who has ever entered a university with the correct admission requirements. Worse, it is an outrageous judicial taunt to all those poor fellows now toiling through school without visiting *Oluwole* or doing a *Toronto*.

Now, I'm not sure how the respected trial magistrate would feel about these sentiments having himself, presumably, attended school with the correct papers. But I certainly expect the Federal Attorney General, who comes across as a man of learning, to advise a re-opening of the matter. For without doubt, the Buhari case is both a litmus test of the integrity of government's vaunted anti-corruption crusade and a barometer for measuring official sensitivity to the public mood.

My concern with the Buhari affair has nothing to do with whether or not the man staged a tearful public confession. That skilfully choreographed gesture was probably intended to be touching. And indeed, many felt touched. However, the entire spectacle rather reminded me of that famous anecdote of the fellow who murdered both his parents and then turned round to plead with the judge to be lenient with him because he is now an orphan!

Surely, the issues at stake go beyond the momentary bout of sentimental blues that we were all programmed to feel while the fellow escaped, all of ₦2000 short, but with a homecoming reception in the kitty. Rather, the Buhari affair raises more fundamental issues regarding the culture of impunity that has emerged and blossomed in the land. Consider this: the fellow also contested and won an election into the same seat last year – as a 28-year old! That fact seems to have escaped our focus. Yet, if we had bothered to properly examine this particular detail, we would have seen that a much deeper malaise is at work.

I cannot quite remember the age qualification for running for election into the House of Representatives under the Abacha Transition. As with many things relating to that tragic era, the less that is brought to remembrance, the better for one's sanity. However, I cannot recall that the age requirement was lower than what currently obtains, i.e. thirty years. Could it not be the case that having gotten away with committing a felony in 1998, Buhari never saw any reason to doubt that he would also get away with it in 1999? And thereafter, forever? Even now, has the fellow been given sufficient cause to believe that he still cannot get away with acting with impunity in the near future?

In its modern-day political usage, impunity is a concept that emerged out of the lexicon of Latin America's bitter experience with brutal military regimes, especially during the "dirty wars" of the 1970s and the 1980s. As with its common dictionary meaning, impunity defines the criminally blissful state of "freedom from punishment" for wrong doing. It is the certainty of getting away with a violation, be it of the law, of public morality, of human dignity, or even of human life.

Several manifestations of the culture of impunity abound from the long night of repressive rule from which Nigeria is, hopefully, now beginning to emerge. The routinization of outlawry in every facet of life is one. The casual application of extreme measures (including murder) in the pursuit of the personal whims is another. So is the appropriation of the public space (including public resources) for private ends. And, of course, the latest fad of brazenly falsifying one's own records even while one's peers and key witnesses are still alive and kicking. All of which define a thriving industry of generally behaving as one pleases in the full knowledge and certainty that prosecution and reasonable sanction will never come.

Sadly, the Buhari sentence does not send the signal that the country is now ready to do something about stamping out the culture of impunity. We are told that there are three major purposes for which decent society imposes punishment on its erring members. These are *deterrence*, *retribution* and *reformation*. It would take a lot to convince anyone that any of these purposes has been served in the Buhari case. And therein lies a great danger, especially with regard to the demonstration effect of the sentence, which is already showing up.

Add this to the rather indecent haste with which Mr. President was reported to have given his immediate predecessor a clean bill of health on allegations of treasury looting, and one sees the outlines of a worrisome trend. Do not get me wrong. General Abdulsalami Abubakar could well have been a nice fellow fallen amongst thieves. Yet a lot of nasty things happened during his brief tenure – especially to the treasury. These things need to be addressed and redressed for the sake of our common well being. And issuing a precipitate presidential clearance will just not do.

The temptation to let bygones be bygones in these matters could be somewhat alluring. It is a temptation that is as convenient as it is dangerous. For

many reasons. A man granted what amounts to immunity and acting with impunity is not likely to see anything wrong in what he did, so he's not likely to come out of the experience a better reformed person. Also, handing down a light sentence in a case of grievous infraction of public morality is not likely to serve as a deterrence to others. Above all, the Buhari sentence introduces a needless benchmark of controversy that is likely to ambush future efforts at stamping out corruption in the land. This is more so given the country's famous combination of divisive forces that instinctively predisposes many to focus every public issue through an ethnic, regional, religious or other primordial prism.

What happens, for example, if another legislator (and we are told there may be many others) say, from the East, or West, or Niger Delta, or the Middle Belt is found guilty of falsification and forgery? The choice would then be to do nothing about the matter, or engage in some kind of sophistry, or to let the felon off as light as Buhari has been let off. And then what will become of all the bluster and bluff about anti-corruption crusade?

In all, it bears restating that the progress of Nigeria's return to decency and democracy would depend, to a large extent, on how the new regime convinces the people that culture of impunity will not be allowed to thrive any longer. A good point to start for in my view is to revisit the Buhari case. Another is to stop playing silly politics in the straight forward issue of what to do about all the Buharis that might still be lurking in every shadow of public life – including the legislative, the executive, and yes, the judiciary.

United, not uniform*

Each time I am confronted with what I consider to be hasty jubilation over a development that is still evolving, I remember Monday 14th June 1993. On that day, I was out with friends at our favourite after-office location on Lagos Island. A friend in Abuja who was in the know had just phoned in the tally of the presidential elections held two days before and the word had spread round the circuit. We all agreed to close early from work and converge for a celebration of sorts.

Naturally, the mood in the house was one of revelry, drinks of all texture and temperament flowed and so did a general spirit of hail-fellow-well-met. It was a time for sharing tall dreams and grand visions of a nascent national rebirth. On that day, otherwise sensible folks permitted themselves such incredibly fantastic flights of fancy about where Nigeria might be headed.

One fellow actually informed the house that "with Abiola's victory, all of Babangida's sins are forgiven." He did not quite tell us by what special dispensation the Almighty God had empowered him to pronounce a forgiveness of sins. We all light-heartedly agreed that the fellow was probably speaking in the spirit – after several bottles of same!

Someone then sounded a note of caution. The push for a sovereign national conference, he warned, should not abate since, in his words, "Abiola was going to be a status quo president." He was promptly shouted down. The fellow who had earlier threatened to declare IBB a saint again volunteered, in between gulps of lager, that "with Abiola in Aso Rock, there would be no need for any conference." And that seemed to have been the general drift of sentiments that evening. The battle was won, it appeared. No need to worry anymore.

The next day, Tuesday 15th, the news came that Humphrey Nwosu had been ordered by an Abuja court to halt further announcement of the election results. We later got to hear of the nasty experience the poor Professor went through as agents of the state sought to give effect of the court order. Barely a week later,

* Vanguard September 17, 1999

the elections were officially pronounced annulled. Our friend who had phoned in the results the previous Monday suddenly surfaced in Lagos. Abuja had become too hot to stay in, he told us. The rest, as they say, is history.

Across the country and within sizeable segments of the international community, an upbeat mood continues to trail the restoration of civilian rule in Nigeria. Which is not a bad thing. After fifteen years of military rule the euphoria is at once understandable and justified. Yet, there are still several aspects of our evolving national condition that merit sober reflection and which must instruct caution, circumspection and vigilance. This is necessary lest we let down our guard too soon or fall into the dangers of complacency. The battle for democracy, equity and progress in Nigeria is not even half won yet, and things could still go dangerously wrong.

Not that one is necessarily a killjoy or a pessimist, although there are more than enough grounds for pessimism in a polity as petulant and as unpredictable as ours. Which is why I find it quite bothersome that the fortunes of the fourth republic still hang so desperately on the sound health, positive disposition and goodwill of its individual managers, particularly the president.

Idiosyncratic statesmanship and personalized authority are not necessarily bad, especially for a president who probably fancies himself as the Nigerian version of Charles de Gaulle. But these are poor substitutes for the building of enduring structures and processes that would outlast the individual and which would not be so easy to subvert by successors lacking in goodwill, decency or competence. This is why the task of constitutional review that parliament has set for itself upon resumption from its current recess is very critical.

Nigeria as constituted today is still a disaster waiting to happen. Ours remains a land of vastly different people set further apart by the unfortunate developments of recent years. For many of our leaders, however, it appears that nation building is seen as a process of making all of us the same. But we are not the same. I won't exactly go as far as my friend, Femi Fani-Kayode, who in a recent article declared that the Yoruba are as different from the Fulani as Germans are from the Turks. Still, it is a statement that speaks largely to certain incontrovertible realities about our national condition.

Let us ask ourselves some pointed questions. Is there a common idea of what Nigeria is? Or a common vision of what it should be? Without prejudice to the work of the Vision 2010 committee and in spite of the huge human and material investment in building the façade and paraphernalia of "one Nigeria", these are not idle posers. For if we engage these questions deeply enough we see why building Nigeria remains such an intractable enterprise even with the best of intentions that Obasanjo is currently touted to have.

There must be something fundamentally wrong with a country whose people cannot even agree on basic issues that other countries take for granted. Why is it that what makes absolutely good sense to a perfectly reasonable person is absolutely nonsense to another perfectly reasonable person in the same country?

How can it ever have made sense to any one that a maritime agency should be located in a landlocked city? Or how can the annulment have ever made sense to anyone in their right mind?

The first Obasanjo administration must claim dubious credit for allowing zeal to outrun reality in the desire to build a strong and united nation. It was in the last few years of the 1970s that we got so carried away with promoting unity that we ended up imposing uniformity. It was the time those institutions that made Nigeria truly federal were subsumed under the federal might.

Fittingly, Obasanjo is back in power. He must undo the damage. What is required of him now is that he becomes an advocate of devolution to initiate the restoration of many of the powers purloined from the constituent units by the centre. A truly federal incomes, wages and prices policy is a good place to start from and it is comforting to note that he is already making the right noises in that direction. Whatever his views may be on regional commands or state police or the need for a sovereign national conference, he must by now have realized that there are structural bases for the country's multiple problems and that these are traceable to the drive for uniformity.

Nigeria can still be a united entity without our keeping up pretences about the fact that ours is a country of vastly different peoples. Only when we put creative structures and processes in place to manage our differences can we afford to sleep easy and celebrate our nascent national rebirth. Continuing the mindless drive for uniformity can only result in further disunity and ultimate ruin.

Interesting times*

There is so much to talk about these days, you do not even know where to start. Events have been unfolding with such dazzling alacrity it literally takes your breath away. Surely, this is one occasion when that much-quoted Chinese saying about living in interesting times would be said to truly apply. The situation is pregnant and the portents could be both fraught and auspicious, depending on how we handle this rather fascinating interface in our country's evolution.

Over the past week, there has been a lot of drama in the air, and with it not a little irony. For me, though, the prize for paradox goes to the dailies that juxtaposed those happy images from the Diya thanksgiving at Odogbolu with news that Hamza Al-Mustapha & Co have been pleading that they should not be tried in Lagos or any part of Western Nigeria for that matter. Who in their wildest imaginations could have thought that such a fairy tale role reversal would be witnessed in our lifetime? But, there have been other equally interesting developments lately. A few samplers.

Great news from Zamfara

With some luck, the much-deferred restructuring of the Federal Republic of Nigeria might just become a reality a lot sooner than many of us had anticipated. And the decisive initiative in that direction seems likely to emerge from the most unlikely quarters. If the current signals become a trend, this could be both a dramatic and fitting finale to a year filled with pleasant surprises.

The *deus ex machina* of what would for many Nigerians be a most welcome development is the issue of Sharia, or, better still, the uses to which that perennially vexed issue is now being put.

* Vanguard October 15, 1999

Last Friday, the Governor of Zamfara State, Alhaji Ahmad Sani, signed into law two bills passed by the House of Assembly seeking to enforce the Islamic legal code and administrative system in the state. The formal proclamation of the new order, we are told, is billed for October 27. Earlier this week, there were indications that the Sokoto State House of Assembly was considering a similar piece of legislation. I do not think this is mere happenstance. If my hunch is right, we are at the onset of a breakout that could witness copycat proclamations of the Islamic code over the so-called "core north" in the very near future.

The ostensible rationale for the imposition of Sharia is the need to rid society of its ills. I do not have any problems with this, or with anyone seeking to recreate society along the lines of a higher ethical order. In fact, any effort to reorganize society on the basis of a new and qualitatively superior morality should hold a certain fascination for anyone genuinely concerned with the human condition. And I do not think it is our business here to impute any motives to the imposition of Sharia beyond the advertised intentions of its proponents.

But having said that, *I think we need to be a little more circumspect regarding the possible implications of the move from Zamfara. The likely implications are legion, spanning virtually all aspects of life.* Our concern here, however, is with the political and constitutional implications of a constituent unit of the federation adopting positions that put it beyond the pale of the commonwealth. Some posers: can the President of the Federal Republic appoint a non-Muslim into a position in Zamfara State that requires the incumbent to operate according to the Islamic code - e.g., commissioner of police? Can banks charge interest in a state governed by Sharia?

It would seem to me that what Zamfara State has just done is to re-define itself in a manner that places it outside the jurisdiction of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. While the fine legal points of this position are being sorted out, let me hasten to say that I do not have a problem with any part of the country declaring that it no longer wishes to belong to Nigeria. If what the people of Zamfara want is what has just been expressed through their duly elected representatives in Assembly, I think they should be welcome to it.

The only problem is that the right of constituent unit to so redefine itself in a manner that borders on de-linking itself from the union, voluntarily or otherwise, is yet to be recognized by our laws. If we desire to enjoy such rights by now introducing the voluntary element into our articles of association, then the least we can do is to get together and talk things over. Welcome to the sovereign national conference.

Between Tinubu and Al-Mustapha

Have you sighted any of those pro-Tinubu graffiti in Lagos lately? They rather remind me of a bygone sinister era – the tail end of Sani Abacha's rule when

choreographed solidarity rallies became the norm. Pray, why would anyone need to go as far as mounting billboards and staging solidarity rallies to prove that they went to school?

Which is one of the reasons I think Al Mustapha and Co. should be grateful for the chance to visit Lagos on legitimate business for a change, having been denied the opportunity for so many years under Abacha. It will not be such a strange surrounding after all, considering that those Tinubu bill boards should be a familiar sight.

Two quick remarks concerning worries over the trial venue: one, you cannot choose both the scene of your crime and the venue of your trial. Or, to put it another way, once you choose the site of the crime, you foreclose any debate on where to be tried if you are caught. Second, I do not think there is much to worry about with the OPC. If anyone harms Al-Mustapha and his fellow accused in Lagos, that person will be tried in the same manner that they are now being tried. And that trial venue will not be in Abuja.

The forces at work*

Once, they say, is happenstance. Twice could be coincidence. Thrice is definitely enemy action. And so, what do you call it when it happens the fifth time?

In the five odd months that have elapsed since the return of civil rule in Nigeria, there have been just as many notable outbreaks of politically significant violence in the land. First, it was Sagamu. Then it was Kano. And, then, a new upsurge in the Delta. Thereafter, the troubles in Ondo. Now it is Ajegunle, right in the heart of Lagos.

In between there have been other incidents, admittedly of lesser moment and dramatic impact, but nonetheless of no mean implication for the health of the new political order. In some cases, the incidents have attained such regularity as to become indicative of a worrisome trend. Witness the heightening incidence of violent crime that spares neither the streets nor homes across the country. Or, the novel and militant slant to motor park touting as had not been witnessed since the days of Bayo Success and his NPN thugs. What about the recurring decimal of obviously choreographed unruliness in legislative chambers? Or, the siege laid to the country's North-East by so-called Chadian rebels? And, of course, the return of the reign of the Strike Force.

There is definitely a lot more to all that is happening around us these days than meets the eye. As far as conspiracy theories go, there could be a grand puppeteer somewhere pulling the strings of our current troubles. And we have heard so much from the exploits of our most recent taskmasters as would confer a large measure of respectability on conspiracy theories, especially when these have to do with politics and the power game.

But, perhaps, we need to keep an open mind in all of this and not ascribe sinister manipulation or malign intent, to any distemper that breaks out in the land. Still, I think, we need to reflect deeply and ask ourselves: why are all these

* *Vanguard* November 5, 1999

things happening now? Or, more importantly, who is likely to be profiting from all the untoward things now unfolding?

When confronted with a situation such as is now at hand, experience teaches that while it is advisable to seek to think through the problem, it profits little to over-intellectualize issues by labouring too long in the province of complex reality. This is because, usually, some of the most complicated and most intricate problems are underlain by base motives and carry very simple solutions. Social science teaches us that the way a question is posed could be significant for the kind of answer you get, or whether you'd even get any answer at all.

So, let us ask some very simple and direct, if seemingly base, questions: who is making hay from this racket of keeping the system permanently on the boil? Who is likely to be gaining from keeping us all on tenterhooks? In whose interest is it that Nigeria should not settle down? Who are those likely to lose out in the eventuality that the country should find its way this time around after over two decades of groping in the dark?

Asking about the "who" naturally leads us into inquiring as to the "what" and the "why". So, what is at stake in Nigeria today? And why are the current vicious and devious methods deemed appropriate and preferable for securing it?

Simply put, what is at stake is no less than the soul of Nigeria itself and the direction in which the fortunes (or the lack thereof) of 120 million people will be steered. If you ask me, I think these are substantial enough stakes for criminally minded power mongers to want to get into the kind of high-wire intrigues now manifesting as communal and ethnic clashes. And I think the forces at work know it too.

In proffering the foregoing as one's reading of the current situation, it is important to stress that there are both retrospective and prospective components to the on-going troubles. The retrospective has to do with the fear that many of our compatriots understandably entertain as to the likelihood that their less than savoury past could catch up with them under the present dispensation. Their battle now is to ensure that this dispensation never stabilizes enough to take on the inescapable assignment of exorcising the past for good.

On the other hand, the prospective component of the crises concerns the worries of those who invested in creating the current dispensation in the expectation that it would secure for them unfair advantages in a system rooted in sub-optimality. Their own battle is to checkmate any trend they see emerging that could threaten full returns on their investment. Increasingly, it does appear that both strands have converged and dovetailed, one into the other.

Together, these constitute the forces now at work. What their current exertions further prove is that regardless of the general atmosphere of exhilaration that overtook the land at hand-over on May 29, the truth is that our country is still in transition to a better future. But we should not be so carried away as to surmise that everyone shares that hope or joins us in that prayer.

For the naysayers, the instruments of battle are the disturbances we now see being instigated all around us. For those who seek a better Nigeria, the time has come to fashion an appropriate response to this affront.

And we need to do this in the full realization that the outcome of the battle is not a foregone conclusion. The game, if it is one, could still go either way.

Awo's face... on a new note*

Sometime in late 1985, a remarkable document of indeterminate source made the rounds of media houses. It contained, claimed its faceless authors, an earth-shaking revelation that could tear the country apart. By that token, they said, it was something that anyone who cared about Nigeria must read. Curiosity being both the blessing and bane of this game, one felt that no self-respecting reporter should omit to, at least, browse through a document advertised in such superlatives regardless of one's hunch that it was an obvious case of smear campaign.

True to its billing, the document was, indeed, a *tour de force*. It featured a petition written against someone who had just been appointed into very high office in the then barely weeks-old administration of General Ibrahim Babangida. It was a bulky write-up, very much in the fashion of such inspired mischief. And it read like a briefing document, which could have been the result of considerable "insider" input. The document catalogued, in painstaking detail, the subject's life since his university days and reeled off a litany of sins that, in the view of its authors, made the man unfit for such high office.

The sin that stood out most starkly amidst sundry other "crimes" was the charge that the fellow, even as a civil servant, was an avid follower of Chief Obafemi Awolowo or, to use the exact words of the document, "an unrepentant Awoist". That point was belaboured *ad nauseam* as the write-up meandered through the dark recesses of its authors' fevered imagination. It then ended on a frenzied note that either spoke volumes for the authors' state of mind or said something about the gravity they attached to what was for them at stake, or both. Allowing the man to occupy such a sensitive office, they warned, could lead to the break-up of Nigeria since, in their words, "that has always been the Awoists' grand design!"

* *Vanguard*, 31 Dec 1999

Mercifully, aside from one or two inconsequential rags, I cannot remember that any newspaper of substance bothered to dignify the write-up with as much as a mention. Which was just as well. The subject of the petition went on to acquit himself quite creditably in the Babangida cabinet and later emerged as a positive force in the politics of that era. The country has not broken up by virtue of his having held office, although it very well nearly did with a lot of help from the likes of the petition's writers. Today, the man is still very much around, a dignified presence in an otherwise depressing cast of political jobbers, with a comportment that becomes an elder statesman in the making.

We recall the said petition to show how, indeed, times have changed around here. Looking back, it is now quite amusing to think that there was actually a time when being associated with Chief Awolowo was to be considered an untouchable in some quarters. I recall that as a reporter covering the great man's burial in 1987, one of the questions one had to answer quite frequently was why the Nigerian press was lending its energies so eagerly to celebrating a man who was, for some, no more than "a tribal chieftain". My answer then, as now, is from that cryptic line popularized in the University of Ife of those days by a leftist teacher: "For those who understand, no explanation is necessary; for those who do not understand, no explanation is possible."

Even today, it is still not certain how far the anti-Awo mindset has receded in some quarters. My attitude to this is that people are welcome to hit their heads against the wall as much as they care. The truth must have dawned on many of us by now, even if we are still too ashamed to admit it. And the truth is really quite simple – *Awolowo was arguably one of the greatest assets it pleased God to bestow on this otherwise benighted land.*

Which makes it doubly depressing that Nigeria should have thought it could move ahead by diminishing its great men while elevating its small minds. Poetic justice being what it is, that predilection led us to those small men who have just finished taking us to the cleaners. Hopefully, we have now come to the end of our folly and would not go further down than we have already. A pity that it has taken all this while and at such heavy cost. But, as they say, it is better late than ever.

It seems to me that an appropriate starting point in this journey to national self-redemption is the introduction of the new one hundred-naira note bearing Chief Awolowo's portrait. I am exceedingly thrilled at this development because I am convinced it is one gesture that signals the beginning of something positive in our national life. Our country finally seems to be coming round to the wisdom of reconciling with itself by giving its brightest and best their due. That, for me, is the symbolism of the new one hundred-naira note. And that, if you will excuse the pun, is really a positive note on which to enter the new millennium.

The new politics*

Four unique features characterize the emerging politics of the Fourth Republic. First is its angry impatience. Second is its fatuous insolence. Third is its eerie surrealism. And last, but in no way the least, is the multiplicity of its possibilities – for good and for ill. To put this last one another way, there is always in today's brand of politics a sense of anything-can-happen, a feature the new dispensation seems to share with the Charly Boy Show or the Smirnoff Vodka advert of old.

The politics of the Fourth Republic merits close, careful and constant watch because it is both fraught and auspicious. At turns hilarious and tragic, it combines, sometimes in almost equal measure, elements of gravitas and imbecility. The Fourth Republic is like no other that we have had. Its portents are as poignant as they are pregnant. What do we mean by this?

The First Republic was founded on an expansive sense of hope that was both understandable and justifiable in the context of a new-won Independence. It was a hope that the shenanigans of the departing colonial oligarchy and the cautionary message of Wole Soyinka's Independence Eve play did little to douse. It was also a hope that crashed in barely half a decade. In spite of ourselves, we again indulged a sense of renewed hope at the dawn of the Second Republic, albeit measured hope. I say in spite of ourselves because the portents were clear enough as to where Nigeria was headed under the ministrations of those characters that took power in 1979. On his departure from these shores barely a few months into the Second Republic, my older brother, Biodun, had said that one of the reasons he was not likely to be back in a long while was that NPN rule could only lead Nigeria into grief. To quote him, "the NPN is the largest conclave of certified rogues to be found anywhere in Africa." And how right he has proven to be. But it was not to be the last time that Biodun would be right about his country and its politics.

* *Vanguard* January 14, 2000

Sometime in 1989, at the inception of the Babangida transition, Biodun had called in from London to exchange intelligence on goings-on at home. He told me that he was reluctant to believe that partisan politics was truly returning to Nigeria until he learnt of how a tailor defeated a lawyer to become legal adviser of a state branch of one of the parties! With the benefit of hindsight, we can now see that the Third Republic took off on such a silly note as to forewarn us all that we were going nowhere. As it were, the Third Republic never actually came into being; it exists only to the extent that there continues to be a debate as to whether or not it ever existed! And what about the Fourth Republic?

By the time May 29 1999 arrived, we had all been cured of our tall hopes and inured to shock. We had seen how far down we could go and what depths of infamy our leaders were capable of plumbing. The discerning and far-sighted amongst us knew it was a most difficult road ahead. For one, too many people had moved so effortlessly from Abacha's two-million-man-march into the Obasanjo inauguration for comfort. It was almost as if they merely switched canopies at the same party. At another level, there were still too many assumptions about vested interests and their potency. Many who jumped on the bandwagon of change merely did so in the context of a marriage of convenience. It was a marriage that was not going to last beyond the wedding day. So, we find ourselves at the present critical juncture, all but consumed by the new politics of rage: OPC and APC; Sharia and Biafra; Ijaw and Ilaje. Everybody has an axe to grind. Everyone wants every grievance and every fear to be resolved at once.

Yet, the arena for addressing those grievances and fears – government – is itself contested territory. *Conditional* Nigerians (those who can only be Nigerians if they are ruling) now find themselves in the same boat as Reluctant Nigerians (those who can only be in Nigeria if it is ruled the way they want). And it is proving not to be a jolly cruise. Those who have always been on the outside heckling and throwing stones are now on the inside and cannot seem to know what to do. In their confusion, they opt for fatuity. Those who have always been on the inside are finding that not only the sitting arrangement but also the language of discussion has changed. So, they opt for sheer bloody-mindedness that almost borders on contempt for the people.

In all of this, politics continues to gain ascendance over governance. And the people get ever angrier, often in the darkness of their homes and workplaces as NEPA goes on recess – perhaps the most poignant index of state failure today. Out of this veritable witches' brew flow many contradictions and imponderables, and sundry distempers. Dark passions are let loose. *Regardless of what anyone thinks of the call for a National Conference, a parliament of the streets has emerged in which the language of business is violence. Increasingly, ordinary folks are lionizing and idolizing those the state claims are outlaws.* In many parts of Lagos, OPC is now the recognized public authority, chasing robbers or those it so describes and controlling traffic. Others, taking a cue from its "success" are threatening to form their own troops. The Middle Belt served

notice to that effect last weekend. Nigeria has become a zone of limitless possibilities. All the IOUs are coming up for payment at the same time and all we have is one man whose shoulders can only carry so much. As the English poet, Matthew Arnold, wrote: "An age is dying the other is still too powerless to be born." It is getting harder and harder by the day to keep pace with the unfolding drama.

Southern patriots, northern elders*

The patriots and elders of this land must worry for the way reasoned argument seems to be fast giving way to bloodletting over the on-going debate on the Nigerian condition.

That debate was about to enter a most interesting phase when the Kaduna riots altered the tempo of the argument, shifting it from jaw-jaw to the war-war. For now, we are not in a position to speculate as to what or who is responsible for this shift. Suffice it to say, however, that rather than deflect from the dynamic of the raging debate, the riots should in fact further give it a booster.

The underlying cause of the current distemper is largely traceable to the continuing unease over the articles of our association as a nation and the justifiable anxiety over the state and fate of the union. To the extent that the riots help us all – Christians and Muslim and traditionalist, northerner and southerner, minority and majority, rulers and the ruled, to sharpen our perspective on the key issues at stake. But it is really a dreadful pity that this is coming at so great a cost in lives and property lost.

The case for dialogue on the way forward for Nigeria remains as compelling as ever. It would help a great deal if the debate evolves progressively. Unfortunately, one has not seen too much of a progression in the position canvassed a fortnight ago by some northern elders in their first major response to the constitutional proposals put forward by the Patriots, a group of eminent southerners led by legal luminary Chief Rotimi Williams. By the way, the Patriots boast of a membership that cuts across the traditional partisan lines. Significantly, also, the group includes some notable actors in the derailment of the Nigeria dream.

The northern elders, on their own part, were said to have convened under a steering committee set up by a former President of the Federal Republic, Alhaji

* *Vanguard* March 3, 2000

Shehu Shagari. Although not a few disturbing issues are raised by this latter detail, we will refrain for now from levelling any accusation of parochialism. Nor would we query the political correctness of having a personage who should be an elder statesman mount such a brazenly tribal platform. (We are all tribalists now, aren't we?) But we should not omit to ask what the reaction from yonder would have been had the roles been reversed, if the former president in question had not come from the north. But then how many former presidents are not from the north?

Anyway, back to the substantive issue. The northern elder's intervention was a riposte to submissions made to the Presidential Committee on the Review of the 1999 Constitution by the Patriots in which the group set out its proposals for amendments to the constitution. Two of the proposals set forth by the group in their self-proclaimed "mission to rescue Nigeria" are notable for the interest and controversy that they continue to generate.

Firstly, the group called for restructuring of the federation by proposing a four-tier federal structure to replace the present three-tier structure. Under the proposed arrangement, six regions would be interposed between the central government and the existing thirty-six states. In proposing this option, the Patriots argue that the present thirty-six-state structure is counter-productive and inimical to prospects for meaningful national development.

Secondly, the group proposed the restoration of the derivation principle for sharing revenue from on-shore resources while arguing that the stabilizing role of fiscal federalism has over the years been eroded by the extant revenue allocation formula, resulting in avoidable restiveness in resource-bearing communities and sub-optimal performance across the land.

Expectedly, the Patriots' argument for restructuring is the one that has gotten the hackles of the northern elders. This is understandable because restructuring is at the very heart and essence of all the other constitutional issues now vexing the union.

And, as astute political war-horses, the northern elders must have reckoned (rightly) that if the restructuring argument can be knocked off, tackling every other in the clamour for constitutional reform would be a piece of cake.

But their response has been, sadly, remarkable for its triteness. The northern elders have merely rehashed some of the well-worn shibboleths against restructuring while seeking to erect a few new bogeys. Three principal errors are contained in the statement issued on the elders' behalf by former Kaduna State Governor Alhaji Lawal Kaita.

Firstly, it is the height of sophistry to claim that a proposal stops being relevant just because it had been previously canvassed and rejected. In human affairs, issues are constantly evolving and yesterday's heresy could be today's orthodoxy.

Secondly, it is begging the question to aver that restructuring becomes unnecessary once there is "able leadership and good governance". What happens

if, as is now the case in Nigeria, the existing structure makes the emergence and sustenance of "able leadership and good governance" impossible? Thirdly, they cite the work of 1995 Constitutional Conference (convened with only 350,000 votes in a country of 60 million voters) as evidence that all is well with Nigeria. When people are reduced to touting Abacha's illegitimate progeny to buttress their case, then they really must be running out of arguments.

But the northern elders really shot themselves in the foot when they then went on to vow to "uphold the unity of the landmass called Northern Nigeria". It is really quite revealing that the elders' concern in all this is not so much with the north's peoples but its landmass. The people do not really matter, only the land does! That could be a Freudian slip, but it speaks volumes to those of us who would rather not see ourselves as being just mere digits on a landmass.

We see all around us intimations that the roof may yet cave in on the house of iniquity called Nigeria. Seeing the way the wind is blowing, the Patriots wisely seek to move themselves closer to the path of rectitude.

In so doing, they may yet atone for some of the costly errors that led us to this sorry pass. The Northern Elders may wish to take a cue. If they persist in refusing to come to terms with the reality of the accumulated injuries inflicted on the people, they may yet end up with all the landmass that they want – with no one to play elder to.

Have they ever heard of how the dinosaurs became extinct?

An end to appeasement*

Sometime in 1987, or thereabouts, a former Chief of Army Staff was our guest at the *Vanguard* editorial conference. In terms of newsworthiness of an interview subject, the man was definitely a good catch – and not entirely because he had held such high office in the past. In addition to having headed the army, our man had behind him a rather colourful war-time history, the high point of which was a famous case of cross-country bicycle riding when he reckoned that it was expedient to put a safe distance between himself and advancing Biafran troops. Even at the time he came to speak with us, he was barely coming out of yet another riding episode, this time a rather messy entanglement with a certain lady of easy virtue.

All of this, of course, meant that we all looked forward to this particular encounter. No doubt, the more salacious details of our interviewee's life rather tickled our fancy much more than whatever might have been the man's contributions to the evolution of Nigerian defence policy. But, we all agreed to rein in any untoward curiosity that could have elicited some rather embarrassing posers. And so we refrained from talking about bicycles and prostitutes and the like. However, as often happens with encounters of this nature, there was no knowing where the scoop would come from. And, it really did come from an unexpected detour that was not even part of the prepared script or the rehearsed questions.

"What does the Arabic inscription on the crest of the Nigeria Army stand for" someone asked, almost out of the blues. To which the general responded that he really did not know. "Did he ever bother to find out?" another member of the team inquires. Not quite, came the reply, but he had heard it said somewhere that it had a religious connotation that was Islamic "or something to that effect". Did he not consider it worrisome that the crest of an institution of which he was

* *Vanguard* March 10, 2000

head should bear an inscription that he could neither comprehend nor understand and of whose symbolic and substantive import he was so obviously at sea? No, he did not think there was anything to worry about in that.

At this point, the interviewers knew they were on to something really interesting, to say the least.

The grilling continued: Okay, did he as Chief of Army Staff initiate or support any moves to have the inscription amended or removed, having been apprised of a general idea of what it meant and the symbolism it carried? No, he did not. Why? was the natural follow-up. He just thought he should let things ride. And, did he feel right adopting that attitude? Yes, of course, for the sake of peace, was the General's retort.

Someone then asked: Could he remember anytime that such a concession came from the other side? What does that mean, the General countered, obviously getting worked up. Simply put, could he remember anytime when his brother officers from the part of the country usually associated with the inscription in question ever allowed such a matter that was so fundamental to the identity of a vital national institution to ride for the sake of peace? Did he not think that it would have been more honourable to stand up to such a brazen appropriation of a national symbol by a section of the country? The general's answer was that people were getting unduly personal and sentimental about the issue and that he found that line of questioning rather tedious. Many of us actually found this a most alarming response, to put it mildly. As we did not want the interview to end in a shouting match, we too, in a manner of speaking, let it ride.

One cannot but recall this particular encounter at this critical juncture in our national life. And, we recall it to underline how things degenerated to this point due to the penchant of people, especially from some parts of the country, to "just let things ride... for the sake of peace."

There is a price that is too high to pay for peace. It is the price of self-respect. For too long in Nigeria we have sought to buy peace and unity at the price of continually debasing ourselves by generally kow-towing to the whims and fancies of our more brazen fellow countrymen. This tendency has brought neither peace nor unity. Rather, what it has done is to further encourage our local slave masters in their brazenness. The time has come to put an end to a policy of appeasement that has obviously not worked and that will never work.

In saying this, we cannot but recall the fate that befell the most famous policy of appeasement in history. In the 1930s, the European powers led by British Prime Minister Chamberlain and French Premier Dalladier thought they could keep Adolf Hitler from his dream of world domination by appeasing him with whatever helpless territory that caught his fancy. That policy foundered on the rocks of the aggressor's unremitting insolence and insatiability. In 1936, Hitler marched into the Rhineland. To appease Hitler, the great powers acquiesced even though he had clearly contravened the terms of the Versailles

Treaty. In 1938, he concluded his famous Anschluss with a puppet regime in Austria. Everyone knew the so-called "voluntary" union was no more than a contrived conquest of a hapless neighbour, but the great powers again acquiesced to appease Hitler. In 1938, he said he wanted a part of neighbouring Czechoslovakia inhabited by the Sudeten Germans. Once again, the great powers acquiesced. Chamberlain thereafter gave his famous "peace in our time" speech in which he claimed that Hitler meant well. Hitler was soon to show how well he meant when just a few months later he asked for the Polish Corridor. At that point, even the most dovish appeasers had to take a firm stand, which was how the Second World War broke out. Historians are almost unanimous in their belief that if a firm stand had been taken against Hitler early enough, perhaps that war would not have broken out and if it did, it might not have been as horrendous as it was.

As with international transgressors, so with local aggressors: Nigeria cannot be built on the basis of permanently appeasing its more brazen elements whose sole source of strength is their belief that they have a monopoly of a casual attitude to violence. The line must be drawn somewhere and it appears we have reached that point already.

Bola Ige and the kingdom of darkness*

Is Power and Steel Minister, Chief Bola Ige fighting the kingdom of darkness or fostering it? This, admittedly, is a rather provocative question. But following the recurring disasters of the past few months (the great Nation's Cup embarrassment inclusive), culminating in two incidents of "system collapse" in as many weeks, it has become necessary to take a hard look at this most intractable ministerial portfolio and its equally obstinate incumbent.

Where you stand on the issue of intermittent power cuts vis-à-vis the Ige factor probably depends on how you perceive reality, especially Nigerian reality. Two schools of thought appear to have crystallized on the matter.

Ordinary folks who live in a world of simple, straightforward reality know only one thing: Chief Ige's tenure is proving to be as lacklustre as that of any of his more appalling predecessors. Possibly worse. Worse because of the revolution of rising expectations that his appointment unleashed. Plus the fact that he had led both himself and the rest of us into believing that he would soon be turning stone into bread – a delicate Biblical allusion that now seems to be standing on its head as our health, leisure and livelihood are daily ruined by power outages.

However, for those who live in a world of complex reality, where nothing happens unless there is a plot behind it, Chief Ige is a victim of powerful forces bent on destroying his tenure and demystifying the man and his politics. For this school of thought, the creeping "Jakandensisation" of Bola Ige is central to any respectable conspiracy theory on how the forces of darkness plan to rubbish the gains of power shift. Sadly for us, it appears the minister himself believes this to be the sole source of his troubles with NEPA.

The truth about NEPA must, of course, lie somewhere between sheer institutional lethargy borne of incompetence and the enemy action of vested

* Friday March 17, 2000

interests. within and without. Our concern here is not to affirm or disprove the existence of plots. Actually, beyond the run of commonsensical conjectures, we are not in a position to do either. Rather, what should concern us is the message in all this and the lesson to draw therefrom.

The first lesson is that in the life of a politician, a purely technical assignment such as power generation and supply takes on a highly political significance that often ambushes and sometimes overrides the technical details of the job. Chief Awolowo, whose name Chief Ige loves to invoke like a mantra, knew this. Which was why he stepped down from the finance ministry as soon as the emergency of the Civil War and post-War reconstruction was over. In Chief Ige's case, perhaps he should not even have ventured at all.

Regardless of his conviction to the contrary, it is hard to sustain the argument that Chief Ige took his present job because there had arisen an emergency to which only he could respond. So why did he take the job?

Answering this question brings us to the second lesson which has to do with the perils of externalizing family squabbles. The story of how Chief Ige got his ministerial portfolio is too well known to bear rehashing here. At the heart of the matter was a desire to prove a point to his old comrades whom he believed, rightly or wrongly, let him down in his Presidential ambition. This desire soon became an obsession. But life is not all about proving a point over a perceived wrong as Chief Ige himself should well know from the sad experiences of many of his colleagues who broke ranks over the UPN gubernatorial contests of 1982-83. The way Chief Ige carried on in the wake of the intramural crisis of the AD presidential nomination, one would have thought he lost to an Arisekola or a Babatope. Yet the preferred candidate is a man of substance in his own right and Chief Ige should not have conducted himself as though a monumental tragedy had befallen the land by his loss to Falae.

Such conduct and his eagerness to show his opponents that he was now moving in higher circles led Chief Ige into taking a job for which he was so temperamentally and technically unsuited. It also blinded him to some of the landmines that lay on his road to doing a good job. Foremost amongst these was the emergence of a former minister as chief executive of NEPA. Now, it is not very clear what game Mr. President was playing with that particular appointment, but Chief Ige should have known that this fellow could not be coming in as a well-wisher and he should have registered his concern over this particular appointment in unmistakable terms. Can anyone imagine Sule Lamido accepting Tom Ikimi as Ambassador to the UN without a whimper?

Yet another lesson to learn here is that humility does not hurt. Chief Ige has over the years displayed a know-it-all approach that makes perfectly normal people want to look forward to cutting him to size. Considering that you can not start learning to be left-handed in old age, perhaps this outlook has become so ingrained in the Ige persona that no change is possible. In which case, only the

up-and-coming can draw the appropriate lessons from its unpalatable after-effects.

The foregoing should of course not blind us to the fact that there are indeed so many forces and interests that would be adversely affected were Chief Ige to make a roaring success of NEPA. But he's been so busy looking at only the more obvious places – revanchist regionalists bent on making him eat his words; old rivals back home; dealers in power generating sets; and people likely to be snared in on-going probes.

But what about the folks with wary eye on the inevitable re-alignment of forces pre-2003? These are people from his backyard who have good reason to fear that they could suffer a diminution if a Yoruba superstar were to emerge in the cabinet, leading the mainstream west into the Obasanjo camp.

In the coming reconstitution of Yoruba leadership where would they be if Ige were to be that superstar?

All said, however, the most critical lesson is this: Examine yourself. And while that lesson is being learnt, let there be light.

Sharia, power shift and confederacy

One of the vices that Sharia, the strict Islamic legal code, is meant to combat is gambling. Interestingly, however, the whole idea of imposing Sharia as is now being actively pursued in some states, mostly in the arid north, is itself a big gamble. It is a gamble that has finally managed to tease out some of the more deadly and, ultimately, ruinous distempers in the land.

That Sharia would bring the genie out of the bottle of our collective angst is something that was bound to happen and so should come as no surprise to anyone.

As we have had cause to argue previously on these pages, the push for full-blown Sharia in any part of the country can only help us exhume all our better-buried imperfections as a union and raise anew long dominant annoyances and animosities. But, most significantly, the Sharia gambit questions and affronts one of the key planks of Nigeria's Independence consensus.

The Independence consensus defines a broad range of fundamental agreements on which the Nigerian state was founded at the attainment of nationhood in 1960. It encapsulates those constitutive ingredients that formed the basis upon which the country's component units agreed to emerge into independence from British suzerainty as one country.

It is on the basis of the existence of this consensus that those who argue against calls for a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) might have a point. Concomitantly, it is on the strength of the claim that this consensus has been so brazenly and so persistently breached almost into tatters that those now calling for SNC also have a strong case.

To hold that at no time did Nigerians of diverse tribes and tongues ever come together to agree to be in one country is, at best, contentious. Nigerians, through their duly mandated representatives, did in fact agree to stay together. That was what the countless Constitutional Conferences that held from the mid-1950s to the eve of Independence were all about.

* *Vanguard* March 24, 2000

Yet, if Nigerians did agree to stay together and march into Independence as one country, it was on certain conditions. These conditions were at the heart of the Independence consensus.

For our purposes, two are worth highlighting here. The first is the country's federal arrangement, the second is its secular status. Sharia attacks and undermines both.

The completion of British colonial conquest of northern Nigeria in the early 1900s terminated for good the campaigns of the Fulani Jihad, which was, in any case, already running out of steam by that time.

It is important to make this point since some of us obviously prefer to persist in the fallacy that what British conquest and control did was merely to defer the consummation of the *jihad*. Regardless of British shenanigans on the eve of Independence, decolonization did not and cannot sanction a resumption of *jihadist* agenda which was why the compromise of having the penal code apply in areas that ordinarily made up the jihad's sphere of influence emerged as a midway arrangement in northern Nigeria.

Instructively, this arrangement found favour with the region's Founding Fathers on the eve of Independence and has since become an intrinsic part of the national consensus.

The current attempt to introduce full-blown Sharia subverts both the principle and practice of this compromise.

But it is not the first time that a central plank of the Independence consensus would be assailed. For over two decades, the unitary tendency that came with prolonged military rule also subverted the federalist component of the consensus. This tendency reached its apogee during the military dictatorships of Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha and bore a decidedly regional bias. At one level, it reduced the entire country into vassals of a power group.

At another level, it destroyed the viability of the country's constituent units as centres of authority co-ordinate and not subservient to the federal government. It was the aggregation of those skew factors that provided the impetus for the agitation for power shift, which has now been achieved symbolically though not yet substantively in the emergence of Olusegun Obasanjo as president.

The push for full-blown Sharia is a disingenuous counterpoise from those who feel worsted by the reality of power shift. But it is a stratagem that has been badly mismanaged on at least three scores.

First is the open acknowledgement by its proponents that more than "one north" does indeed exist.

Second, is the introduction of a needlessly high violence quotient into the agitation.

Third, is the seeming eagerness to annoy those who would ordinarily be considered as traditional allies in the context of national politics.

This mismanagement has now led to the emergence of the confederacy agitation as a response to Sharia. Thus, we find ourselves with a step-level pattern of action and reaction as confederacy emerges as the nemesis of Sharia which itself sought to be the nemesis of power shift. Where the cycle of action and reaction will end we do not know. But *those who argue that Sharia is purely about people's right to practise their religion may wish to reflect on the argument that confederacy is also purely about people's right to own what belongs to them.*

The upshot being that we must all learn to limit ourselves to what is doable and sensible. Going for broke can only break things up and could literally make some people go broke – especially those amongst us who have all along survived by being carried, at great cost and inconvenience, as other people's excess baggage.

Work-in-progress...

At the close of its first year in office, the presidency of General Olusegun Obasanjo remains both an enigma and a work-in-progress. Very much, you'd say, like the Nigerian project itself. And very much, also, like the man himself whose life reads like Providence's unfinished business. Following twenty years of decline and disaster for which the man is not entirely free of blame, Nigeria is still in the early stages of its turn-around. The hope is that, it is a turn for the better.

A year ago at the inception of the Obasanjo administration, the mood, both at home and abroad, was upbeat. In the euphoria of the historic inaugural at Eagle Square, some of us even permitted ourselves rhetorical flights that bordered on the hyperbolic. The end of the long twilight of the Buhari-Babangida-Abacha-Abdulsalami despotism, we told ourselves, was Nigeria's second Independence. The omens in that analogy appeared to have been lost on us. Like the first, this second Independence is showing up all the worrisome signs so early in the day even while taking its time living up to the dream. That it could yet self-destruct remains a grim possibility.

Last Sunday in my church, the priest gave a sermon on the turbulence that had overtaken the land since the advent of the new democratic dispensation. His exegesis, at once spiritual and medical, sought to draw an analogy between the current distempers and the after-effects of a potent medication. The evidence that the pill of democracy is working, he explained, is to be found in the rushes that have erupted in its wake – parliamentary petulance, executive excesses, sponsored mischief, etc. The congregation was told that a deeply rooted ailment would fight a potent medication with a ferocity that leads to breakouts, almost putting the organism at risk. And it is only after the disease loses the battle that the organism is restored to good health. What we see now in Nigeria, the reverend said, is the ailment fighting the medicine.

* Vanguard May 26, 2000

I truly believe him. But you don't have to be an unbeliever to ask if all we see today are really hope-inspiring signs of the efficacy of the drug or disturbing evidence of tissue rejection.

Still, confidence must replace inertia and scepticism must give way to a renewed hope. On three major fronts will the Obasanjo administration be evaluated: how well it restores faith in the viability of the Nigerian project by healing the wounds of the past and refraining from inflicting new ones; how fast it turns the economy around and creates livelihood opportunities for the teeming poor; and how successfully it fights crime and re-builds public confidence in the law and order machinery. Doing all these calls for the imaginative deployment of statecraft in both politics and governance.

Unfortunately, governance remains ambushed by politics. The past year has seen so much politicking of a rather depressing variant but very little by way of real governance. Aside his admittedly formidable presence, there is very little evidence that Mr. President has taken charge. In the war on corruption, the man remains very much his own cheerleader. His presidency is still hostage to too many holdovers and leftovers representing too many inimical vested interests. There are still too many dinosaurs and mutants strutting the corridors of Obasanjo's power.

An irreducible minimum condition for getting things moving is for the President to thoroughly re-appraise the human resource mix at his disposal. This has become imperative because the same hands that proved so effective for winning elections in a rogue transition may not be so suited to governance of the kind that Nigerians now so sorely desire and deserve. It used to be the case that the entourage that served a candidate during his electioneering would also be available to see him through the challenges of his incumbency. But that is not the case today in Nigeria, there is a need to respond accordingly.

There must be a way of matching task and human resources without running the risk of being accused of ingratitude or putting the 2003 project in peril. It is not beyond this President to give golden hand shakes without putting his pet anti-corruption crusade in jeopardy. The hope is that the much-heralded cabinet reshuffle will not spare the kitchen cabinet.

But beyond this, an attitude problem is to be addressed. It is said that you cannot learn to be left-handed in old age. But, the President really must try to rein in his "I know-it-all" outlook to issues on which his expertise is dubious at best. In the traditional society that he so much loves alluding to, man was not made king because he happened to be the wisest or most knowledgeable person around. And, even though his administration is still very much a work-in-progress, President Obasanjo should avoid the temptation of carrying on like he was in the State House to post a billboard that proclaims: "Genius at work, do not disturb." His re-enactment of de Gaulle notwithstanding, he is no genius. And disturbers we will have aplenty. Or, how else are we to measure his effectiveness if not by how well he overcomes disturbances?

All said, however, it is an anniversary worth celebrating. For one simple reason: anyone who thinks we have not moved forward from last May 29 only needs to look at where we were on May 29 of the year before. Still, it is getting increasingly difficult to sustain the Obasanjo presidency solely on the strength of the grossness of predecessor regimes. Expectations are high and patience is short. Some successes are needed, and pretty fast too. And the greatest tragedy that could befall this era is for it to give Nigerians cause to be looking back to the bad old days with nostalgia.

How trouble starts*

Chinweizu, the writer, once said at the weekly *Vanguard* editorial meeting that all it takes to set Nigeria ablaze could be something as silly as an altercation between two army corporals over a bowl of pepper soup or over who should win the company of a lady of easy virtue. He spoke then, I rather suspect, only half in jest.

All it requires for trouble to erupt, Chinweizu said, was for two corporals to fall on either side of the great divides that traditionally separate Nigerians – region, religion or ethnicity, and for the kinfolks of each of the brawling parties to be ready to line up behind their man. One of the corporals would be a southerner and the other a northerner, one would be Christian and the other Moslem, one would be, say, Ijaw and the other Igala. Or, they could be any combination of all of the above.

Chinweizu made this statement some twelve odd years ago when the temperature of the country was nowhere near what it is today and when the fault-lines were still relatively few. We did not have a Delta crisis yet on our hands. Nor had the Sharia palaver evolved as dangerously as it now has. Zangon-Kataf had not yet radically altered the state of intra-regional relations in the north. Nor, had June 12 and its aftermath sent all of us back to our ethnic cocoons.

But today Nigeria teeters at the brink, courtesy of the fulsome bloodletting that has become a recurring feature of our national life. I always had cause to recall Chinweizu's words. And, I often get the creeps merely contemplating how easy it is to bring the roof down on Nigeria.

Last week, as the nation took in the full blast of the latest round of mayhem in Kaduna, I almost had a first-hand experience of what it was like to see the roof cave in on the strength of some arrant idiocy.

* *Vanguard* June 2, 2000

It all happened on the eve of Children's Day. But, what took place that day was no child's play. I had gone to visit my parents at the family house in Agege, a Lagos satellite at once famous and notorious for more things than I care to recall here. Approaching the area from the NYSC camp, I noticed a more than usual littering of broken bottles on the road. At first, I thought it was from an accident involving one of those ubiquitous drinks trucks that have become part of the traffic nightmare of Lagos. Getting closer, past where the late Dr. Sofunde used to have his medical practice, it became obvious that something more untoward than an upturned drinks truck had taken place. The sheer amount of broken bottles strewn across the road and the number of vehicles with smashed windshields were telltale signs of the horror that had just visited the vicinity. *What happened?*

The story sounds so silly you start to wonder if people would actually unleash that amount of violence just for that. But, as they say, seeing is believing.

Apparently a vulcanizer and his apprentice had worked through the night on that particular day. One of the many things that the area is notorious for is that it always comes alive at night. Anyway, the apprentice, obviously tired, had gone to a nearby shed to grab a nap since he was expected back at work by mid-morning. But, he was to have no respite as some of the "area boys", alias the local hoodlums, who had colonized the traffic intersection around the place kept waking him up intermittently to run errands for them. After what he considered one errand too many, the apprentice protested. His protest caught the attention of a mallam who had his kiosk nearby. The mallam was said to have then remonstrated with the "area boys" to let the poor boy rest. Their response was to ask him what business of his it was what they did with a fellow Yoruba. The mallam was then said to have invited the boy to his kiosk to continue his nap and dared the "area boys" to disturb the boy's sleep any further.

That was how much of the story that anyone could narrate with some coherence and intelligibility. What happened next was that all hell broke loose. With so-called Hausa and Yoruba youth facing themselves in pitched battles. Not a few skulls were cracked. And so many vehicles and shops were vandalized. By the time the police arrived, the damage had been done. And almost as suddenly as it erupted, the fracas died down.

Who knows where the next eruption will occur in a country with so many mixed neighbourhoods as ours? Or, what idiotic impulses would be said to have occasioned such an eruption? Or, which hidden persuaders lurk in the dark to put such occasions to devastating use? Do you or do you not agree with Chinweizu?

Why government is not trusted.

In one of his fables entitled "The Sick Lion" Aesop the famous storyteller of ancient Greece, narrates the following tale:

When the lion reached a ripe old age, he became weak and could no longer hunt for his prey. All he could do was to lie in his den, where he breathed with great difficulty. Soon he made it known that he was indeed very ill, and the news was spread among the beasts, who lamented his sick condition. One after the other they came to see him, and one after the other they fell into the lion's trap in his den, where he made an easy prey of them and grew fat on this diet. The fox suspected that there was some foul play and decided to visit the lion and inquire about his health. Standing at some distance, he asked his majesty how he was.

"Ah, my dearest friend," said the lion, "is it you? Why are you standing so far away from me? Come sweet friend, and whisper a word of consolation in the poor lion's ear, who has but a short time to live."

"Bless you," said the fox, "but you'll excuse me if I cannot stay. To tell you the truth, I feel quite uneasy when I look at the marks left by the footsteps that I see here. They all point toward your den, and none reveal that they however left."

As in Aesop's animal kingdom, so it appears to be in today's Nigeria. Government, like the lion in the story, would feign to be at sea as to why the whole country reacted with such holy fury to the hike in fuel prices. But, the hoopla that followed the price increases speaks eloquently to how much wiser

Nigerians have become after so many years of being made an easy prey. Such a robust stance comes from recurring bitter experience with taking government at its word.

Why is government no longer trusted? It is mainly because government has consistently broken the social contract that binds a people to their rulers. In the process, government has acquired an unsavoury reputation as a recidivist liar in its dealings with the people. In all of this, the first lie is that there is something called fuel subsidy. If such a thing exists, it must be in the imagination of those who persist in peddling such a falsehood. The second lie is that it is only by removing the so-called subsidy that the state can provide such public goods as health care, good schools, functional utilities, and other services that taxpayers legitimately expect of their government.

Why has the removal of a non-existent subsidy become such a consuming passion with successive Nigerian governments, especially since the end of the Second Republic? I think the answer lies in the fact that officials and their cohort insist on stealing from the public coffers the same amounts that were stolen when Nigeria sold two million barrels of crude oil daily at \$46 per barrel. As the country now sells less than that figure at a much lower price, making up the inevitable shortfall suggests that you have to look elsewhere and that means taxing the people. It is this tax that is now being passed off as fuel subsidy.

Yet, it is not as if ordinary Nigerians really mind paying taxes or making sacrifices as necessary. Remember how the Babangida regime made us donate fractions of our salaries to the economic relief fund with a promise that our monies would be returned in due course? That turned out to be a lie. Nor can we forget that the same argument of improving social services via "appropriate pricing" has been used repeatedly since the time petrol sold at forty-two kobo a litre. Who can have forgotten the monumental scam known as PTF, conceptualized by the present Chief Economic Adviser and about which much that is odious continues to filter into the public area these day.

Which leads us to the other reason why government is not trusted. This has to do with the image and reputation of those now asking us to make additional sacrifice. Not since the days of the legendary Triple A (whose physical frame suggested that he probably consumed the entire Federal Budget all on his own) has the profile of government officials become such big issue in a matter of policy. The President's Chief Economic Adviser is a man who the masses hold in justifiable suspicion. At an intellectual level, a man who could make such an easy transition from being an apostle of the "commanding heights" approach to become a zealot for deregulation should not be trusted. And at a personal level, some would argue that the man has probably not made any purchase in his adult life that was not paid for by the state. How can such a perennial "*omo ijoba*" understand the pains and fury of hardworking folk over the price of fuel?

Nor is the Chief Economic Adviser alone among retainers echoing the jaded IMF song that Nigerians are not paying enough yet for fuel. He seems to have a

companion in a particular minister who is said to be the President's favourite. Here is a man who once sold party's presidential mandate to the military. Who is to say what he would soon be selling. Perhaps, the entire country? Together with a coterie of hungers-on whose numbers has suddenly come up in the jobs-for-the-boys lottery, these fellows make up the face of government that the people associate with fuel price hike. It is the face of government that the people would rather not be seeing and in whose mouths any calls for sacrifice cannot but sound hollow. But, we deceive ourselves if we think that by their backing down now they have backed off for good. Having been forced to beat a retreat this time around, they would now be fishing for new tricks on how to take more spending money out of the drained pockets of Nigerians. Whatever new, subtler tricks they come up with, however, there is a simple fact our wisening up has made non-negotiable. It is this: once the gains from the anti-corruption crusade, both substantive and symbolic, are manifestly visible and irreversible, Nigerians would willingly submit to another round of sacrifices.

Rainy season and PDP's umbrella.

An interesting lovers' quarrel is now boiling over in the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). To say the truth, the controversy has been brewing for quite some time. And, like virtually all tiffs of intimacy, the actual (as opposed to the advertised) causes of the mutual disaffection remains shrouded in much mystery – at least for third parties.

Whether the animus is strong enough to precipitate a break-up of the troubled union remains to be seen. But, a lot of people must be quite intrigued by the increasingly loud protestations of leaders of the party on both sides of the divide that the party is not about to break. If they have to state and restate that point so often and so passionately, might this not suggest that the party is indeed about to break?

Anyway, regardless of what they openly admit or refuse to admit, one thing has come out clearly in all this. Some people in the party definitely feel cheated and jilted by the way things are now turning out. A community of grievances has now coalesced around disaffected points men operating under the umbrella (what else?) of self-styled "concerned elders".

Matters expectedly came to a head after last Monday's meeting where some very senior members literally took the party and the government it controls to the cleaners. Things were, of course, not helped by the fact that those attacked felt constrained to respond in kind. I think it is all a mess if you ask me.

At the root of the PDP crisis are two interrelated but largely understated factors. The first has to do with the jostling and jockeying that produced the post-Abacha dispensation, particularly the horse-trading that preceded the emergence of the Obasanjo presidency. It is quite instructive that a party with an impeccable pedigree of backroom deal-making now finds itself unable to settle its intra-mural rifts away from the public glare. Such must be the depth of feelings on the matter.

* *Vanguard* June 23, 2000

The first year of the Fourth Republic has brought out so many of the cracks and fissures that had to be covered up to ensure that this uneasy alliance triumphed at the polls. It has also brought a surfeit of political opportunists intent on reaping where they did not sow, or, shall we say, desirous of having others do the tough work for a change. These two developments have produced a tension, resulting in a situation that many see as benefiting the PDM faction. In turn, the PDM faction is seen as scheming with AD elements to take over the Obasanjo presidency and shut out the others. The faction is also accused of seeking to build up a war chest with which to rubbish its opponents next time around. Which leads us to the second factor.

Obviously, this second factor relates to the positioning for the 2003 elections. Having come to grief so early over their role in the emergence of Obasanjo, certain elements in the PDP are determined to start working in good time to pay the "ingrate" back in his own coin. The party is only one of the theatres of hostilities that are being opened. Others may be opened in the days to come.

In all, however, what we see now unfolding in the PDP is the in-built strategic instability of the platforms of the Abdulsalami transition. Viewed alongside the goings-on in the Alliance for Democracy (AD), it is obvious that this is not an ailment that is restricted to the ruling party. Clearly, a lot of strange bedfellows got into hasty dalliances in the process of cobbling together election platforms to replace the "five leprous fingers" of the Abacha Transition. The dubious structures that emerged as parties never had the time or inclination to prove they stood for anything other than to capture power. All the parties without exception cannot be accused of ideological coherence of any sort. And this, by the way, includes the AD whose devotees often love to humour themselves as being a cut above the rest.

None of the three parties is anchored on any set of ideas or ideals that go beyond the whims and fancies of chieftains who themselves are bought and sold at the drop of a hat. Which is why all the quarrel in the PDP now is about such thoroughly depressing facts as who got paid what, who is cheating on whom, who is being appointed to what post, and so on, *ad nauseam*. In a political culture suffused with bloated "dignitarianism", what we hear now are the names, names and names and all about personalities, rarely about issues never about ideas. Yet, this is the same party that controls the federal government, which in turn controls the fortunes or otherwise of over one hundred million people, and which governs twenty-one of the country's thirty-six states. Any surprise that nothing seems to be moving except backwards?

With all the rigmarole now afoot, perhaps the most charitable thing that one can find to say to the two quarrelling camps is go pronounce a plague upon both their houses. We say this because it is obvious that their quarrel is not in any way related to improving the country or tending the well being of its silent but suffering majority. If the umbrella has now started having holes, whose business

is that? And does common sense not suggest to the founding chieftains that in rainy season, such as we now have, lovers should be seeking ways of getting closer, and not drifting farther apart?

Sharia, NYSC and “people’s wish”*

The politically motivated expansion of the scope of Islamic law in some parts of the north is a move that was bound to invite its own nemesis. But, from all indications, the fury of the inevitable backlash was obviously underestimated on all sides. There may still be more to come.

At the commencement of the Sharia charade last year, we had cause to observe that its instigators had embarked on a suicide mission. It is a mission that may at first impression appear smart but which would ultimately prove quite costly and eventually boomerang. We said then that the decision of Zamfara State to flag off this tempestuous odyssey should be regarded as “great news” by all patriotic elements desiring a resolution of the vexed National Question. We advised that, rather than be agitated by the move, those who have been working tirelessly to reconstitute Nigeria on the basis of equity and progress must see in the Sharia gambit a historic opportunity disguised as an adversity. It is an opportunity to set things right, once-and-for-all.

With the benefit of hindsight, those have turned out to be rather modest prognoses. Anyone who still doubts the redemptive efficacy of Sharia for nation-building only needs to reflect on the sheer extent of the nationalist reawakening that it has wrought across the country. How so?

Sharia has inadvertently rekindled the fire of Middle Belt consciousness in a way that no other issue has done since independence. Sharia has, once again, intimated us of the possibility of a resurgent Biafra, with the continuing retreat of Igbos from the north into the eastern heartland. Sharia has signalled the admittedly tentative beginnings of a nascent southern solidarity as witnessed in last Monday’s unprecedented meeting of leaders of umbrella groups from the three zones that make up southern Nigeria in the law chambers of Chief F. R. A. Williams.

* *Vanguard* July 14, 2000

We note this historic meeting, of course, without prejudice to the statement issued by Dr. Lateef Adegbite to the effect that southern Muslims support the Sharia game now being played in the north. With this statement, the man has only reaffirmed his pedigree as a lackey of long standing, a cash-and-carry promoter of chaos and confusion. One would have thought that his likes would take some time off to reflect on the fate that befell M. K. O. Abiola in the hands of his northern Muslim brothers. Anyway, if he is so sure of the claim he is making, perhaps what Dr. Adegbite should be doing is not issuing press releases but sponsoring a bill to introduce Sharia law in the House of Assembly of his home state, Ogun.

If Dr. Adegbite's role in the matter is understandable, not so that of Alhaji Atiku Abubakar. Otherwise highly regarded for his level-headedness, the Vice President seems to have chosen this time around to jettison balance in favour of hypocrisy and cant. The question to ask is: was that really Atiku Abubakar speaking or is the man merely trying to fulfil all righteousness lest he be accused of not being a true Muslim? Whichever it is, the Vice President is entitled to his opinion. But, it would be nice if he learns in future to keep his views on such incendiary matters to himself for the sake of the high office he is now holding. The tone and thrust of his two recent statements can only make people wonder whether he fully appreciates the burden of that office.

Which brings us to what is perhaps one of the greatest gains from the Sharia controversy. Suddenly, Sharia has made the erstwhile politically astute not so astute any longer. Part of the strength of the so-called leaders of the north in times gone by was that they were never seen to play their hands openly in the power calculus of national politics. They either had lackeys speaking for them or did things in ways that could not be directly traced to them.

Now the story is different. It became obvious that there was something terribly wrong when they volitionally defined the Middle Belt as not being part of the "true" north just because that region appeared to have been favoured in the early appointments made by the Obasanjo government. With Sharia, they have now been forced to play their hands openly, too openly you might say.

First, it was Shehu Shagari and Muhammadu Buhari, both former heads of state and both one-time super-nationalists disclaiming the Council of State's advice on the Sharia controversy. Now, it is the incumbent Vice President telling us that Sharia is the "people's wish".

To compound matters, the Vice President has now accused The Patriots, under whose auspices the southern leaders met, of playing a divisive role in the matter. Now, who really stands accused of divisiveness in this matter? Who is dividing what? And what is wrong with dividing anyway, if that is the sensible thing to do?

It is fitting that the NYSC scheme, one of our very few symbols of national unity, should also be one of the earliest casualties of Sharia. What this says in essence is that Sharia is incompatible with national unity. This is a powerful

message that cannot be muted by mealy-mouthed remonstrance or half-hearted assurance that youth corpsers would be safe in the Sharia states. With one part of the country defining itself as hostile territory, can people from the other parts be blamed if they refuse to go there?

What the NYSC issue has done is to dramatise the inevitable reconstituting of the Nigerian nation. This is a natural follow-up to the realignment of the Nigerian state that came with the inauguration of the Fourth Republic.

It is the culmination of the Nigerian logic, a logic that we have sought to deny for so long – those who can live together will do so; those who cannot, will each go their separate ways. In all, it signals the unravelling of our forced unity. Anyone who doubts this may wish to hold a referendum to determine what the people's wish truly is.

Aluko and the Senate's twisted tale

The National Assembly of the Second Republic certainly had its fair share of heists and deals. But the scandals of that era appear like boys scout pranks when compared with the pranks that are now said to have displaced lawmaking as the primary interest of federal legislators. Could this be part of the democracy dividend we have been looking forward to?

Each passing day provides fresh indications of how bad things have gotten around here. For further depressing evidence of how much matters have taken a turn for the worse, you only need to read the interview granted *The Guardian on Sunday* of August 6 by Second Republic Senate President, Dr Joseph Wayas. The juxtaposition of then and now puts things in very bold relief.

Outdoing the Shagari era in matters untoward cannot be a mean feat, considering the record of those years. But such has been the progressive deterioration of institutions and leadership in Nigeria that Wayas almost comes across as a paragon, and the era in which he served as the nation's Number 3 citizen increasingly sounds like a golden age. Even after allowing for the usual self-glorification and understandable nostalgia, much of what Wayas said in that interview would still shame the present crop of lawmakers.

Wayas speaks of things that are probably alien to today's legislators. He talks of the General Order and Financial Instructions, those hallowed systems by which government service shields itself from sundry kleptocrats. He makes reference to Ministerial Tenders Board and President-in-Council, the proper fora at which contracts are considered.

Wayas was in office at a time when the country sold two million barrels of crude oil a day at \$40 per barrel, yet he could count only four cars in his fleet.

* *Vanguard* August 11, 2000

And he did not know how those cars were bought. Today Nigeria sells much less oil at a much lower price, yet his successor is said to have thirty-two cars in his fleet. What does the National Assembly have to do with street lighting? Wayas asks, calling it a total abomination. He concludes by asking legislators to comply with the provisions of the constitution and obey rules and regulations that guide public services.

For many, especially some of us who attained the age of maturity at the time of Dikko rice and SGS scandal and the amassing of ₦2.8 billion, it must be a culture shock of sorts to discover that the Second Republic could actually have set any positive standard.

But the truth is that much of the atrocities for which that dispensation was condemned and ultimately overthrown have been more than surpassed by successor regimes. At least in those days there were still procedures for doing things. And people at least still tried to keep up pretences that those procedures were being followed. These days, all systems and standards seem to apply only in the breach. No one bothers to even keep up pretence any longer.

Senators award contracts to themselves and claim the only thing wrong with this is that the executive is nosey. People take ₦39 million as Christmas pocket money and boast that this figure is actually beneath their station. Someone says we should be grateful to him for the prudence of buying a personal computer for half-million naira. And senatorial gardens are tended for the same amount it would take to build an entire department of horticulture in a university.

Professor Sam Aluko says his son is not a thief. Agreed. Anyone who worked for Sani Abacha for four years would know a thief when he sees one, wouldn't he? Professor Aluko also says that people do not steal in his family. I thought the man was a professor of economics and not a professor of genetics. Anyway, Professor Aluko's intervention on behalf of his embattled son contained so many contradictions that the statements can only get people even madder at the small boy. First the old man says his son is a victim of political gladiators and buccaneers. Then, he says the offence for which his son is being pilloried was a collective guilt. And then he asks the old men in the Senate, what a small boy would be doing with ₦74 million.

Plenty, if you ask me. Professor Aluko would probably have heard of the American professor who won the Nobel Prize for Economics some time in the early 1990s at a very advanced age. A reporter who went to interview him had wondered what the old man, reputed for his frugality, would be doing with all the prize money. To which the old professor replied that although he may not

know what to do with the money, he had two grand-daughters with very bright ideas about what to do with any amount of money.

Senator Gbenga Aluko himself has not helped matters by saying that the allegations against him sound like fiction straight out of a Jeffrey Archer novel. The young senator would be well advised to be a bit more careful in future about his choice of literary analogies, Jeffrey Archer's fiction sometimes does bear a striking resemblance to real life, particularly when it comes to writing about underhand dealings by Nigerian public officials. Since Aluko is obviously so familiar with Jeffrey Archer, he must have read one of the man's short stories entitled "A twist in the tale".

Probes and Pandora's box*

Scheming for the fall of Chuba Okadigbo was definitely a hair-raising venture. But for the scriptwriters, the ouster could still turn out to have been hare-brained. Dislodging the voluble Chuba and his gang from their exalted thrones in the Senate opens a Pandora's box. It introduces an interesting but potentially disruptive element into the politics of the Fourth Republic.

The development is interesting for obvious reasons. The impeachment and the high drama that surrounded it were the stuff of a box office event that people would ordinarily have had to pay to witness. One rather suspects that Nigerians would not terribly mind to have the show encored over and over again with as many public institutions as possible serving as theatres.

Yet the move is also potentially dangerous for a simple reason: having so publicly humiliated and sanctioned high officials of state for being cavalier and light-fingered with public funds, things cannot be expected to remain the same thereafter. What do we mean by this?

In a country famous for its corrupt officials and corrupted institutions, it would be hard to sell the line that the Senate scam was an isolated case. But, by opening the Senate's can of worms, it would appear that we have (inadvertently?) started the process of throwing ajar the door to Nigeria's house of iniquities. It is a move that could be both fraught and auspicious. Why?

In spite of its gestures and gimmicks to the contrary, the Obasanjo regime still does not appear too keen to travel very far down the road of tackling the endemic crimes of impunity in the system. And who can blame it? The job seems truly formidable. Even with the best of intentions, Mr. President is hobbled in his anti-corruption crusade. His administration still harbours too many people whose names have become a byword for infamy. Virtually every public agency is densely populated with rogues. There are still too many parts of

* *Vanguard* August 18, 2000

Nigeria where looting the treasury is hailed as community service, deserving of a chieftaincy title. The job of probing Nigeria is indeed a tough one.

But having made such a public example of Okadigbo and co., questions are bound to be asked. Were they the only public officers who stole? Does the Senate alone house all the thieves in government? These would be extremely awkward questions indeed to answer, especially with the axe of possible prosecution under the anti-graft law still dangling over the heads of the indicted.

We would be less than honest with ourselves if we claim to be ignorant of the reasons why many of today's political office holders invested so much in getting into office, often willy-nilly. Two of these reasons stand out and are interrelated. First is the consuming passion with burying a past in which many of them played a less than edifying role. Second is a determination to ensure that the ethos and practice of governance does not go beyond business-as-usual. Both needs can only be served if nothing is done under the present dispensation to institute a genuine probe, which would be bad news for all concerned. An illustrative example: did David Mark get into the Senate in order to canvass a probe of NITEL? Wasn't the fear of public scrutiny one of the key driving forces behind the drafting of General Olusegun Obasanjo to contest for the Presidency.

The question to ask is: are we ready for the repercussions of a full-scale probe? For repercussions there will be – not just from those who have invested in forestalling a probe, but also from the people. After so many years of taking the people for granted, it might sound laughable that anyone should consider them a force to be reckoned with. Yet, underrating the likely popular backlash could turn out to be an even more costly error than setting off the probe process in the first place. There is something called revolution of rising expectations, as Ghana's history shows.

Even as states insist they cannot pay a minimum wage of less than eighty dollars a month, sordid revelations on the level of looting in government continue to filter into the public domain. Today, the reigning mood in the streets is for a Nigerian enactment of the Rawlings solution. The man in the street may not be able to do much beyond nursing this mood. But, who can tell how many kindred spirits also brood over the revelations in officers' messes across the country?

Still, not probing at all is likely to be less offensive than a mishandled probe. One of the greatest blights on the Buhari regime was the selective nature of its cleansing crusade. By its lights, only one member of Shehu Shagari's cabinet was guilty of wrongdoing. But, a great deal of energy was expended on nailing governors from parties that opposed the ruling NPN. Shagari, a kinsman of the regime's leaders, was placed under house arrest but his deputy, an Igbo, was put in detention. Those famous fifty-three suitcases passed customs, escorted we are told, by a Fulani prince.

We need to draw the appropriate lessons from the lack of even-handedness of the Buhari era. Soon, the question would be asked as to whether the alacrity with which the Senate was probed had anything to do with the part of the country its President comes from or who Okadigbo had offended. Is the House of Representatives populated with angels? What about the Presidency?

If Mr. President is truly desirous of championing a successful cleansing, he must make a direct connection with the people and build his vanguard for the crusade on their organizations. Massive public sensitization would have to take place prior to or concurrently with the probe. Revelations from the probe would have to be dramatic enough to bring people out into the streets in such numbers as to convince the guilty that fighting back would be a losing game. The NLC was sufficiently outraged to want to march on the Senate in the Okadigbo case. Other civil society organizations must demonstrate similar gusto in chasing rascals out of office.

Cleansing Nigeria would require a demonisation of the culprits on a scale perhaps not witnessed since the Great Moscow trials of the 1930s. And for the probes to be credible, heads would have to roll all the way up. Are we ready for that?

Catching up with the past*

On the eve of the fortieth anniversary of her independence from Great Britain, an abiding paradox defines the Nigerian condition. The paradox is that at age 40, Nigeria's progress is to be measured largely by how well the country re-enacts her early teens, to approximate, as it were, the standards of twenty if not thirty years ago. In Nigeria today, development is both about meeting the future and catching up with the past. To move forward, the country must step backwards.

This is a monumental irony that is nonetheless characteristic of much else about this enigmatic land, a country that was once described as an exporter of what it does not have and an importer of what it has in abundance. It is an irony that is at once depressing and challenging.

Let us take a personal testimony that is likely to resonate amongst many Nigerians who, like me, share the same age bracket with their country and have young children in school. The new school year started only last week so I still have a fairly vivid recollection of what it costs to keep my two children in school. And it is a lot. Yet, I cannot confidently say that the quality of education that my children get for all that money in a private school is anything superior to what I got for virtually free in a Western Region public primary school. Minus the computer and the video, my kids' school library is light years behind what I recall of the library of my "Awolowo" school.

As with education, so also with health, security, values, governance, transportation, etc. Talking about transportation, a friend recalls that growing up in Ibadan she often returned to school in Kano each term by train, with her father handing her over at the railway station to total strangers for safe-keeping during the two-day journey. Not once did these strangers fail to deliver her safely to her grandmother at the other end. And, were the journey to have any hiccups, there was always the railway telephone, a curiosity she finds it hard to

* *Vanguard* September 29, 2000

explain to her teenage son who knows all about the cell phone but has never seen the inside of a train.

These days, ferrying her kids from Ibadan to their school in Ilorin, less than two hours away, is like planning a military operation. Of course, she won't dare hand her children over to anybody for safekeeping. Even where we allow for the rose-tinted retrospection with which people often recall eras gone by, it is beyond dispute that Nigeria was a much better place in the 1960s and 1970s than it is today. Another irony: life was safer during the Civil War than it is today. In Nigeria, the expression "good old days" speaks not just to a feeling of nostalgia, but also a sense of culture shock at how much the country has changed for the worse in the span of less than a generation.

Nigeria has compressed into just four decades such dramatic historical epochs that it took other people centuries, perhaps millennia to record. Ours must be one of the very few countries that can boldly claim to have passed through infancy, adolescence and obsolescence all within a few years. When I entered the University of Lagos twenty-one years ago, it cost forty-five naira to have breakfast, lunch and dinner for the 30 days that make up a month. Today, that amount will not buy you one decent meal even on a provincial campus.

Understanding what went wrong with Nigeria is as important as working to put things right. Having watched our country reach its zenith and descend into an abyss, we are now trying our hands at resurrection. It is a job that is likely to be as tough or as easy as we want it to be. And a good place to start from would be to dispel all those fanciful and frivolous notions about how we got to where we are and what needs to be done to get out of it.

As far as my grandmother is concerned, the great error of Nigeria was the fact of Independence itself. In her reckoning, the British ran our lives so well that asking them to leave could only have resulted in the disaster we now have on our hands. Without prejudice to the wisdom that old age is said to confer, I do not think that this explanation is right. Amongst the not-so-old, a favourite fallacy is to blame every ill on military rule. Many Nigerians have willed themselves into believing that all was well with their country until the soldiers stepped into governance. But the reality is not that simplistic. Of course, only a criminal or an alien would deny that Nigeria really went to the dogs during the second military era i.e. 1984 – 1998. Yet, it would take a special kind of animus against everything in uniform to deny the fact that the last time the country enjoyed any kind of orderly growth was under the military. Outside of the immediate pre- and post-Independence years, the entire history of progress in Nigeria can largely be summed up between two dates (1970–74), which coincide with the Second National Development Plan of Gowon, a soldier. Just as the commencement of the country's decay can be summed up between two dates (1979–83) coinciding with the Second Republic of Shehu Shagari, a civilian.

At the root of the Nigerian predicament is deliberate subversion of the Independence consensus, those common grounds on which the Founding Fathers agreed in the run-up to 1 October 1960.

It is often argued that Nigeria got Independence on a platter of gold. This is true only to an extent. Nigerian Independence was the product of very hard bargaining, not between the British and Nigerians, but amongst Nigerians. In that process the British played a less than even-handed role, but we won't belabour that point here. What is important for our purposes is that a consensus of sorts emerged from the negotiations, which defined the framework for emerging into Independence in unity. That framework was largely federalist. However, no sooner had the British left than this consensus came under severe assault, leading to the Action Group crisis of 1962, the census controversy of 1963 and the inconclusive General Elections of 1964. The cycle of conflict that these events unleashed continues to define the Nigerian problem to date. Clearly, an irreducible minimum condition for moving ahead is to return to the Independence consensus. However, if we find that too much had intervened in the last forty years to restore that consensus in its pristine form, then there is a need to re-negotiate it. This, in a nutshell, is what makes the case for a national conference so compelling.

The cartoonist Charles Schulz, author of the "Peanuts" series, warns that "there is no heavier burden than a great potential." For forty years we have been told that ours is a potentially great country. The challenge for Nigeria at 40 is that of moving from potential to fulfilment. I believe that in spite of itself, Nigeria can still become a great country. I also believe that our best days are still ahead. But there is great work to be done. We must find a workable formula for staying together that everyone buys into. We must restore the moral fabric and promote values that support development. We must creatively address the re-ethnification of political consciousness that has been unleashed by the annulment. But, above all, government, as Emeka Anyaoku once said, must again become "a nationally-owned instrument for the enforcement of equity".

We're all parrots now*

The greatest utility of the Oputa Panel is the way it continues to unmask all the dissemblers and pretenders who had taken Nigerians for a ride, especially in the last fifteen years. Has the chairman of the Human Right Violations Investigation Commission, Honourable Justice Chukwudifu Oputa managed to reverse one of the fundamental laws of biology?

This question played around in my head the other day as I listened to a cousin to one of Sani Abacha's henchmen now answering charges at the Oputa Panel accuse the retired Supreme Court Justice of presiding over a circus show. Obviously, this fellow is not alone in holding such an uncharitable view of the Panel's work. He is, in fact, in eminent even if rather strange company. It appears that Chief Gani Fawehinmi and Papa Abraham Adesanya are also of this persuasion, given their reported views on the panel. Everyone is entitled to his or her view, don't you think?

But if any member of the Oputa family were to be identified with the circus, it certainly would not be the man who in his heyday at the Supreme Court acquired the sobriquet of Socrates of the Bench. Perhaps, a better candidate for the title would be the man's eccentric son, Charles, more famously (or notoriously, depending on where you stand) known as Charly Boy, star of the Charly Boy Show and one of Nigeria's few authentic cultural icons.

So, has Justice Oputa inherited his son's traits, especially the punk king's legendary gift for enacting a riveting farce? To hear some people say it, that is what the work of the panel suggests. I beg to disagree. Aside from standing a basic law of heredity on its head, the charge that the Oputa Panel could have come straight out of the Charly Boy Show is both absurd and unfounded.

The work of the Oputa Panel represents a historic watershed in the annals of Nigeria. It is one of the best things to happen to this country, the fact of its being the greatest show in the land since Festac 77 notwithstanding. Apropos of which

* *Vanguard* December 8, 2000

I vote for giant television screens to be mounted at every street corner across the country to relay proceedings at the panel live to as many Nigerians as NEPA (or NEPA's vandals, if they're not the same) would permit.

People who take the meaning of democracy more seriously than the decibel level of whoever happens to be the reigning activist know that the Oputa Panel reveals where we have been. Some may ask, so what's the use? After all, there is very little that is being said at the panel by the principal *dramatis personae* that we did not already suspect or have a hunch about before now. True. Yet, that does not subtract from the catharsis of having your hunch proven right. Or, the satisfaction of seeing murderous gangs dissolve into mutual recrimination under the searchlight of a society taking a hard look at itself. There is a whole world of difference between suspecting that something untoward was taking place and actually getting to know that things were indeed twenty times worse than you ever suspected.

The greatest utility of the Oputa Panel is the way it continues to unmask all the dissemblers and pretenders who had taken Nigerians for a ride, especially in the last fifteen years. By the time all of this is over, many reputations would be in tatter. And, justifiably so, too. So, we all knew that Obasanjo, Gwadabe, Yar'Adua and co were condemned to death in 1995. But who knew for certain who voted for the death penalty or who did not? Or, that there was even a vote at all? Before now, the impression many of the members of the Abacha regime gave us was that such decisions were only taken by the dark-goggled General and his boy wonder, Hamza Al Mustapha.

Yet dissembling in high places has a rich pedigree around here. Sometime in late 1992, some middle ranking army officers were said to have sought audience with General Babangida to ask him why he was bent on giving the military a bad name. This was immediately after the disqualification of all the presidential aspirants of the SDP and NRC, a move that these officers saw as further confirming public suspicion that the military was, indeed, reluctant to leave power. The former President was said to have shared his concerns with the officers vis-à-vis which he saw as the lack of enthusiasm of key elements of the military high command on the issue of handover. He then agreed to the officers' suggestions to conduct a discrete poll of all officers above a certain level to determine who was for or against transition to civil rule.

The outcome of the poll was said to have been shock, even to the military President. Leading the generals who argued that the country was not ripe for democracy and that the politicians were not "serious" was a certain officer who had also been one of the most vehement against Babangida's so-called "sit-tight" plans. Of course, the man was later to emerge as a prime beneficiary of a demonisation of Babangida, a "pre-democracy General", and soon thereafter a key functionary of Abacha regime. As nemesis would have it, he also met his comeuppance in the sit-tight plans of his friend Abacha and only has his stars to thank that he was not dispatched before Abacha himself was.

The hope is that many of such perfidies were to come to light at the Oputa Panel. When a nation had gone through the kind of wrenching experience Nigeria had in the hands of the gangsters that recently ruled her, the least that it owes itself is a retelling of what happened in as graphic a detail as is possible. One of the greatest threats to the sustainability of democracy in some of the countries of East Europe and the former Soviet Union is the fact that too many official culprits and secret service types were never "outed" (exposed) in the euphoria accompanying restoration of people's power: their plotting to regain power remains a constant source of instability for the new order in those countries.

I am quite thrilled that all the tough boys are now singing like the lark at the Oputa Panel. Such is good for our health and also good for the health of the polity. Some say Al-Mustapha and his cohorts are merely making dramatic statements in order to take down as many people as possible with themselves. That could be true. Or, it could be self-serving, but no one has denied any of the people now being accused their right of reply. And, as a Yoruba proverb has it, it is hard to afflict a man that does not smoke cigarette with the curse of hemp addiction.

The choice is ours*

By Monday, a new year would have dawned and all that needless controversy about the actual beginning of the new millennium would have become academic. For those people who say that it started on January 1, 2000, the euphoria should have run its course, as the new millennium would by their lights now be all of one year old. And, for those mathematical purists who argue that the millennium can only start in 2001, the celebration should be on from midnight on Sunday. If you ask me, I would say celebrate with both camps since we are not likely to be around to witness the arrival of the next millennium, or participate in the controversy on its actual beginning! Well, maybe one should not generalize. Those who wish to be around to witness the next millennium are welcome to it. But count me out.

A most remarkable year in our country's annals draws to an end. The year 2000 has been what it was destined to be: tedious, tempestuous, and troublesome. 2001 would equally be what it is destined to be. But, it will also be what we want it to be. It could be even more turbulent than the year that is now at an end. Or, it could be a less tumultuous year in which the national journey settles down to a more predictable pace. One thing is certain: 2001 would be a year of destiny for Nigeria, a year in which things change decisively and irreversibly. Whether the change would be for the better or for the worse is our choice to make.

2001 promises to be a year of many milestones. It would also be a year strewn with countless political land mines. It is definitely the year in which glib alibis on the quality of governance in Nigeria won't hold water any longer. The newness of incumbents or the novelty of the system would no longer be such handy excuse in rationalizing lacklustre performance of government at the various levels - federal, state and local. Those in love with jaded adjectives

* *Vanguard* 29, December 2000

would have to start looking for replacements for “nascent” in describing the present democratic system.

Speaking of local government, council polls are slated to hold in 2001. The elections, if they do indeed hold, should serve as some kind of a mid-term reality check for the present crop of councillors and their parties. For the rest of the country, the most important issue in the elections is not likely to be which candidate wins or which party loses. Rather, it would be whether or not the council elections are held with voters using the national identity card. The decibel level in the ID card controversy has been on the rise since Papa Abraham Adesanya’s zoological allusions at the Fifth Pan-Yoruba Congress. With the Union of the Niger Delta and the Middle Belt Forum reportedly voting on the side of the pro-ID camp, it would be interesting to see how things unfold in the New Year.

Zoo lessons are also likely to come into play in the other delicate matter that may arise in 2001. If the federal government is feeling confident enough, it may venture to conduct a national census next year. I do not see any signs yet of such confidence, but who knows. Going by the traditional intervals in our censuses, a head count falls due this year, although there do not appear to be any preparations to that effect. However, if the Obasanjo administration was to actually decide to take on this assignment, it may be the end of Nigeria as we know it.

The year 2001 national census would be remarkable for many reasons, not least of which is the fact that it would be the first head count to be conducted by a federal government headed by a southerner. What are the likely implications of this for the integrity of the process or the nationwide acceptability of the returns? Watch out for an epic battle on this front.

Battles there would be aplenty in the coming year. But we must also be careful and circumspect in setting the rules of engagement. If the inevitable battle for Nigeria continues to unfold, victory belongs to the team that can get the opposing side to score as many own-goals as possible. Which is why, in spite of all its imperfections and sluggishness, we cannot afford to overwhelm the democracy experiment with grumbling and nitpicking and demand overload.

We are still passing through the uncertainty of transition. Year 2001 is likely to bring an intensification, not a reduction of this turbulence. It is a fact of our history that no democratic transition has ever survived the first handover election. As the present administration enters mid-term in the coming year, the jockeying for succession would shift into the gear. We must be determined to make a positive difference to our baleful national record vis-à-vis managing transition. And the time to start is now.

It is okay for us to complain but we must be very cautious that we do not condemn what is okay. It is okay for us to grumble about NEPA and water and no jobs and returning fuel queues and the stealing that is still going on. But, we must always remember that we could yet put ourselves in a situation in which

we still have not corrected all these things but we would have lost what we have, which is the right to complain and to hold people accountable.

There are people who attack the present regime because they wish to correct it. There are those who attack the regime in order to de-legitimise it and make its unconstitutional overthrow appear acceptable, sensible and inevitable. Those who rail against the regime in good faith must always keep this in mind and not provide ammunition for the malevolent. It would be foolhardy indeed to give the game away by scoring own goals. Let all eyes be open in 2001, a year that promises to be decisive. Will it be decisive for good or for bad? The choice is ours.

Mistake of 1914, wisdom of 1966

With the release of the seventeen-point list of so-called impeachable offences of which the House of Representatives say the president is guilty, it is now obvious that the whole impeachment drama has very little to do with the constitution or with probity. As many had suspected and some had known all along, the whole drama is about politics and ego-tripping of a very pernicious brand.

Perhaps, the most serious of the charges laid against the president is something the Americans call *impoundment*. According to the *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics*, impoundment is "the refusal of the Executive to spend funds which have been appropriated by the Legislature." Usually, such refusal is effected in the public interest and resolving disputes arising from the executive use of this instrument clearly does not require that the president be impeached. Impoundment is not a high crime within the contemplation of the constitutional provisions on impeachment.

But as they say, all is fair in love and war. Yet people must at least go into these things with their eyes wide open and with their heads properly screwed on. I was reminded last weekend that the House of Representatives now finds it expedient to pose as a lover of the Niger Delta in its quest to remove the president. This is the same House that once shouted down one of its own, Hon. Temi Harriman, over her proposal to amend the Petroleum Act of 1969 in favour of the Niger Delta. Now, who is fooling who!

With this and many other evident inconsistencies, the reality must by now have dawned on many who earlier tagged along in the impeachment game. The point is each participant in the game is pushing for impeachment for different reasons that they may not have disclosed to their confederates. There are obviously various agendas within the impeachment agenda, and people should keep tabs on the whole thing. But the chief agenda seems to have a regional tone

* *Vanguard*, Friday 16, 2001

that our brothers in the Middle Belt and southeast and south-south need to consider carefully.

Consider this: the man who moved the impeachment motion (Muhammad Kumalia) is a northerner; the Speaker who allowed the motion (Ghali Na'Abba) is a northerner; the most visible spokesman of the House on the matter (Farouk Lawan) is a northerner; and, the man who stands to benefit immediately from the impeachment (Atiku Abubakar) is also a northerner. Some people really must think we are so dumb we cannot see the connection.

The other day at a seminar in Kaduna, a fellow who spoke on top of his voice offered only one piece of so-called evidence to support his claim that the president "hates the north". Said he: "Obasanjo has refused to implement the 2002 Budget." In other words, if the president exercises the option of impoundment, it is because he wishes to punish the North.

Listening to this line, the unwary could get the impression that the federal government budget affects only northerners, howsoever defined. Of course, that is not true. What could be true is that there are some northerners who have for many years built a monopoly industry around the spending down of federal government money. These people have every cause to interpret the alleged non-implementation of the budget as a hostile act. What they have no right to do is claim to speak for the North, or to disturb our peace just because they have a bone to pick with Obasanjo, whom they had told us initially was the leader they "could trust." Yet, it is a mindset such as the one captured in this outburst that seems to animate the impeachment threat.

In Nigeria, we have all been consistently socialized into a them-and-us mindset since the annulment of the 1993 presidential election. The annulment was to all purposes and intents a massive assault on the "us", the Abacha years further helped to exacerbate an already dangerous trend: But respite came with the tit-for-tat cancelling out of Abacha and MKO Abiola resulting in a "soft landing." The ensuing statecraft manoeuvres, in turn, resulted in the emergence of Olusegun Obasanjo as president in 1999.

The slide towards a total collapse of the national consensus was thus stemmed by the triumph of common sense and sleight of hand under the Abdulsalami transition. It now appears that things are again headed for a breaking point as the power shift arrangement, that formed the basis of the settlement of 1999, comes under threat with moves to impeach Obasanjo.

But, there is something called the law of unintended consequences. A similar game was played with the annulment in 1993. But those who thought they too would gain from the annulment soon came to grief as Abacha turned out to be ultimate beneficiary. Increasingly, the impeachment move is starting to appear as nothing more than a continuation of the annulment by legislative means. And the House of Representatives members could turn out to be no more than the cat's paw used to pull the chestnut out of the fire. Those among the House members who wish to get some education on these matters only need to take a

stroll to the upper chamber next door and ask Senator David Mark about the annulment.

It is a good thing that wise counsel should prevail in this dangerous gamble. We are told that elders from across the country are getting together to find a political solution to what is to all purpose and intents a contrived impasse. But, many may not consider it such a tragedy if wise counsel fails to prevail. The simple truth is that any attempt to either impeach President Obasanjo now or to scuttle his chances of running for a second term by some subterfuge would be considered a hostile act and a direct challenge to the power shift arrangement that was the condition for keeping Nigeria as one country after the events of 1993-98.

The puppets and the puppeteers of the annulment circus thus have a choice to make. They can persist in their game plan and prove to us that 1914 was indeed a mistake and let us all go our separate ways. Or, they can pull back from the brink and see the wisdom. The choice really is theirs.

National Library of Nigeria

Crucifying Ojo Maduekwe*

The Christian Lenten season has only just started, but it appears that Good Friday may be here already for Ojo Maduekwe, Minister of the Federal Republic in charge of the transport portfolio. And as with that famous first Crucifixion at Golgotha, Ojo's trials and travails are coming not from strangers but in the hands of his kinsmen, the Igbo. His sin is a remark he is said to have made regarding the viability of an Igbo presidential candidature in the 2003 elections, a remark whose details are still in contention but which is nonetheless being touted in some quarters as both incendiary and insulting. Tons of verbiage and pages of newspaper advertorials have already been deployed in promoting one interpretation or the other of the said offending statement to the delight, no doubt, of many media advert managers and their bankers.

It is all a needless controversy, as indeed are many controversies born on the wings of high-wire politics and elite mischief-making. But, it is a controversy strong enough to sway emotions and inflict heavy damage. Will Ojo Maduekwe survive this well-orchestrated plot to get him out of the federal cabinet and subject the Igbo to further ridicule in the politics of the Fourth Republic?

I think Ojo will survive, essentially because the man's political obituary has been written so many times in the past, and on each occasion the *nunc dimitis* had proven premature.

It was immediately after one of such setbacks sometime in 1990 that I first met him in person after a year of following his progress in the debates at the Constituent Assembly of the Babangida transition. My colleague, Yusuph Olaniyonu, and I had gone to interview Baba Gana Kingibe who had then just emerged as the first National Chairman of the defunct Social Democratic Party (SDP). Ojo had sat in on the interview as some kind of a hovering presence in the room. He was mostly silent through the session, but there was no doubt that he was there as Kingibe's chaperone, a role he played admirably at critical

* *Vanguard*, March 2, 2001

points during the interview with studied interjections that defused tension or clarified contentious issues.

A few days earlier, we had gotten information regarding how the SDP national executive that Kingibe headed emerged at the party's maiden convention in Abuja. It was not a very pleasant tale. Ojo, we were told, was practically a shoo-in for the position of National Secretary of the SDP, given the backing he enjoyed from the ascendant faction of the party. But, he refused to do certain things that were considered expedient and which Ojo thought ran counter to his convictions. That singular stand was said to have stood between him and a post he was so eminently qualified to hold. An old politician, who was privy to all the murky goings-on, was to tell me later that, "that boy will not go far in politics".

He was wrong. Not only is Ojo a minister today, he arrived at that position via a most edifying trajectory, first as one of the finest intellects of the Babangida transition and a most articulate spokesperson of the newbreed politics that Babangida claimed he was promoting, suspect as it was. And, he can rightly claim some credit for tending the process that produced June 12. At a time we used to joke at editorial meetings that it appeared that Ojo was the one doing the thinking for both the SDP and its rival NRC, so bereft was the latter of men of ideas.

My respect for Ojo has not waned since those days, despite some of the curious company that he kept during the Abacha days. I consider it a great compliment that the respect has been mutual.

They say that Ojo called the Igbo a race of idiots. The man has said that he said no such thing. And we should believe him. For that would be a most idiotic thing to say about ones kinfolk. I have known Ojo to be many things, but being an idiot is not one of them.

If the current hullabaloo over what Ojo said or did not say serves any purpose at all, it is to once again call painful attention to the kind of beggar-my-neighbour politics that our cousins across the Niger appear to have perfected over the years. If there is anyone really keen on embarking on a fault-finding mission, there are so many scores on which to separate Ojo from his most difficult portfolio, which appears to have become a graveyard of reputations. I do not think that people need to contrive a *casus belli* from an election that is still two years away in order to whip up sentiments against the man and get him out of the way.

People are welcome to plot how to get into Obasanjo's cabinet to fill the Igbo quota. But they would be on a wrong track trying to peg their consummation of that plot on Ojo Maduekwe's exit from the cabinet. The man has paid his dues and I think that the president knows this.

The Igbo must really learn to stop this habit of pulling down any of their brothers that appears to be making headway at the federal level. It is a zero-sum mentality that has not gotten them anywhere.

As the Yoruba proverb says, the sky is so wide that all birds can fly without getting in each other's way. Who says that the Igbo cannot have more than the number of ministers they now have? I think that they have so internalized oppression that the only way they know how to get out of it is to turn on one another. The rest of the country is rather enjoying watching an otherwise smart people tear themselves apart as they try to win favours from their tormentors. Why must the Igbo always think that they have to scramble for what is theirs by right?

People should let Ojo be. It would indeed be a shame if this choreographed storm in-a-tea-cup were to lead to the man's exit from government. For if the truth be told, Ojo Maduekwe's presence in Obasanjo's cabinet confers some dignity and stature on the quality of Igbo representation in the Federal Government. Need we say more?

General Buhari, was Judas guilty?

It is Good Friday, and Easter is just around the corner. Like one priest that I know used to say, there are many Christians who would have wished that the road from Palm Sunday to Easter did not have to pass through Good Friday. It is natural, human inclination to want all the gain without any pain. Don't you think?

We all love the celebration but not the sacrifices. In the true sense of Christianity as a living faith, this Good Friday provides us with yet another opportunity to reflect on our own individual lives. Perhaps, more significantly, it also enables us to further ruminate on the meaning of Christ's sojourn on earth and the import of his life and death and resurrection for present-day public conduct, or the lack there of and it is in this spirit that we take a few lines from the Holy Bible to foreground today's article. Our passage comes from the 26th Chapter of the Book of Matthew, and it reads as follow:

Now when the evening was comes, he sat down with the twelve and as they did eat, he said, verily I say to you, that one of you shall betray me. And they were exceedingly sorrowful, and began every one of them to say to him, lord, is it I? And he answered and said; he that dips his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me. The son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe unto that man by whom the son of man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born, then Judas, who betrayed him, answered and said, Master, it is I? And Jesus said to him, you have said it.

One thing that comes out clearly from this passage is that in doing what he did, Judas Iscariot was acting out a part in a pre-ordained divine plan. But does that absolve him from blame for betraying Jesus? The story of the betrayal, trial,

* *Vanguard*, April 13, 2001

crucifixion and death of Christ continues to be a subject of endless disquisitions in some learned circles. The role of Judas and the nature of predestination, as well as the rightness or otherwise of blaming someone for something that had been preordained to happen, should Judas be adjudged guilty of an act that had been divinely predestined to happen the way it did?

This question probes at the very foundation of the enduring debate between destiny and human conduct, between fate and self-will. And I think that it is in this context that we need to view the altercation between two generals, Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammad Buhari at the Third Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Memorial Lecture held in Abuja last Saturday. Obasanjo was reported to have said that the blame for Yar'Adua's death should be laid at the doorstep of General Sani Abacha, who detained him. Buhari, on his own part, was said to have claimed that no one should be blamed for Yar'Adua's death, as it was the man's destiny to die when he did.

I believe that people should be entitled to their views, even in matters of life and death. But I also believe that people should not invoke a so-called "will of Allah" for every act of wickedness. For me, like the title of that famous play, *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, a human agency that lends itself to the fulfilment of an evil prophecy must itself have an intrinsically evil disposition. Abacha was evil and he killed Yar'Adua. No more, no less. The question to ask General Buhari is, if he was asked to pronounce on the guilt or otherwise of Judas Iscariot, how would he decide?

The new parties*

As has become customary in Nigeria politics since the advent of military rule, many of the emerging political groups do not seem to stand for much beyond the oversized egos of their founder and the plunder instincts of their membership. Which is not necessarily a disqualification considering the state of the three existing parties. With the benefit of two years of depressing hindsight, it does appear that the three parties cannot be said to stand for much that is more ennobling or more inspiring than whatever it is that the new groups represent.

The People's Democratic Party (PDP) has expectedly turned out to be no more than an enlarged and more unruly NPN. How much it owes to that pedigree is to be seen from how the party used corruption to destroy its own poverty alleviation programme, literally killing two birds with a stone as it rubbished two of its Presidential candidate's major campaign promises – poverty reduction and the war against corruption.

The All People's Party (APP) gave its game away too early in the day by emerging as the party of Sharia and by housing the largest conclave of Abacha people outside the man's family. In so doing, it has become perhaps one of the greatest threats to both the longevity of the Fourth Republic and the very survival of the country as one entity. Still, it may be the party to watch.

On its own part, the Alliance for Democracy (AD) is so progressive and so different from the others that it can only prove that point by being perpetually at war with itself. It is unsettling that the only way in which AD seems able to trace its roots to the Action Group is to reconnect with the era of that party's troubles without being able to re-enact AG's earlier glorious feats. These days, the activity that consumes the most energy within AD is the search for how to manufacture a new Akintola. While the party continues to indulge in pointless

* *Vanguard*, April 20, 2001

fratricidal wars and mutual bellicosity, a big question mark hangs on its claims to being the sole "progressive" label in Nigerian politics.

All of this is, of course, without prejudice to the efforts and achievement of the fine gentlemen and ladies who are in office on the platform of the three parties. Rather, the point being made is that the state of the parties is such that it can rightly be argued that whatever good anyone in office under their banner might have done must have been in spite and not because of the party.

Yet, the clamour for new parties is not merely a confirmation of discontent with the existing ones. In fact, it suggests something much deeper and much more sinister. The identities of the moving spirits and principal characters in some of the new parties provide cause for concern. Especially because it says a lot about the lengths to which the failure of the new democracy could drive the inevitable momentum for change. And, I speak here of the creeping re-legitimization of Ibrahim Babangida and the growing nostalgia for the Abacha era.

Of course, it was always going to be a perilous business to speak of General Babangida in the past tense as far as the politics and government of Nigeria is concerned. After all, the man had said that he was merely "stepping aside". Still, the fact that he is now emerging as a rallying point of sorts speaks to a monumental failure of the existing parties as platforms for popular mobilization and institutional contexts of governance. Also, the nostalgia for Abacha, especially on the issue of the exchange rate of the naira, has started to spread from pundits, who should know better, to the masses who do not know any better. Misery rules the land, corruption thrives in all chambers of government and the much-touted democracy dividend is nowhere to be found.

Has democracy failed, then? That depends on what it was meant to achieve in the first place. I think the more relevant question to ask is whether or not the system as it is now can be said to be immune to the antics and ministrations of a populist demagogue. I do not think it is. And, therein lies the danger with how to handle the challenge thrown by some of the new parties.

Democracy in the Fourth Republic has not built the calibre of supportive constituencies required to resist a determined effort to upstage it by a resurgent IBB group or a regrouping of Abacha loyalists or any combination of such forces. The crucial issue here is whether any of the constituencies that can act as a counterforce to these two, be it within the elite or in the streets, feel sufficiently committed to defending democracy. Has the democratic regime conducted itself in such a way as to win such a commitment? To answer this question, the performance of the regime is best assessed on two crucial fronts: economic empowerment and civic education. On both scores the young democracy and its parties have nothing to offer beyond excuses.

In the light of its patently manifest non-performance, what the federal government seems to be left with is the weapon of non-registration of the new parties. It would be a double-edged sword to wield. And, it is likely to be

resisted in a way that seriously questions the legitimacy of the next elections and threatens the survival of the democratic system. In the absence of a sound basis for assessing the gains of this democracy, old wines may not even need to disguise themselves in new bottles to find acceptability – first with an opportunistic elite, and then with the masses.

Things can only get more interesting if you ask me.

Mid-term and democracy dividend.

On the second anniversary of the country's return to civil rule after fifteen years of military dictatorship, the main consolation for many Nigerian is the feeling that things could be a lot worse. The democratic regime gets an endorsement only by default. It is a half-hearted verdict that hangs on the apprehension that what might come after it may be even worse. But for how long can a regime survive on the mere suspicion that might be the least odious of all the obnoxious option available?

The restoration of democracy is not solely about Obasanjo, larger than life as the man himself and his foreign admirers may think he is. This is a point that bears restating at mid-term and at every other time. All too often we confuse democracy with Obasanjo. Not only that, we also confuse the Fourth Republic with the Obasanjo Presidency, to the extent that some might be tempted to think that the Fourth Republic starts and ends with Obasanjo's tenure. Coming from a history of one-term republics, this is probably understandable.

Equally understandable is the obsession with the man and his government's performance – or the lack thereof. After all, his is the federal government in a country that is still largely run by a centralized state apparatus. To that extent, the efforts of other levels of government, especially states such as Lagos become hardly noticeable in the shadows of a fumbling federal behemoth. We all have very pressing reasons to be alarmed at the lacklustre performance of a man who continue to rejoice in the illusion that he is a genius, the very best thing to happen to Nigeria.

Yet, if the only thing the Obasanjo government has done by 2003 is to survive in office and manage a passable transition to another democratically elected government (his own inclusive) it would have qualified to be called a resounding success, very much in the same way that Obasanjo's earlier handover to civilian was. That was the boat that Ibrahim Babangida missed; and

* Vanguard May 25, 2001

which he so sorely craves to catch once again with his convoluted bid to return to power. He labours in vain.

In essence, it would be correct to say that at the midterm of Obasanjo's administration, the greatest democracy dividend is the guarantee of the continuity of the democratic state itself. But democracy for what, some would ask. And it is indeed a pertinent question that recalls a continuing debate: Is democracy an end in itself or is it a means to an end? Is it an instrumental value or is it a consummatory value? To attempt an answer, let us reach for a historical reference that is becoming disturbingly apt for our circumstances - the Weimar Republic in Germany.

Between the end of the First World War and the rise of Adolf Hitler, Germany was ruled by a constitution fashioned in the city of Weimar, hence its name. The Weimar constitution was reputed to have been the most liberal constitution of its time, as it guaranteed all the rights and freedoms possible in that era. But it also operated at a time of great stress. Germany then laboured under the burden of punishing war reparations imposed by the victorious powers, a heavy yoke that was to coincide with the onset of the Great Depression. This combination of misfortunes triggered hyperinflation and so much misery for ordinary Germans. The inflation was of such intensity that it was said that one needed a wheel-barrow full of Deutschemarks to purchase a loaf of bread. It was in this atmosphere of widespread suffering and uncertainty that Hitler rose, promising to put an end to Germany's decline, and aided by the same militarist interests that had led Germany into war in the first place. On his way to absolute power, Hitler tore up the Weimar constitution, noting derisively that the constitution did indeed guarantee all right and freedoms, including the right of ordinary Germans to die of hunger! He then took Germany and the world through a nightmare the like of which had not been witnessed before or since then.

Can it happen here? Many of the ingredients that led Germany down the blind alley seem to be present: A doddering president, once a war hero but who consistently refuses to stand up to vested interests; an economy in shambles; an opportunistic political elite; a crushing debt burden; a society in turmoil. Perhaps the comforting bit for us is there is as yet no constitution to speak of. What exists is palpable anxiety about skyrocketing food prices, the falling value of the naira and the fact the government seems to have lost control of the economy. It is the perfect scenario for the rise of rascals who can sufficiently bamboozle the people and overwhelm the democratic state in the name of promoting public welfare.

We must admit though, that the democratic regime itself is not helping matters, with the president's idiosyncratic approach to governance and the general feeling that people in authority are so thoroughly disconnected from the reality of the daily lives of ordinary Nigerians. In the political arena, every permutation possible is being tried just so to avoid having to face up to the real

issues – restructuring, equity, devolution, reconciliation, etc. Yet when people censoriously declare with finality that the Obasanjo government has failed, what exactly are they saying? That a coup is welcome? Or that the man should be impeached? I thought that the failure or success of an elected government can only be determined at the next elections. In passing our verdicts or making our assessments of the Obasanjo administration, we must be careful lest we provide ammunition for those who would want to claim that it is democracy that has failed. And that is where I think that Chief Olu Falae's midterm assessment is perhaps the best that has been offered to date. It is balanced, well reasoned and with copious suggestions on how the flaws he so admirably catalogued can be redressed. Let others who would shout the government down before its term expires also come up with their proposals.

As they say, it is "not yet *Uhuru*". But those who make such a mighty fuss about the absence of democracy dividend may wish to reflect on the grim possibility that if this house is brought down, they could end up with no democracy at all, talk less of its dividend.

Farewell to pretence*

A lawyer friend used to practice in one of the big law chambers in town that had quite a reputation for paying its lawyers allowances that many of them considered to be meagrely. Lawyers working in chambers are not expected to be on a salary but on stipends that are meant to cover their costs and out-of-pocket expenses. This arrangement, like many curiosities in the learned profession, is said to have its origins in British convention. The logic, to the extent that it could be so called, is that the benefits of being associated with reputable chambers far outweighed whatever pecuniary returns a lawyer could expect to get while undergoing tutelage.

It does appear though that many lawyers are increasingly finding it difficult to live with the arrangement, as it does not seem that whatever is paid as stipend is ever enough to cover even the barest costs. Plus, that it is a system that could be quite open to abuse by a stingy principal. Plainly, many think that this remuneration regime no longer makes sense, regardless of what British convention said.

Naturally, my friend, like many of his colleagues, devised various creative coping mechanisms to get round what was obviously an impossible situation. People simply did their own thing on the side, sometimes using the leverage that the chamber's name recognition accorded them.

One day my friend and some of his colleagues thought up a rather cheeky way of getting the lawyers' message across to their principal on the chamber's atrocious remuneration policy. And it was going to be a very public outing. The opportunity was to have presented itself with the birthday anniversary of the principal. As it was going to be one of those "landmark" birthdays, the staff had decided to commemorate the occasion by organising a novelty football match with many clients and friends of chambers invited to the match. My friend was

* *Vanguard*, July 20, 2001

given the responsibility of procuring jerseys that the two teams would wear for the match.

He had gotten in touch with me confident, as he said, that I should be knowledgeable about how and where such "campaign materials" could be gotten and appropriately branded to suit the occasion. He was only half right; I knew next to nothing about the markets where jerseys were sold but I certainly had a few suggestions on where the branding of inscriptions on the jerseys could be done. So, after he had bought the jerseys, we went off to my friend, Felix Aikhomu Ediale, now dearly departed, who had a print shop. Felix asked what text he wanted inscribed on the jerseys and my friend replied that a few suggestions had come up at the office including messages like "Happy Birthday, Daddy!" and "Many Happy Returns!" and other such predictable inscriptions. But, what he and some of his colleagues really had a good mind of inscribing on the jersey, he told us, was a rare gem of a message that would convey in unmistakable terms how they really felt about what the chambers paid its lawyers.

If they had their way, he said, the backs of the jerseys would bear a message that read: "we pretend to work, they pretend to pay!" to tell the boss exactly what they thought of his miserly ways. Felix and I had a very good laugh over what would have been a most mischievous punch line but, of course, my lawyer friend never did summon the nerve to give Felix the go-ahead to print those cheeky words on the backs of the jerseys. And, so it was that the novelty match went on without any inscription that could have ruined the celebrant's day.

I recall this line that was never used each time I encounter a situation where people get so smug that their fellow men are not wiser to their chicanery. More often than not, people know when they are being taken for a ride but merely play along or wait for an opportune time to kick up a mighty fuss. I rather think that such a thing might now be happening over many of the contentious issues in our national life, especially the agitation for resource control by peoples of the oil-producing Niger Delta region. There is today a sudden outbreak of concern for the ordinary people of the oil-producing areas by officials of the federal government and spokesman of the northern political elite that had for a long time appropriated the federal apparatus. I do not think the concern is genuine. First, it was President Olusegun Obasanjo talking about *owambe* parties. He had threatened to probe governors of the oil-producing states on their use of the extra funds that had accrued to their states' coffer from the increased revenue allocation to them under the 13 per cent provision. Then, it was his deputy, Abubakar Atiku, wondering why the Niger Delta governors should be taking the federal government to task for not releasing to the affected states the exact amounts that were due to them. Alhaji Atiku argues glibly that they must first account for what they had collected so far.

Not to be outdone, and, as if on cue, pointsmen from the North who have been fishing around for ways to counter the agitation for resource control

jumped into the fray. They have now come up with the claim that the agitation for resource control was only being pushed by elite from the oil-producing areas for selfish reasons. Quite notable in concocting this argument have been one Lamido Sanusi and the journalist, Mohammed Haruna. According to them, those arguing for resource control are merely trying to feather their own nests. This could well be true. But these new day champions of the common man in the Niger Delta fail to tell us how the lot of the masses in the Delta improved in all the years that oil monies were rapaciously appropriated by elite from other parts of the country.

Or, how many ordinary people from those other parts benefited from their elite's control of oil revenue. We recall that some people had to wait for the emergence of a Christian president from the south to remember that they needed to live under the Sharia to be good Moslems.

The same people now obviously need the jolt of a determined push for resource control to acknowledge that common people were suffering in the Niger Delta. If you ask me, I think that it's all hogwash, a trick to deflect people from addressing historical injustices.

And it just won't wash. The question of whether or not leaders of the Niger Delta are using their windfall from oil properly is for the people of the Niger Delta to raise. Professional busybodies and mischief-makers from Abeokuta or Adamawa or wherever would do well to note this fact, lest they further add insult to age-long injuries.

Madness, mischief and power games*

The Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland is one of the most significant landmarks of Bonn, former capital of the Federal Republic of Germany. Literally translated, its name in English means House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany. And, that is exactly what it is – a massive collection of theme and period artefacts from Germany's contemporary history. There you find an original of Adolf Hitler's signature from the Reichstag (Parliament) on that fateful day in 1933 when his Nazi party, intimidated all other power blocs into acquiescing in the subversion of Germany's fragile democracy.

There you also find flashbacks to the brutalities of Kristallnacht, the violent night in 1934 when Nazi thugs led frenzied gangs to destroy Jewish shops across Germany, effectively signalling the beginning of Hitler's massacre of six million Jews. And, there you also find vivid and horrifying images of the Holocaust as advancing Allied troops liberated the concentration camps to reveal unspeakable evidence of man's inhumanity to man.

There you can watch the televised address of late US President John F. Kennedy delivered at the height of the Cold War in 1961 when, in a memorable show of solidarity with the people of Berlin, whose city was then under siege as the infamous Berlin Wall was built, he declared: "Ich bin ein Berliner" (I am Berliner). And, there you will find huge slabs from that same wall, torn down by surging crowds and festooned in graffiti as the communist regime that built it collapsed in 1989. Then, there are happy images portraying the Wirtschaftswunder (Germany's post-War economic miracle) and its author, Ludwig Erhard, second Chancellor of the Republic. In all, a tour of the museum provides a riveting, if haunting, excursion into contemporary German history, economy, society and politics.

* *Vanguard*, October 26, 2001

But, as a visiting Nigerian, confronted with rather depressing news of fresh outbreaks of violence back home, what I found most remarkable about the Haus der Geschichte was a simple and yet powerful message inscribed near the approach to the exit. As we made our way out of the museum last Sunday at the end of a marathon tour, I had the guide interpret the inscriptions from the message written in German to me. Here is what the lines say: Your Christ, a Jew, Your religion, an import. Your car, a Japanese. Your coffee, a Brazilian. Your democracy, a Greek. Your pizzas, an Italian. Your numerals, Arabic. Your script Latin. And your neighbour? Still just a stranger?"

These few lines obviously speak volumes about Germany's continuing debate with itself and the world around it, especially in the context of the country's Nazi past and its resurgent xenophobia.

But, the words also carry a thought-provoking message for all nations, especially those lands where the genuinely mad, the plainly ignorant, and the power-obsessed mischief-maker foster the demonization of others to rationalize wanton destruction and the casual taking of lives. The obvious intent of placing the message near the exit is to provide further food for thought to anyone who, after the tour of the museum's fare of barbaric images from modern German history, still finds it in himself to harbour hatred of his fellow man. Germany is one country that should know the horrifying consequences of the kind of murderous hate that opportunistic politicking, rabid fundamentalism and extreme nationalism can breed. Nigeria should, too. But it does appear that either our memories are too short about these things or that the mischief-makers among us have a longer staying power than the rest of us, as the on-going events in parts of the Middle Belt and, now, Kano sadly show.

And, there, perhaps, the utility of the museum message expires. Its purpose is to educate the daft, not eliminate the dastardly. I do not think that all the bloodletting that Nigeria has suffered in the past couple of months can be traced solely to the ignorance of zealots who misread their holy books or the madness of chauvinists who misinterpret their history books.

Fluids, pebbles and breakables*

At the dawn of a New Year, the great job of achieving a durable and workable unity remains the primary defining task for Nigeria, our country of multiple diversities. Even as we ended Year 2001 on a note of hope tinged with despair (or vice versa) the necessity and urgency of this assignment have only become more poignant and increasingly daunting. What are our options in taking on this assignment, since so much hope continues to be invested – especially by others and in spite of ourselves – in seeing that Nigeria works and works well? Are there any new ideas in our bag of tricks after all the failed permutations of years gone by? Is unity possible in Nigeria? Or, is it the labour of Sisyphus to seek unity in a nation so fractious.

My answer to this last question is a resounding NO! In contemplating the future and prospects of our country, I take a deep breath and then I vote on the side of optimism and hope.

Let us consider two images of the Nigerian condition. One image is that of Nigeria as an odd assortment of fluids of diverse hues and chemical composition, all contained in the same breakable glass cup. The other image is that of Nigeria as an agglomeration of pebbles of various shapes and sizes, also contained in a fragile glass cup. The glass cup defines the perimeters of the country and the overriding task is to ensure that the inevitable interflows and exchanges amongst its contents do not result in the breakage of the fragile container or the spilling of its contents.

It is not an easy task, primarily because of the very nature of the container as a fragile object that can only take so much rattling. But, also because of the divergent temperaments of its contents, some of which, in the case of the fluids, are prone to ignite on contact, smashing the container in the process. Or, the case of the pebbles is prone to grate and clatter with such violence as to break the glass cup and reduce everything to just so many pebbles.

* *Vanguard*, January 4, 2002

What to do in the circumstance? The seemingly easy choice would be to try to remove the most troublesome contents from each container. But that is not quite as easy as it sounds. By the very fact of being in the same container, some interflows and admixture would have taken place in the case of the fluids. Even in the case of the pebbles, regular grating would have resulted in some chipping off, which produces gains of fine sand that are neither recognizable by their ancestry nor easily definable in terms of their pristine character.

Another choice, which really is no choice, is the free fall option – i.e. to let the exchanges get so volatile that the cup breaks so that every item in it can find its level. The difficulty here is that in the case of the fluids, the fact of the interflows that have already taken place means that there are no more pure substances in the real sense, only a concoction. This would be so even if the fluids in question were to be as extremely different in their composition as water and oil. And, anyway, what assurance is there that in spilling out of the cup, the contents would not get sucked into the ground or be dried up by the sun? In the case of the pebbles, there is also no guarantee that the grating would cease by the mere fact of the pebbles no longer being in the same container. Some could fall out of the broken container only to find themselves having to exist side-by-side, one with the other. And then what happens?

The parable could be stretched to all kinds of limits depending on the span and ingenuity of one's imagination. But the long and short of it is that a break-up is no longer feasible in Nigeria.

What, then, is feasible? Crucially, a steady hand to hold the cup, to ensure that the interflows and the grating continue to take place in such manner as to throw up a unique blend in which all the original contents can find some little bit of themselves. For the cup containing the fluids, this blending would take a lot longer and a lot more ingenuity in the case of the cup with the pebbles. But, even the hardest rocks ultimately succumb to weathering agents.

In either case, however, an option that should not be tried at all is to attempt putting a lid on the cup! For, ultimately, that can only lead to an explosion or an implosion or both. The steam and the dust that are generated by the exchanges inside the cups must have an outlet. In a country like Nigeria, there is not likely to be a shortage of people canvassing any of the possible range of options on how we can stay together or why we should not. Yet, the truth is integrationists must learn to live with secessionists. But, all of these must fall under the guiding arm of the federalist.

And, so one goal to set for ourselves in 2002 is that of strengthening the arms of our federalist in the work of unity that has clearly become a task for all. There will be no quick or easy victories. For, as US President George W. Bush said of the war against terrorism, victory can only be won "by the patient accumulation of successes."

For Bolaji Akinyemi at 60

When I decided a couple of weeks ago to dedicate my first column this year to my former teacher, Professor Bolaji Akinyemi who turns 60 today, matters seemed fairly straightforward. There had not been the tragic intervening variable of Chief Bola Ige's assassination. And, there had not been the grief and confusion occasioned by that event, which has also informed a muting of what should have been a full celebration for Nigeria's former Foreign Minister. In the circumstance, all that one can do now is to wish Professor Akinyemi a happy birthday and to defer the intended comprehensive review of his public life to a more auspicious time.

In the interlude between his tenure at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) and his appointment as President Babangida's Foreign Minister, Professor Akinyemi had taught my graduate class a course in foreign policy. He always emphasized then the primacy of domestic considerations in determining a country's foreign policy, stressing that a country can only realize its place in the world if its home front is intact. This perspective was to find ironic expression in his own career as a diplomat as the 1993-1998 struggles re-defined several things about many of us, including our Nigerianness, such that it would be interesting to know which title means more to Professor Akinyemi these days - IBB's Foreign Minister or NADECO envoy/*Afenifere* chieftain.

I wish Professor Akinyemi many more years of fruitful service to the nation - howsoever he defines it.

After Ige*

So much has been said since the assassination of Chief Bola Ige just two days before Christmas 2001. Even a lot more has been left unsaid. Which is probably just as well considering the increasingly incendiary dimension that the accusations and counter-accusations, claims and counter-claims over the dastardly murder are starting to assume.

For many, palpable grief has mixed with confused angst as people struggle to comprehend the meaning and ramifications of this tragic event. The confusion has expectedly spawned all manner of conspiracy theories, a situation that is not helped by the stabbing to death earlier in the week of a top aide to the Chief Justice of the Federation. This latest killing has set many thinking as to possible linkages and whether a mafia could be at work that seeks to intimidate the judicial system. Making sense of this possibility might be one of the biggest assignments confronting the law enforcement apparatus following the death of Chief Ige.

Still, the focus in the Ige murder remains largely on the political front, the most prominent of the various constituencies in which he was a key player. No doubt, all of these constituencies deserve more than a passing glance in the investigations into the death and none should escape the searchlight as the hunt for Ige's killers continues.

But, some may be tempted to ask: to what end? The fact of his death cannot be reversed. As Henry Miller said in the enigmatic opening line of his book *Tropic of Capricorn*, "after you have given up the ghost, everything follows with dead certainty, even in the midst of chaos."

Has death, then, pulled a final curtain on Ige's many struggles? I think not. What seems to be emerging with his death is a gigantic and unbelievable transformation of the man. Not many would argue that death has elevated Ige

* *Vanguard*, January 11, 2002

not just way above his peers and rivals but also beyond whatever pedestal even he could have sought to appropriate for himself in his lifetime. As President Obasanjo said in his tribute, Ige has joined the great martyrs of history. Who knows, perhaps, someday soon elections could be won and lost on the strength of his name.

As Chief Ige is buried today, two uncanny pieces of insight that have been proffered on his death must compel some very hard thinking on the part of Ige's kinsmen in Yorubaland and his compatriots in the larger entity called Nigeria. *Egbon Gbolabo Ogunsanwo*, a respected senior colleague who writes in *The Comet*, provided the first insight. A veteran of many political battles, Ogunsanwo had at a private session sought to draw an analogy between Chief Ige's assassination and the murder of Ahmed Massud, the charismatic leader of the Northern Alliance opposition in Afghanistan who was killed in a September 9, 2001 suicide bomb attack.

Two agents of the ruling Taliban had gained access to Massud by posing as journalists seeking an interview, only to detonate explosives strapped onto their persons, killing their quarry and themselves in the process. The attacks on Massud took place just two days before the September 11 terrorist hijack bombing in the United States in which thousands died. At the time of Massud's murder, the fortunes of the Northern Alliance that he headed were at a very low ebb as the Taliban regime in Kabul entrenched itself, gaining more and more in power and brazenness. It was this brazenness that was to have blinded the Taliban to the horrific consequences of lending their hand to the US bombings, reportedly perpetrated by their guest, Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network.

As it turned out, the terrorist bombings in the US became a blessing in disguise for the Northern Alliance. For, it was the fury of America and its allies over the attacks that eventually led to the unprecedented bombing of Afghanistan, effecting the ouster of the Taliban and paving the way for the restoration of the Northern Alliance to power. In effect, then, Massud's death seemed to have been the sacrifice that his movement needed to make to triumph over its enemies. It is the stuff of epic irony: the general is killed and only then does his army march into victory; the captain dies and then the floundering ship safely makes its way to shore.

The analogy here is that Chief Ige's murder may well coincide with a dramatic but ultimately victorious culmination of his life's battles. The man dies and then his ideas triumph. In which case, his will be the case of the general that is felled just before the enemy is routed.

The second piece of insight comes from the pained article written by our dear sister Toyin Fagbaya, which was widely circulated in the national newspapers last week. In the closing paragraph of her write-up, Toyin, a former member of the national executive of the Alliance for Democracy (AD), offered a dire prognosis on the fate of Yoruba political elders. "The removal of Uncle

Bola's cap in Ile-Ife," she said "was a bad omen for the Yoruba, which the elders did not condemn publicly. His death may be the removal of the cap of the elders."

It is a very sobering but courageous thing to say. And, I think it perfectly captures the mood of these times. Elsewhere in the article, Toyin had lamented that "Uncle Bola's assassination is the collective shame of the Yoruba as a people in particular as well as that of the elders who worked assiduously to undermine him..." She went further to deliver the accusation that, "...we, the Yoruba, are vicariously responsible for this tragedy – as we created the enabling environment for the heinous crime to be committed."

Quarrelling with these sentiments would be very hard indeed, even if some would say that they have been expressed in the heat of the moment. Whatever the investigations might throw up, it would be hard to fault the thesis that whoever killed Chief Ige had the ground well prepared for them by the nasty developments in Yoruba politics immediately preceding the act.

So where does all of this lead us? I think this tragedy already suggests the outlines of post-Ige politics. And, it is likely to be much better politics than that which defined Ige's life and presaged his death. Both the Massud analogy and the de-capping symbolism carry a deep resonance for politics in Nigeria and in Yorubaland. One speaks of the *deus ex machina* of triumph in death; the other of a reconstructive dynamic triggered by that death. Both outcomes are inevitable, but no one should underestimate the intensity of the war that would be waged before the dynamic fully plays itself out. For, even while Bola Ige's body is yet warm in the grave, the battle would have been joined – in the man's political family and without.

It is a tribute to any leader that he is able to so affect in his death the affairs of the still living. May God grant the soul of Chief Bola Ige eternal rest. Amen.

It all hangs together*

Nigeria's increasingly frightening chronicle of woes provides unmistakable pointers to insider mischief. It is becoming quite clear that the frequency of the unsettling developments of the past few months can no longer be ascribed to mere happenstance or sheer coincidence or even the much maligned "will of God". In these strange and depressing times, when it appears that our country can only cascade from crisis to disaster to tragedy, we must reflect on the meaning of unfolding events and take necessary action. We need to do this lest we all get consumed by the cycle of violence and bloodletting that now turns with seemingly inexorable regularity.

Our wheel of misfortune is rolled by not-so-hidden persuaders and their co-plotters on the inside. The goal seems to be not just to unseat the incumbent government and truncate the democratic order but also to break the will of the people in the exercise of their hard-won freedom. All of this may be about 2003, but it could also be about much, much more.

In a twinkling of an eye, countless monumental tragedies have befallen the country in such circumstances and with such rapidity that can at best be described as curious. First, it was Jos, where a long-standing reputation for serenity and a hallowed tradition of peaceful coexistence were shattered by an inter-communal clash that left the city's people badly bloodied and the rest of the country bewildered. Before the sad incidents of last September, Jos was easily the most pleasant metropolis of its size in Nigeria, with an unblemished record of serving as a safe haven for people fleeing from neighbouring trouble spots, notably Kaduna and Bauchi.

Fast on the heels of the Jos crisis came the unprecedented bloodletting in Taraba State, ostensibly borne on the wings of a long-running Tiv-Junkun war. But let us ask ourselves: what really is the genesis of the renewed round of so-called Tiv-Junkun hostilities? Could it be part of a desperate effort by hostile

* *Vanguard*, February 8 2002

interests to halt the development of a resurgent Middle Belt solidarity that was beginning to coalesce under the Obasanjo presidency? Such Middle Belt consciousness had always been considered as an affront by people sworn to hold the area permanently in servitude, as a tag-along bargaining chip in their power games with the rest of the country. Now the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) says it is reconciling the *Tor Tiv* and the *Aku Uka*. I wonder what that is meant to tell the Middle Belt and the rest of us.

Hardly had the dust from the razing of Zaki Biam and other Tiv villages settled when the nation woke up to the news that Chief Bola Ige, Attorney-General of the Federation and Minister of Justice, had been gunned down in his bedroom. The slaying of the nation's chief law officer just two days before Christmas was reportedly accomplished without as much as a whimper from those duty it was to guard him. There was no resistance because the guards were nowhere to be found.

The late Ige's wife is a judge of the Federal Court of Appeal, a fact that should have made an attack on him a not so easy walkover as it turned out to be. Yet, all we heard was that at the critical moment the man's guards all "went to eat" while the assailants moved in.

Speaking of eating and without seeking to trivialize issues, we must recall that the selfsame Ige had once been accused of being ungrateful to those who invited him to "come and eat"! And to further tell us how ridiculous things can get around here, someone then went ahead to announce a reward of ₦500,000 for information that could lead to the arrest of Ige's killers, prompting an American commentator to gleefully report that Nigeria had just told the world that the life of its Attorney-General was worth only 4,600 American dollars!

The nation was still mourning Ige's death when "high calibre" bombs, said to have been carelessly stored, went off at the Ikeja military cantonment in Lagos. Virtually every Lagosian has a story to tell of the explosions that shook their city to its very foundations, penultimate Sunday. Of course, we cannot excuse whatever unpardonable negligence might have been at play in the manner the bombs were said to have been stored. Still, we need to ponder the yet un-refuted story that the bombs that went off had just been relocated to Lagos and that the explosions may have been aided along to teach a few lessons. Given the testy nature of our polity these days, insinuations are bound to be rife on the cantonment blasts.

But we cannot pre-empt the investigations, which the military, rightly or wrongly, has decided to conduct privily. Whatever we may think of the approval of secret investigations into the blasts have been overshadowed by fresh killings triggered, we are told, by Hausa-Yoruba clashes in Idi Araba, a densely populated part of Lagos that is home to the Teaching Hospital. As we write this, killings continue in other parts of the state, suggesting choreographed preparations. Writing in *The Guardian* on the day of the bomb blasts, one MT

Usman had warned that, "the triumphalism of the Ibos during the Ironsi regime is now being replicated by the people of the West."

In the light of what befell the Ibos in those dark days of 1966, we cannot treat this as a flippant statement. Are we set on the road to another July 29 1966?

It does not take a bout of paranoia to see that all these things happening around us hang together somehow. The big question is: is the President on top of things? If he is not, it is not too late to seek help. And there is help aplenty from quarters that he should know.

Tony Blair and the poverty blight

British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, is setting out on an African tour that many see as a step on his road to world statesmanship. Preparatory to the start of the trip, his office on Tuesday issued a powerful statement focused on poverty in Africa.

He repeated his earlier remark that poverty in Africa is "a scar on the conscience of the world." Blair warned that Africa could produce the next Afghanistan, a failed state dependent on guns that becomes a haven for terrorists. He further admonished that following the September 11 attacks the West needed to help Africa win the war against poverty, not so much as an act of altruism but out of enlightened self-interest: "Let us re-order the world around us," he said, "before the troops of terrorism strike again."

All of which is well said, especially coming on the heels of similar sentiments expressed by United Nations' Secretary General, Kofi Annan, last week. Blair's observation, though, carries a particular symbolism, with particular reference to Nigeria. For too long, British policy in Nigeria had helped keep power in the hands of those who would rather deepen their people's poverty. And in case Mr. Blair needs to be told, these are the same people who would jubilate at the events of September 11. Is Britain about to stop playing the "perfidious Albion" with Nigeria's fortunes?

Mr President's catch-22.

We concluded the first part of this piece last week by noting how President Obasanjo has been deferring taking a stand on key issues that are quite germane for the health of his presidency and of the nation. We also noted that he had needlessly been making too many enemies and opening too many battlefronts, even where he could easily have gotten away with delay tactics. Both approaches, we said, provide a background to some interesting developments as elections draw near.

The President has put off taking a decision on some critical matters because he still looks forward to a second term. His opponents know this. They also know that allowing him to make decisive moves from the relative comfort of a second term, when all IOUs against him would have been exhausted, could be quite dangerous. So they want to force him either to play his hand while he is still vulnerable or to foreclose any smart moves that could put the system in a spin. Both sides are engaged in a massive gamble, and the system is overheated on that account.

The dilemmas of President Obasanjo are legion. Many of these are self-inflicted. But many more are consequences of the sheer dynamics of running a country as complex as Nigeria. Virtually all the dilemmas are just way above Obasanjo's head, even though being the Mr. Know-it-All that he is, he would be the last person to admit that any problem could be beyond him. But whether Obasanjo admits it or not, the picture we see today is that of a President caught in a web of contradictions about which he is doing (or can do) pretty little.

In-house, it is doubtful that the man can boldly claim that all his men are working for him, or that even a majority of them are loyal to his cause. Some recent developments suggest that these days, President and Presidency could indeed refer to two different entities that may sometimes be working at cross-purposes. The unending stream of high profile embarrassments to which the President has lately been subjected says a lot about delicate balancing acts on

* *Vanguard*, February 22, 2002

the inside. In the larger context of his government, Obasanjo remains his own cheerleader in the anti-corruption crusade, which he probably sees as the flagship initiative of his regime. Officials and acolytes grumble in private conversation, the impression you get is that the man is strictly on his own in this matter of catching thieves. As far as many of them are concerned, the beat must go on.

President Obasanjo's anti-graft war presents a catch-22 for the man and his administration. These days, a common refrain you hear is that the president has not been "empowering" his people. This complaint has been loudest from characters claiming to be "working" for Obasanjo, especially on the project of securing a second term. More often than not the complaint is no more than the self-serving lamentation of rogues. The President often calls his own people just that – rogues – sometimes in the open.

Yet there is an issue here. The forces arrayed against the President have very deep pockets and have not been squeamish about deploying mind-boggling sums to buy support and sponsor mischief. As practised masters of "settlement" and denizens of subversive generosity, this force find in Nigeria's corrupt, poverty-ridden system a rich hunting field. The dilemma here for Mr. President is obvious – it is the old argument between principle and expediency. How do you counter forces whose forte is free-spending if your campaign is seen as penny-pinching especially in an environment of so many hungry people! And how do you match your opponents, as one of the President's friends lately boasted, "naira for naira and dollar for dollar" while playing holier-than-thou! Should the war on corruption be deferred or tempered to give rogues fighting from ones corner an upper hand in the political contest!

It is a great dilemma, compounded by bad faith of some of the President's known beneficiaries who still refuse to stand up for the man at critical times. There is also the sneaky feeling that some of Obasanjo's close allies preside over huge machine of accumulation and graft, making a mockery of his Mr. Clean image. People often point to some unseen hands in the privatization exercise. Which has led many to argue that Obasanjo anti-leniency temper and firm putdown seem to be trained on "soft target" from certain parts of the country. The argument here is that when push comes to shove, Obasanjo cannot summon the nerve to slaughter all sacred cows. This reticence is said to be at the heart of some of his bigger dilemmas on the political front.

Obasanjo continues to shoot down proposals that would provide structural guarantee for all the reforms he claims to be putting in place, preferring instead to content himself with making only personnel changes that can be easily reversed. To date, I still cannot understand his opposition to a less centralized federal arrangement that leaves people in different parts of the country free to move at their own pace. His dilly-dally on the national conference is only an aspect of this deep-seated opposition that seems to come from his military

background. Obasanjo fails to see that we are choking ourselves the way we are currently held together. We need to breathe.

It is a fundamental dilemma. Obasanjo insists on holding together a country that appears to have made up its mind to break apart. Either he knows something we all do not or he is just hoping against hope that the need to find an appropriate framework for unity in Nigeria would simply go away if you deny or ignore it long enough. Without such a framework, the country cannot move.

Keeping Nigeria together under the present arrangement is possible only under someone like Obasanjo, but increasingly it is becoming clear that a Nigeria united under such condition cannot also be a country that makes progress. Those who say Obasanjo has not performed miss the point Nigeria is not structured to perform. This is why what makes perfect sense to one intelligent man in one part of the country does not make any sense at all to another perfectly intelligent man in another part of the country. And that is why we can afford to play politics with everything, including murder and our children's future.

The determined and deadly opposition now being mounted against even his minimalist reforms should convince Obasanjo that in his quest to change Nigeria for the better, there can be no half measures. Some forces and tendencies just have to be utterly destroyed. You either get them or they get you. His decision to go about this inevitable task without much further ado would greatly help Obasanjo as he seeks to overcome his many dilemmas.

The Emir and JAMB.

A statement credited to the Emir of Zazzau, Alhaji Shehu Idris, last Sunday, provides much cause for concern and a lot of food for thought. The emir, in whose domain the north's leading tertiary institution, Ahmadu Bello University is located, was said to have called for the scrapping of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB). His reason? JAMB is "causing great hindrance to students from the north in gaining entrance into institutions."

Wonders shall never cease. What the revered Emir may or may not know is that the general perception of JAMB is that it is one of those federal institutions created to make life easy for northerners and, by the same token, in accordance with the Jubril Aminu script, to "storm the fortress at Ile-Ife", and slow down the south's educational advance.

If what the Emir claims is true, then we seem to have the law of unintended consequences. Or, may be further proof that some people won't be satisfied until the admission cut-off mark for some parts of the country is reduced all the way down to zero.

It has been said, time and over again, that peace and unity will continue to elude Nigeria insofar as the yawning educational gap between north and south continues to widen. Bridging that gap requires that the elders of the north tell the truth to their people and encourage their young ones to brace up for a competitive environment. It is not for elders to give the youth the false comfort that there could be profit without work or that they should be spoon-fed from cradle to grave. And, those who would rather slow others down, as a way of catching up, should by now have realized that your candle does not shine brighter just because you put out the other man's candle!

* *Vanguard*, March 29, 2002

How to spot a progressive*

Rummaging through some of my old collections last week, I chanced upon a rather interesting pamphlet titled "Ideology of Nigerian Progressives", a publication of the Research Department of the Office of the Political Adviser to the Governor of Kano State. The twenty-page pamphlet contained an address delivered by Alhaji Abubakar Rimi, then Governor of Kano State at a seminar in December 1982. The address was essentially a treatise on the evolution of radical and progressive politics in Nigeria. Its immediate task at the time, however, was to provide a road map for the progressive parties that were then forming an alliance to wrest power from the ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN) in the 1983 elections. Rimi was in the thick of that struggle, which had also divided his own party, the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) into the Aminu Kano and Michael Imoudu factions. The address was anchored on the message of change that Rimi and his fellow progressives in the Great Nigeria Peoples' Party (GNPP), Nigeria Peoples' Party (NPP) and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) were then championing.

Changes have indeed taken place since then in Nigerian politics, but mostly for the worse. Not only did the progressives lose in 1983, winners and losers alike were soon rounded up by the military, which took power on the last day of that year, effectively truncating the Second Republic. Some would argue that Rimi himself has gone through a few changes of his own, perhaps also for the worse. But that need not detain us at this point. What concerns us is that much of his message of twenty years ago remains relevant today as we begin another round of electioneering, with Rimi interestingly, now a presidential aspirant.

In the said address, Rimi had set out four "minimum commitment conditions" to which a political movement in Nigeria must adhere "before it can be classified as progressive". These are a) commitment to promote and defend the unity of the people of Nigeria over and above all sectional vested interests;

* *Vanguard*, Friday, June 7 2002

b) commitment to promote, ensure and defend democratic elections and (uphold) democratic activity in all organs of government and the elimination of all feudalist and fascistic practices which violate the fundamental human rights of citizens; c) commitment to support African unity and the liberation struggle of all the people of Africa, black people everywhere and all oppressed people fighting for liberation from imperialism and its aggressive instruments, Apartheid and Zionism; and d) commitment to promote social and policies that will consolidate and advance Nigeria's struggle for social, economic and political change.

Adhering to these commitments, Rimi said, would lay the foundation for achieving the ultimate goal of the progressives, which is to bring about a "new order". He then listed sixteen "specific policy actions" as key elements of the new order. These are

- 1) the provision of effective security and protection for the lives and property of all persons in Nigeria;
- 2) a just land policy;
- 3) guaranteed national minimum wage and regular payment of salaries and allowances to all wage earners;
- 4) a new system of social (welfare) and effective national defence;
- 5) a programme of rural development centred around the peasant farmer;
- 6) a programme of building new, modern industries in each state to bring about rapid and balanced industrialization and increase and spread employment opportunities;
- 7) a program of urban renewal to save old towns and cities from decay, congestion and filth and build new ones that promote the work, health and happiness of all inhabitants;
- 8) free and purposeful education;
- 9) free and effective health care based on national preventive health system with grassroots foundation;
- 10) the promotion of the dignity of women through the building of women centres run by women for accelerated literacy and acquisition of skills and civic rights by all women;
- 11) mass literacy campaign for all adults to make all the adult population literate and numerate within a decade;
- 12) the creation of viable states in accordance with the wishes of the people, to promote harmonious social and economic development;
- 13) a purposeful and dynamic foreign policy that provides substantive support for the Liberation Movement in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and directed towards the achievement of African Unity and a more just and peaceful world order;
- 14) a social policy that will contribute to a redistribution of wealth and guarantee the benefits of national progress to all the workers, peasants and the toiling masses;

- 15) the promotion and support of scientific, technical and other creative ideas in order to enhance productivity in the industrial, agricultural and technological fields; and
- 16) a massive rural development programme aimed at providing modern amenities, establishing industrial projects and mechanizing agriculture in such a way that the gap between urban and rural life would be finally eliminated within a reasonable period.

No doubt, radical politics has evolved since Rimi's treatise was delivered twenty years ago. On the world stage, international socialism has since been orphaned as the Soviet empire crumbled. In Nigeria, progressive politics has regressed under the onslaught of reactionary military regimes. So much so that even the Left has caught the bug of intense re-ethnification of political consciousness that the annulment of the 1993 elections unleashed. Still, the ideological and programmatic essence of progressive politics in Nigeria remains largely the same as Rimi elaborated in the address.

As in the run-up to 1983, serious politicking is again in the air with 2003 just round the corner. The stakes are not very different from what they were twenty years ago, if anything the stakes are higher. But now it appears that the progressive label may be up for grabs. The other day Vice President Abubakar Atiku accused the Alliance for Democracy (AD) of having betrayed the legacy of Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Senator Ayo Fasanmi, the AD's leader in the Southwest, has denied the accusation. It is, of course, comforting that people still feel the need to squabble over who is and who is not committed to upholding Chief Awolowo's legacy. Yet it should be instructive that the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) elements have lately been gaining in confidence to enter the fray as Atiku did in Ibadan of all places.

The clear message is that we stand at the edge of a massive transformation that could see a further blurring of traditional divisions in contemporary Nigerian politics. No one is likely to get away any longer with being hailed as a progressive just by proclaiming himself as one. Visible work to further the agenda of progress would be the litmus test of one's earnestness as a man of positive change. This is why Nigerians must ensure that the people who emerge from the coming elections – local, state, national – are the true heralds of a new epoch, not just the accomplished masters of the usual window-dressing. To do this, we need to measure the utterances and performance of all contestants against the parameters so clearly enunciated by Alhaji Rimi two decades ago. And it might be interesting to start with Rimi himself.

The race is on*

No one needs to be told that the race to fill elective officers at all levels of government is now on in earnest all over the country. As the August elections into Local Government Councils draw near, all manner of drama and dreariness is unfolding as aspirants seek to out-manoeuvre one another. It's all such heady stuff and the uninitiated can be forgiven if they fear that the world is about to come to an end. At the last count 774 local governments were up for grabs, that is if we discount the possibility that some state governments could try to hold elections in the new councils that they have just created. Still the coming council polls only presage what to expect in the elections into the other tiers of government – state and federal – in 2003.

Since the days of the Babangida transition, I have always tried to find one landmark incident in the process of politicking and electioneering that would best signpost the absurdities of the time. In 1990 it was my brother Biodun who called my attention to what in retrospect should have alerted us all to the farce that was then afoot. He had picked up curious news item about Nigeria, to the effect that a tailor had just defeated a lawyer to become the legal adviser of a state branch of one of the Babangida parties. My brother, who had left for the UK during the Shagari days, was to say later that incident convinced him that politics was indeed back in his native land!

The Abacha transition would have boasted its own plentiful offering of absurd hilarities were the country not so much on edge with the whole Abacha game so drenched in blood and gore. But for me the singular act that won the prize for farce was the television show featuring Don Etiebet as he publicly renounced his leadership of the National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN). In case anyone has forgotten, Etiebet was rumoured to be toying with the idea of using the party, which he formed, as a platform on which to launch a bid for the

* *Vanguard*, June 14, 2002

Presidency. Why he allowed himself to nurse such a silly dream nobody knows, especially seeing the fate that befell Shehu Yar'Adua after his anti-Abacha plot at the Constitutional Conference fell through. Yar'Adua's lot should have alerted everyone to the fact that Abacha was bent on staying and was not keen on doing so through any seriously competitive elections. Anyway, Etiebet was literally forced to appear on primetime TV to announce that he was leaving NCPN to become a floor member in the "mainstream" UNCP, a role with which Abacha's goons who scripted the whole scam were obviously more comfortable. The adoption of Abacha as sole presidential candidate by all five parties was to come up soon after that eerie incident. It was to be the crowning absurdity but the humiliation of Etiebet would have forewarned the discerning.

The rush-rush of the Abdusalami transition did not deny it of its own share of absurdities. The way leaders of what was to become the Alliance for Democracy (AD) sojourned from one party to another was one. The eagerness with which candidates ran for office without a constitution setting the rules for the officers that emerged from the Abdusalami transition, especially at the local government level bespoke an invasion of hustlers.

Which is why it should have surprised nobody that these people tried to use every kind of trickery to extend their stay in office. Happily, they did not have their way regardless of what one might think of the appointment of caretaker committees. Enough damage was however done in the three years that the dissolved councils held sway. And that is why the coming council elections are daily assuming the hue of a do or die.

A good laugh was had the other day when a friend from Ogun State disclosed to us that the Chairman of his local governments used to be a barber. Throughout his tenure, the man strutted around town with 14 special assistants in tow, a larger number, people say, than all the apprentice barbers that had ever trained under him. Not surprisingly, the chairman's excesses became the talk of the town with one elderly wit joking that they had a chairman who, true to his trade, was shaving everybody's heads by stripping the local government treasury. When last sighted the man was said to be plotting his re-emergence as Chairman. But the townspeople are convinced that his next appearance should be at Akanbi panel.

Keeping the pulse of the streets and following the news one could easily tell that the political tempo is heightening. Last Monday, the Southwest PDP took over the entire neighbourhood of my office as its campaign for the council polls was flagged off. Traffic around the Golf Course and the Police College was in a bad snarl and tempers soon became short. One harassed motorist wondered how people hope to win votes by blocking the road and causing so much hardship. My colleague in the car with me promptly mused that since the elite who inhabit such vicinities don't vote, the campaign organizers must have reckoned correctly that it really did not matter what this motorist and his ilk thought. But all that could be changing now. Across the country things are happening. The

past week has witnessed violent clashes in Benue, Ebonyi and Niger States. The incidents in Benue and Ebonyi prompted a threat by PDP National Chairman Audu Ogbeh to invite the army to keep watch at the next PDP convention. In Lagos State, where Governor Bola Tinubu has just declared his intention to seek re-election, the week opened with a press attack on the Governor's record by a veteran journalist. The Governor's people say that the outburst is a case of sour grapes over the sharing of local government caretaker committee slots among the rival political factions in the state. Meanwhile, the crisis in Kwara State has claimed a casualty in the most unexpected of places – inside the innermost sanctum of *Afenifere*, the pan-Yoruba group which last week sacked its secretary Ayo Opadokun for hobnobbing with Governor Lawal. A press war is now on over the matter and things can only get more interesting. But perhaps not quite as titillating as the case of a former council chairman in Anambra State who reportedly ran amok during a visit to the home of his successor. The man was said to have started behaving strangely after taking a bite of the traditional kola nut served the visitor. Several theories have since emerged on the incident, none of which can be restated here lest one's sanity be also called to question.

Do all this portend danger ahead as some fear? I don't think so. Rather, it all goes to further confirm that in Nigeria, there is never a dull moment. As a British politician once said, Nigeria is one country where the best may never happen but where the worst is also never likely to come to pass. There may be strong reasons to think that no one can know us better than the British but our World Cup encounter with England does not provide too much of a clue either.

One zone, one party*

The formal presentation of certificates of registration to the three newly registered political parties last Monday brings the total number of parties in the country to six. Looking through the credentials and composition of the new parties, the first thought that would readily come to mind is – so what's new? For many, what separates the six parties one from the other is really no more than the difference between six and half-a-dozen. Other than a wish to fulfil all righteousness in order to be seen to have carried out a statutory duty, I do not know why the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) bothered at all to take us all through all the rigmarole.

I have never bought this silly idea of having a government body determine which association qualifies or does not qualify to be a political party. Nor do I subscribe to the rogue notion that a party has to have a so-called national spread in order to be able to canvass for votes. The process is so heavily rigged in favour of the thieves amongst us who are the only ones that can bankroll the clearly undemocratic requirements of party formation in these parts. But we must look to the bright side of things. Perhaps now that we have six parties we may be headed for the happy situation whereby each of the six geopolitical zones in the country will have its own party.

* *Vanguard*, July 5, 2002

Na'Abba's tantrum*

Speaker of the House of Representatives Ghali Umar Na'Abba has been giving young people a bad name ever since a fortuitous certificate scandal propelled him into the headship of the Lower House of the National Assembly nearly three years ago. As a member of my generation, Na'Abba has definitely not represented us too well by his conduct and utterances in high office. He has not managed his youthful exuberance too well, often giving the impression that good comportment is alien to his vocabulary. But that is even hardly the biggest part of the problem.

Given his rather skimpy credentials for the post of Speaker, one would have thought that Na'Abba's first assignment on the job would have been to avail himself of the ample learning opportunities available to any sensible person who finds himself suddenly promoted beyond his competence. And there are indeed, many people around from whom he can learn. Sadly, Na'Abba has been content to compound a third class mind with fourth rate manners.

In a way Na'Abba's emergence in the nation's Number 4 position shows the quality of human material that has been thrown up for political office by prolonged military rule. Once again we are confronted with the stark reality of how bereft of quality leadership our country has become over the years. It is one more attestation to the progressive deterioration of national life that has taken place since the Second Republic. How would a person like Na'Abba rate when placed alongside parliamentarians of the calibre of Edwin Ume-Ezeoke who was House Speaker in that era? And to think that Ume-Ezeoke and President Shagari were not even from the same party.

Ordinarily, the exalted position of Speaker is supposed to be a position of responsibility that should temper the petulance of youth. Not so in the case of this speaker. Ever since he assumed that office, Na'Abba has made a point of reducing governance to a costly circus show featuring as main attraction his

* *Vanguard*, July 5, 2002

countless tantrums. He has perfected the art of raising the nation's political temperature at every turn with his loose statements, personalized animosities and unremitting filibustering. Nigeria's number four ranking officer of state should not be found routinely making irresponsible statements at a point in time when the country has its plate full with very delicate and formidable statecraft challenges.

The fellow's numerous gaffes first started to catch my attention through the rather silly speech he gave during the joint session of two Houses of the National Assembly held in honour of the visiting US President Bill Clinton. Na'Abba had said something then to the effect that Clinton should implore the Executive to give democracy a chance to survive in Nigeria. He painted a picture that presented the president's stance on what was then an incipient face-off between the Executive and the Legislature as the big danger to Nigeria's young democracy. What he conveniently omitted was the fact that it was the insistence of people like him on leading the House by the nose to contest executive authority with the president that was fuelling tension in the system. Why such a high officer of state would choose the visit of a foreign sovereign to externalize a domestic quarrel still beats me. It should bother us all that the speaker of our House of Representatives might have been blissfully ignorant of the weightiness of that gaffe.

Ever since that outing, Na'Abba has made a point of having his foot permanently in his mouth. He has become such a tedious presence in this dispensation that people now generally place him somewhere between Attahiru Bafarawa and Kofoworola Bucknor Akerele in terms of sheer egregiousness. I hope he does not take this as a compliment, considering that he had exhibited a lot of dimness lately by making a virtue of rudeness and carrying on like a loose cannon.

Na'Abba's latest howler came last week when he again raised the ante in his highly personalized disagreement with President Obasanjo. He has threatened at a public function that he would leave the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) if the party nominates Obasanjo to carry its flag at the 2003 Presidential elections. This statement is coming against the background of Na'Abba's rumoured interest in contesting for the Presidency himself. If there is any substance to this rumour, then we must all wonder what the world really is coming to. Has Nigeria really descended to the level of having Na'Abba even dream of becoming President?

One thing is certain as a logical consequence of Na'Abba's vituperations: Na'Abba won't be returning as Speaker or even as a backbencher in the House. That much is clear from the treatment he got from his constituency in Kano last Sunday, which I hope he has taken as a warning signal. It is not likely that the PDP would miss him when he leaves the party's fold as threatened. But concerning such threats, let's recall that there were those who threatened that

they would die if Sani Abacha did not become a civilian president in 1998. They are still alive today, dancing around the corridors of power.

What really is Na'Abba's problem? I think he seeks to latch on to a supposed northern disaffection with the Obasanjo presidency to pose as the Arewa avenger around whom all the disaffected converge to scuttle the good work of a reformist president.

As the Yoruba would say, *Omode lo n'se*. Or to put it in the more graphic street lingo of pidgin-speak, *Na small pikin dey worry am*. One day soon, he would be surprised that when the crunch comes, he would be flicked off like a fly and left out in the lurch as the president cuts a deal with his so-called opponents.

Amina Lawal and the Stone Age*

Nigeria is once again in a dubious global limelight courtesy of the death-by-stoning verdict delivered in the case of Amina Lawal by a Sharia court in Katsina State. Lawal is accused of conceiving of a child out of wedlock which, under the strict Islamic legal code now in operation in many states of northern Nigeria, is said to be a capital offence. As with the earlier celebrated case of Safiya, no mention has been made of the male party in this supposedly adulterous combination. Feminist groups and human rights activists are literally running out of adjectives (and in some cases, expletives) to denounce what right-thinking people the world over must consider a monstrous verdict and a travesty of justice.

The death-by-stoning verdict is nothing short of a throwback to the Stone Age, which is probably where many of Amina's tormentors, in the Sharia brigade belong. And matters are not helped by the fact that the verdict overlaps the on-going impeachment controversy. The uproar that has trailed the Amina case comes at a most inauspicious time for the democratic regime in Nigeria as it strives to put a nice face to Africa's leading nation after several years of rogue military dictatorships. But, while the uproar may be an international embarrassment, it could ultimately be a blessing in disguise on the domestic front. What do we mean by this?

Contrary to what its proponents may claim, political Sharia has very little to do with upholding Islam or restoring the ethical basis of society. Puritans who are genuinely interested in safeguarding public morality in the northern states know that they have their work cut out for them. And they are scandalized that in over two years of Sharia no big fish has been caught amongst a wanton elite that has been historically notorious for its perversion and debauchery.

The truth is that political Sharia is all about regional politics of hegemony. Sharia is the offspring of an unholy alliance of political has-beens, emergent rascals and discredited mullahs who worked hand-in-glove with barbarous

* *Vanguard*, 6 September 2002

military rulers to bring the country to its knees in years gone by. These groups now suffer a severe bout of status anxiety given their role in the spectacular failures of decades of northern misrule. Naturally, they fear a loss of relevance. For them, Sharia is a tool with which to deceive hapless northern commoners and terrorize the rest of the country.

The reason their gambit is a blessing in disguise is that inadvertently but increasingly the apostles of political Sharia are working towards their own self-isolation from the rest of Nigeria. Clearly, most Nigerians would rather live in the modern age than in the Stone Age. This silent majority is just about getting fed up with sharing the same country with people who think they can threaten the rest of Nigeria into submission by raising the spectre of a murderous theocracy.

Nigeria has so many fault lines, each of which can easily precipitate a break-up of the country. Those who wish to persist in the folly of political Sharia are welcome to their con-game. But they should be told in clear terms that they are unwittingly helping to crystallize a broad national consensus around the map of Nigeria that Gideon Orkar and his co-patriots tried to draw twelve years ago. Someday soon, the rest of Nigeria may be left with no choice but to meet the political careerists now masquerading as Shariarists on their own terms. Many eagerly await that day.

National Library of Nigeria

Colonel Nyiam and NADECO

Colonel Anthony Nyiam's interview in *The Guardian* of last Saturday should serve as a wake-up call to all sides in the political battles now being waged in the country. Nyiam, in case anyone needs to be reminded, was one of the leaders of the April 22, 1990 attempted putsch, popularly called the Orkar Coup. The coup's high point was the proclamation that some states in the far north had been excised from the federation.

The gist of the interview is the Colonel's appraisal of recent developments in the country, especially the over-heating of the polity and threats to the Obasanjo presidency. Nyiam's view is that the forces that he and his colleagues tried to dislodge through their coup are still very much around and that they are the same forces now making trouble for Obasanjo. His submission is that the country must be prepared to take on these forces once again as the struggle to secure Nigeria's young democracy enters a most delicate phase.

It is comforting to know that many of the activists who fought the military after the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election appear to have pre-empted Nyiam's call. Last month, the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), the main platform on which pro-democracy forces mobilized to face down the Abacha regime, was re-launched. Similar organizations and cells now need to be re-activated within and outside the country as it becomes increasingly evident that the reactionary forces have revved up their activities.

What is fast emerging from the multiple crises now erupting all around us is that there could be people working on all manner of outlandish crisis scenarios towards scuttling the current democratic experiment and the power shift arrangement that underpins it. It might just help if such elements ponder the likelihood – and consequences – of a return to the days of struggle, especially as there is no guarantee that they would be holding the federal might as they used to. The worst may or may not come, but we should put our thinking on a war footing. As one time British Prime Minister Harold Wilson advised, let us

behave like the optimist who carries his umbrella even while hoping it won't rain.

And, so, we say to NADECO, welcome back! And to Colonel Nyiam, we say many thanks for the reminder.

What to do in Bakassi*

Clearly, not many Nigerians feel that their country has gotten fair justice from the International Court of Justice sitting at The Hague. The court last week affirmed the sovereignty of the Republic of Cameroon, Nigeria's eastern neighbour over the disputed Bakassi peninsula. The two countries have in the past two decades been involved in a tussle over ownership of the oil-rich peninsula, which is also a major strategic access for the Nigeria navy. Hostilities have sporadically broken out in the past until the matter was submitted to adjudication eight years ago. While some have counselled caution over the verdict, others have called for sober reflection and a resort to quiet diplomacy. But the majority reaction has predictably been characterized by blame-placing finger-pointing, and patriotic frenzy, none of which is helpful in the circumstance. In the wake of the court verdict, the search for scapegoats has taken on the hue of a witch-hunt. Recriminations are legion. Former head of state, General Yakubu Gowon, has again become the butt of jeers and sneers from his enraged compatriots who had in the past alleged that he unilaterally gave the disputed territory away to Cameroon as compensation for that country's support for the federal side during the civil war. Gowon has felt compelled to respond to the charges that have now resurfaced with added stridency, taking time off from his on-going efforts to broker peace between the executive and the legislature. At another level, people are blaming the administration of late General Sani Abacha for going to court over the matter when he knew that Nigeria had a bad case and only to pursue the case lackadaisically. Others have alleged that the consideration for composing the legal team that defended Nigeria's claim left a lot to be desired. And so on *ad nauseam*.

The inquisition does not stop with past leaders. Some say that it was wrong for President Obasanjo to have pledged to abide by the court ruling during a

* *Vanguard*, October 18, 2002

meeting between him and Cameroonian president, Paul Biya, last month. The meeting was brokered by the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, and hosted in Paris by the French president, Jacques Chirac. Apropos of which people speak of international conspiracy and of French designs on Nigeria. A few desperate politicians are now seeking to make the ruling a campaign issue, claiming that Obasanjo should be personally held responsible for Nigeria's loss of a prized territory, and accordingly punished at next year's elections. Truly, failure is an orphan.

But there is an aspect of the Bakassi issue that still raises some uncomfortable questions. And this has to do with the 1961 plebiscites in the former mandate territories of Northern and Southern Cameroons. The two territories used to be German possessions but were administered by the colonial administration in Nigeria under a UN trusteeship arrangement set in place after the defeat of Germany in the First World War. On the eve of Nigeria's independence, people in the two territories were asked to decide whether they wished to remain in Nigeria or join Cameroon. Northern Cameroon was said to have opted to join Nigeria and was incorporated into the Northern Region, while Southern Cameroon, of which Bakassi was a part, was said to have voted to join the Republic of Cameroon and was transferred accordingly.

But there are claims that the matter may not have been as simple as that. A school of thought argues that the loss of Southern Cameroon was engineered by the federal government, then under the aegis of the Northern Peoples' Congress, the ruling party at the centre. This was said to have been very much in the manner of an own-goal scored by Nigeria to achieve an internal balance of geopolitical power that favoured the Northern Region. The agenda was to have an enlarged north bearing down on a diminished south, and, as the calculation went, the more the territory the south lost, the better. Some people say that credence is lent to this thesis when one considers what the geopolitical equation in Nigeria could have been if Southern Cameroon had been part of Southern Nigeria. These days, with Bakassi flowing with oil, one of the things we are often told is that the people in the disputed area are Nigerians. So how come these Nigerians voted against joining Nigeria forty years ago?

In the aftermath of the court verdict, pretentious patriots have started pushing the war option, with some soldiers in the field said to be beating their chests about the trouncing that Cameroon is about to get. The government must resist the temptation to dance to the drums of war. This is a time for wisdom. A war over Bakassi would not really be a confrontation between Nigeria and Cameroon but between Nigeria and France. Some analysts have argued that the size of French investments in Nigeria should serve as a deterrent to France in this regard. But the truth is in its Nigerian (and West African) policy, France has historically not acted rationally in line with this economic argument. This suggests that we might need to look beyond the immediate economic consideration to determine what actually drives France's Nigerian policy. While

Nigeria's outright defeat in a war with France over Bakassi may not happen, a stalemate could occur. A bog-down in an unwinnable war has been known to do things to an army. In our case, it could probably give room to military meddlesomeness in public life that could weigh down on the young democracy. Foreign adventurism should not become a pretext for thrusting on the country once again an army discredited by its own domestic political adventurism. There are reasons why the administration should be wary of those egging it into a war with Cameroon. People are already scoring cheap political points by trying to blame the federal government for the loss of the court case. Who can say what the say or do if we get bogged town (or trounced) in a war? Some lawyers were said to have made easy money from the case. Who is to say that cash incentives totally unrelated to national interest and the interests of the unfortunate inhabitants of Bakassi are not driving the current war-mongers? So what to do? First, we must respect the court ruling and, if possible, seek its review. Then, we need to pursue with more vigour the political option. We should seek other forms of leverage and access points with the Cameroonian regime, especially with a view to creating a special status for the area. Part of the deal could be our granting dual citizenship to the people of Bakassi. Also, we should take more serious interest in the dynamics of the English-speaking parts of Cameroon. But, above all, we must learn the appropriate lessons from this setback.

How the army treats its own

The Reverend Father Mathew Hassan Kukah, one of the very few upright men in this land of too many crooked people, once shared a piece of sardonic humour with a gathering in Lagos. I think it was at the Annual Dialogue of the Obafemi Awolowo Foundation a few years back and the topic of discussion was this whole business of marginalization that still has not gone away. As is customary whenever such a hot topic is on the table, the north-south dichotomy promptly reared its head and many soon worked themselves into a holy fury on who was doing what to whom.

As the gathering warmed up to the debate, the reverend gentlemen came in with a word of advice. It is not helpful to over-generalize in these matters, he cautioned, as he offered a telling example from home. In his part of the country, he said, the only kind of federal presence that people see is when the dead bodies of their sons, who served with ECOMOG, are brought home for burial. Reverend Kukah comes from southern Kaduna, still considered to be right in the centre of the north, which many see as the prime beneficiary of the proverbial national cake.

As with the north-south dichotomy, so with the military-civilian divide. There are many who would swear that the only breed that had a nice time in the past two decades that Nigeria went to the dogs were the soldiers. That would be a sweeping generalization, even if the story of Oladipo Diya's uniform-wearing wives and their two million naira-in-the-house could suggest otherwise.

Take the pathetic story of Chijoke Oguine as narrated by his sibling and reported in last week's edition of the *Tempo* magazine. Oguine was a major in the Nigerian army who was serving in ECOMOG as a doctor in the medical corps before he was killed in a rebel ambush in Sierra Leone in 1998, three months to his 32nd birthday. Reading through the story, the first thing that strikes

you is that bad as the lot of Revered Father Kukah's people could be, it must still be much better than that of some other people who also had sons in the military – like the Oguines.

According to the report, the death of Major Oguine was treated with such insensitivity that no family that had lost a loved one should be subjected to. First, the news of their brother's death was said to have initially reached them in sketchy snatches via unofficial sources. Second, confirming the news took several visits to the commandant of the medical corps, who was described as a "busy man". Third, was the fact that getting Major Oguine's remains for a befitting burial turned out to be a mission impossible. After waiting endlessly for the army, the Oguine family finally had the funeral of their son in 2000, two full years after the man was said to have been killed, without his body and with no hope of finding out what really happened to him.

This story appears to fall in a pattern of institutionalized barbarism and self-ridicule that the Nigerian military seemed to have nurtured during its second sojourn in power – that is, 1984-1999. Recall the nonchalance with which the death and burial of the victims of the C130 crash was handled. Recall also the picture of the laughing generals at the scene of the burning Defence Headquarters. Consider the continuing scandal of shrivelled military pensioners languishing in the hot sun for their entitlements. And flash back to the grovelling generals pleading for mercy from a major. It is, indeed, as one former Chief of Army Staff said, an army of "anything goes".

Things have not always been this way. My father never tires of telling the story of Brother Segun, one of his workers in the 1960s. Sometimes in 1967, Brother Segun told his boss that he was joining the army. It was a decision that my father received with much concern for the young man. Upon inquiry as to why he would do such a thing at that delicate period, Brother Segun was said to have replied that after watching the burial of Colonel Adekunle Fajuyi, the slain governor of Western Nigeria, he had made up his mind that he must be buried as a soldier. He got his wish. The last letter he sent home from the battlefield was from the Abagana sector where he perished. The letter remains one of my father's prized possessions to this day. I doubt that whatever glory that is left in the Nigerian army these days is enough to fire anyone up in the same way it fired Brother Segun in those days.

No nation has become great by treating its soldiers, dead or alive, with disrespect and dishonour. Adopting a cavalier approach to people in the perilous business of defending their country has a way of eating away at morale and putting national security at risk. This is even more so if such treatment comes from the self-same institution. It could take a very long while to convince any other Oguine that defending one's fatherland is a worthwhile venture.

The story of Major Chijioke Oguine is a telling metaphor on how years of bandit rule has affected not just the entire country but also the military party that held power during those years. And we sincerely hope that curbing the occurrence of such disgraceful tribulations is one of the reasons we now have four ministers in the Ministry of Defence.

As PDP votes...*

This weekend's presidential primaries of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) are at once fraught and auspicious for both the party and the country. Fraught, in the sense that the slightest miscalculation or loss of concentration could cost everyone plenty. Auspicious because getting things right this once could just launch Nigeria irreversibly into the league of great nations.

The primaries represent many things to many people. For some, the day of reckoning has come; it is payback time; for others, it is a window of opportunity, a time to consolidate. The PDP primaries signify many things rolled into one: a plebiscite on the personality and style of the incumbent president; a stake holders' review of the performance of the regime that was installed on May 29 1999; and, an intra-party referendum on the political savvy of the country's ethnic power blocs. Some have even suggested that this is a struggle between good and evil. While this could be an exaggeration, there can be no doubt that this is, indeed, a watershed vote on the future of Nigeria.

In time of great battles, when dust gales from the tramples of gladiators becloud the battle scene like a confusing situation, one needs to be resourceful to survive. One of such resources is to be found in the collection of instructive epigrams credited to Aesop, a Greek wit of the classical era (c.620 BC-560 BC) who left behind over two hundred tales that are commonly referred to as *Aesop's Fables*.

Composed over two-and-half millennia ago, *Aesop's Fables* have been used through the ages to illustrate life experiences and to teach useful lessons. Employing a simple medium of the animal story in short narrative, Aesop's fables convey lessons that are germane for the human condition. All the fables share the common purpose of revealing a universal truth or a simple moral. Men of public affairs across the centuries – from Jonathan Swift to Benjamin Franklin, Leo Tolstoy to Oscar Wilde – have used Aesop's fables to elucidate

* *Vanguard*, January 3, 2003

the great issues of the eras in which they lived. Aesop's allegories and metaphors contain timeless truisms that men of affairs and those seeking power ignore to their peril.

Today, as the PDP delegates cast their vote, I commend to them three of the fables as contained in the Penguin popular classics edition of 1996. I then append at the end of each fable, Aesop's moral as well as my own interpretation of how the fable speaks to our present circumstances.

In "The Wolf and The Crane", Aesop writes thus: a wolf devoured his prey so ravenously that a bone got stuck in his throat. In extreme agony, he ran and howled throughout the forest, beseeching every animal he met to pull out the bone. He even offered a generous reward to anyone who succeeded in pulling it out. Moved by his pleas, as well as the prospect of the money, a crane ventured her long neck down the wolf's throat and drew out the bone. She then asked for the promised reward, but the wolf just grinned and bared his teeth: "Ungrateful creature. How dare you ask for any other reward than your life! After all, you are among the very few who can say that you've put your head into the jaws of a wolf and were permitted to draw it out in safety."

The moral that Aesop adds the end of this tale is: "Expect no reward when you serve the wicked, and be thankful if you escape injury for your pains." For us at this time, the message is clear: *Obasanjo is like a bone stuck in the throat of the Nigerian wolves. Whosoever would volunteer to help them remove the bone could live to regret it.*

In "The Hawk and the Pigeons", Aesop writes thus: some pigeons had long lived in fear of a hawk, but since they had always kept on the alert and stayed near their dovecote, they had constantly managed to escape their enemy's attacks. "Do you prefer this life of constant anxiety when I could keep you safe from any conceivable attack by the kites and the falcons? All you have to do is make me your king, and I won't bother you any more. Trusting his claims, the pigeons elected the hawk to their throne, but no sooner was he installed that he began exercising his royal prerogative by devouring a pigeon a day. "It serves us right," said one poor pigeon whose turn was yet to come.

The moral of this tale, according to Aesop is "some remedies are worse than the disease itself." In the present circumstance, the advice that this fable carries for the PDP delegate is, do not jump from the fry pan into the fire and do not for fear of being killed choose to commit suicide!

In "The Fox and the Goat", Aesop writes thus: a fox had fallen into a well and could not find any means to escape. Eventually, a thirsty goat appeared, and upon noticing the fox, he asked him whether the water was good and plentiful. Pretending that his situation was not precarious, the fox replied, "Come down, my friend. The water is so good that I can't be exhausted." The goat did and found he had no way of getting out. The fox informed him of their predicament and suggested a scheme for their common escape: "If you will place your forefeet upon the wall and bend your head, I'll run up your back and escape.

Then I'll help you out." The goat readily agreed to this, and the fox propelled himself out of the well. Following his escape, he made off as fast as he could, while the goat yelled and reproached him for breaking their bargain. But the fox turned around and coolly remarked to the poor deluded goat: "if you had half as much brain as you have beard, you would never have gone down the well before making sure there was a way up."

Aesop states the moral of this tale crisply as: "Look before you leap." The larger lesson, though, is that we should not be so blinded by our thirst for anything that we lose our senses in seeking it.

Every culture in Nigeria, no doubt, has some version of Aesop's fables in one form or the other. We would all do well to heed the lessons that ageless wisdom teaches us. The wolves and the hawks and the foxes have not changed from what they used to be in Aesop's time.

Murder and power games*

Joy turned into ashes on Ash Wednesday in the home of Dr. Marshal Harry, the frontline politician who was felled by assassins' bullets in Abuja at the commencement of the Christian Lenten season. It is a tragic and frightening development and the country has appropriately reacted with loud outrage and a deep sense of foreboding. The casual taking of lives for whatever reason stands condemnable and must be a source of worry for all of us.

Several issues arise from the brutal murder of Harry, who was said to have been a politician of uncommon mobilizational capabilities, especially in the context of the tempestuous politics of his home state, Rivers State. His killing raises a lot of awkward questions for many people, not least for policemen and politicians. When he fell out with the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) of which he was a founding member, Harry was rightly considered a prime catch by the rival All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP), which promptly offered him the same position that he had occupied in the PDP.

That position, as South-South Coordinator of ANPP, put him directly in charge of organizing the flag-off of the party's presidential campaign which was to take place last Saturday March 8. The party had obviously set much store by this symbolic flag-off, given the background of the On-shore/Off-shore Dichotomy Bill, which had put the PDP-controlled federal government in a tight spot with many in the South-South. Harry was shot dead only three days to the D-Day and just a few hours after attending a crucial party meeting in Abuja.

Expectedly, Harry's party has sought to make heavy political capital out of the murder, pointedly accusing the PDP governments at federal and state levels of complicity. There was talk of some people trying to take his body from the mortuary in Abuja for display at the March 8 rally. But, finger-pointing and recrimination, though understandable in the heat of the moment, are unlikely to be of much help in the long run. After the initial anger and grief might have

* *Vanguard*, March 14, 2003

subsided, every member of the political class will have to settle down to some hard thinking on what is obviously a common danger. Sobriety, not grandstanding, is what is really needed to confront this threat. For once again, we see in the dastardly murder of Harry manifestations of a collapse of consensus within the political class that some are then exploiting to inflict maximum harm.

The Chinese say that he who strikes first admits that he has lost the argument. Politics is nothing if not a continuous, sometimes never-ending, stream of arguments and debates and controversies on how to win power and how best to deploy it in the context of public life. Whatever the true cause, the murder of a politician, especially an effective one like Harry, is bound to be construed as a political killing. And political killings demonstrate a breakdown of non-violent mechanisms of conflict resolution within the political class. In this regard, we must all lend our full support to the call for a summit of politicians to set the ground rules for non-violent politicking in the run-up to the elections.

The German military strategist, von Clausewitz, describes war as a continuation of politics by other means. It would appear that as the country approaches the watershed April elections, many of the gladiators in the various contests have chosen to turn that definition on its head by construing politics as a continuation of war by other means, mostly violent and macabre. For killings are more characteristic of war than of politics. While we all have a duty to ensure that our politics does not degenerate totally into a state of warfare, the highest responsibility in this regard is that of the state, as symbolized by the federal government.

Political killings question one of the key attributes of the state, which is that the state has the exclusive right over the legitimate threat and deployment of instruments of violence. It would appear that the Nigerian state is fast losing this exclusive right as our politics seems to have fallen under the thumbs of warlords with formidable war chests and private armies, constituting themselves into a state within the state. This presents one of the greatest dangers to the health and survival of the Fourth Republic.

Over the past couple of years several high profile murders have been perpetrated that suggest that the killings are not just incidents but part of a discernible trend. Looking back now, the killing of the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice, Chief Bola Ige, appears like the opening shot in a war of attrition. Since then, there have been the brutal murders of the Igwes, Ogonnaya Uche and now Marshal Harry, to mention a few. All of the killings continue to lengthen the country's frightening litany of unresolved murders.

Increasingly, it does appear that "fifth column" elements with a political agenda or with a bone to pick with the system are on rampage once again. Often, one of their signatures is to commit their crime right under the nose of the law. The unresolved murder, say one wit, is often an insider job. More often than not,

the killings that now haunt us have taken place in very curious circumstances. In the case of Chief Ige, all his guards went off to have a meal at the same time while the man was taken out. In the case of Marshall Harry, a police station was said to have been only a hundred metres away.

A situation whereby the murder of prominent citizens is considered as permissible collateral damage in the quest for power is totally unacceptable. Democracy cannot be built on violence casually deployed. And, we must take it that whoever goes about targeting political leaders for murder seeks to delegitimize the democratic order. These killings are obviously meant to foster a feeling of helplessness among the populace, to tell them that their safety and security cannot be guaranteed under democratic rule.

As we sympathize with the family of Dr. Marshall Harry, we must continue to remind ourselves of the danger we face from elements intent on using murder as a tool in their power games. Of course, there will be no shortage of people shedding crocodile tears over this particular murder, including many who never wished the man well while he was alive. And, while it may be comforting to pretend that we see light at the end of the tunnel, let us continue to caution ourselves that the light could well be the headlamps of an on-coming train – that blinds those who see it and then crushes them. It is really all so depressing.

Coping with the aftermath

Nigeria faces a formidable challenge of coping with the aftermath of the 2003 general elections, which end tomorrow with the State Assembly polls. Save for some unfounded anxiety in certain quarters, no one seriously expects the results of tomorrow's elections to deviate substantially from the trend recorded so far in the National Assembly and Presidential elections. Thus, with the picture getting even clearer, the emerging dispensation presents the leading parties and key political actors with contrasting burdens as they seek to manage the fallouts from the election.

For the victorious Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the challenge is to manage success in a way that ensures that the party does not self-destruct out of over-indulgence and/or over-extension. A quick example: how to temper the ambition of the Vice President is perhaps the most critical challenge that PDP would confront as it settles down to a second term. It is not going to be an easy task. Nor, would it be easy to resist the impulse to foist a one-party state.

For the All-Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) the challenge is to behave like a party that still has a stake in the system, given the number of states it controls. Allowing an electoral setback to fester into a systemic threat that scuttles democratic rule will hurt ANPP as much as the rest. Realizing this, the party must continue to find creative ways of distancing itself from its presidential candidate, General Muhammadu Buhari who appears wedded to a hard-line and ultimately ruinous stance. As the party well knows, raising legitimate complaints about the conduct of elections is not the same thing as proclaiming that there will be no lawful government in Nigeria from May 30 as Buhari is widely reported to have threatened. It is commendable that despite its concerns on past elections, the party has asked members to participate in tomorrow's polls.

As for the AD, the challenge is to re-invent itself into a viable political platform capable of staking a claim to some relevance as the emerging

* *Vanguard*, Friday, May 2, 2003, p. 16

dispensation is shaped. Regardless of the intimidating size of the PDP victory, the truth is that the national situation remains in the state of flux. This could present a small but disciplined outsider party with openings for imaginative manoeuvre that enable such a party to punch beyond its weight at the national level.

For the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) the challenge is to hold a steady course and refuse to be buried by the present results. APGA's leaders must continue the task of nurturing the party as it represents a long overdue but uniquely Igbo response to the National Question. More importantly, they should acknowledge the tendency of Nigerian politics to gravitate towards a two-party structure and position APGA strategically for leadership in the emerging formations.

In days gone by, there could have been other forces whose responses would agitate us in times like this. In this regard, we should be thankful that we do not have to add the military to our list of worries. For now, the armed forces appear to be content with playing their constitutional role, although there is no shortage of rascals wishing and working that things could be otherwise and that the army would step in once again. As for the international community, the right noises have followed the initial flip-flops over the reports of the observers: all have given their good wishes to the President-elect while commending the electoral process.

Still, challenges persist on the home front. People have different ways of responding to changes and setbacks in life. For some, the attitude is to resign to fate, in the manner that we seem to have perfected by ascribing every misfortune to a so-called "act of God." For others, the response is to sulk and to plot revenge. And for others still, the attitude is to move on to new challenges.

The response of General Buhari, the leading contender, to the elections has raised much concern, obviously because it has potentially disruptive impact for the polity. Even before the elections held, the general and his entourage had spoken of how the polls were going to be rigged. It was like deliberately programming the public mind to reject his inevitable defeat. As the results came in, the Buhari camp started calling for mass action. The curious thing in all this is that, going by his pronouncements, General Buhari seems to actually take himself seriously that he indeed stood a chance at the presidential polls. But the only people I know who are enthusiastic about a Buhari presidency are misguided zealots, third-rate hegemonists and PTF contractors.

Students of organizational behaviour and management would be familiar with the literature on how to manage transitions. In *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, Williams Bridges defines transition as, "the psychological process (that) people go through to come to terms with a new situation." Bridges notes that, "transitions begin with letting go of something" as you enter the "neutral zone" between the old reality and the new. On her own part, Liz Gould writes that people often go through various moods, phases and

stages as they seek to find coping mechanisms for a new situation. The stages include shock, despair, denial, retreat, frustration, and acknowledgment. It is the acknowledgment that change has occurred that leads to letting go, which in turn leads to adaptation to the new situation and application of experiences gained for other useful endeavours.

As with organizations, so with individuals and nations. It would seem that people like General Buhari are still at the stage of denial about what has just happened. They fail to accept that anything that has a beginning must have an end. President Obasanjo's re-election effectively puts an end to the proprietary right that some people in the north claim they have on federal power. The verdict that has just been delivered via the elections is that any trueborn Nigerian can get into any office in the land by the grace of God and the goodwill of fellow Nigerians and not necessarily by the say-so of some self-appointed Arewa kingpins. This is a serious change that compels new mentalities. And no change is more difficult to accept than a change in thinking.

General Buhari believes he is God's gift to Nigeria, without whom no good can happen in the land. Since he is so convinced of the indispensability of his self-proclaimed redemptive value, he can afford to wait till 2007 to get his vindication. I am sure God will preserve him till then. But, meanwhile, the good General should take his case to the tribunal and let us have some peace.

Anenih, the Oracle

Flush from successfully running the Obasanjo re-election campaign in the south-south, former Works Minister, Chief Tony Anenih, has now pronounced that the next President must come from the north. Considering that it was Anenih that first described a "No Vacancy" in the Presidency years ago, this latest statement from the oracle needs to be taken seriously. But, when will South-South zone, that produces all the country's oil but have never been considered fit to produce a president?

June 12 and Buhari's men*

It seems to be open season on the just concluded general elections as all manner of characters with all manners of agenda strive to malign the integrity of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and impugn the credibility of the election results. For reasons best known to them, some people are sparing no efforts to convince Nigerians and the world at large that what has just taken place in Nigeria is a monumental fraud. *Apropos* whichever regime that emerges from this supposedly flawed election should be treated as illegitimate.

For effect, the spectre of a one-party state has been raised. The threat should not be dismissed lightly given the conduct and utterances of some members of the victorious Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which really do raise a lot of concern. But, whatever be the PDP's intentions or designs, the geopolitics of Nigeria still presents sufficiently numerous and onerous obstacles to the emergence of the kind of elite unanimity and herd mentality needed to foist one-party rule.

Back to the post-election controversies: at home, some aggrieved losers, led by the Presidential candidate of the All Nigeria People's Party, (ANPP), General Muhammadu Buhari, say they reject the election results outright. Not to be undone, a few inconsequential parties with no presence anywhere outside of INEC's official documents also claim they have been cheated at the polls. It would have been all so comical were the on-going theatrics from a section of the political class not such an unaffordable and dangerous distraction. Mercifully, the critical mass of disaffection that they require to really put the system under pressure may not be easy to muster.

While genuine grievances on the conduct and outcomes of the election need to be addressed, we also need to get a firm handle on the desperation of the naysayers. It seems to be a very un-Nigerian thing to quietly accept an election in which you lost. Now, those who would project their loss as evidence of an impending systemic shutdown seem to have found fuel for the fire in the reports

* *Vanguard*, May 9, 2003

of some of the international observers, especially from the European Union and the United States. With home-based politicians turning themselves into repeater-stations of foreign busybodies, the reports of the observer teams are freely cited as evidence of alleged vote rigging.

As someone has noted, it would seem that no election in a developing country is ever considered to have been free and fair by some international observers except one in which the incumbent loses. Let us face it; blatant subversion of voters' preferences should not be tolerated. Yet, the concerned observers need to show how the lapses they noted amount to a wholesale rubbishing of the entire elections as is now being claimed. Many are bemused that even while the echoes from the famous Florida vote are yet to die down, some American observers can muster the temerity to pronounce on the conduct and quality of other people's elections.

Speaking of temerity, one person who must really have it aplenty is Alhaji Sule Hamma, Director General of the ANPP Presidential Campaign Organization. In a position paper posted on the Internet last week, Hamma quotes copiously from the reports of the observers, rehashing all the tired arguments on vote rigging and calling for an annulment. Significantly, he raised the number states where elections should be cancelled outright to nineteen, including Adamawa, Akwa Ibom, Anambra, Bauchi, Bayelsa, Benue, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Enugu, Gombe, Imo, Kaduna, Katsina Kogi, Nassarawa, Ogun, Plateau and Rivers. Instructively, none of these states returned an ANPP victory, suggesting that wrongdoing took place only in those states where ANPP did not win. Of course, wherever ANPP won, the elections must have been conducted by angels!

Two interesting revelations struck me in the said article. One is Hamma's rather laborious and obsequious concurrence with the position of the foreign observers. The other is his dramatic about-face on the June 12, 1993 Presidential elections. Given his unique background, these are remarkable developments indeed. May be we should offer a peep into this background.

Alhaji Sule Hamma was Special Adviser on Political Matters to the late dictator, General Sani Abacha. In that capacity, he was one of the known hawks around Abacha. He, alongside some other shadowy presences in the Presidential Villa, was in charge of the General's project of transmutation from a military head of state into a civilian president. Two of the foremost articles of faith of the Abacha inner circle were that the June 12 election never happened and that the international community, which thought otherwise had no business in Nigeria's domestic affairs. In seeking to bury June 12 and keep the world out of Nigeria's affairs, this group came up with a convenient contrivance known as "home-grown" democracy. Under this swindle, the five Abacha parties (which late Chief Bola Ige aptly labelled "five leprous fingers of the same hand") returned the same man as their presidential candidate!

It is curious that Alhaji Hamma, once an apostle of "home-grown" democracy and a proponent of non-interference should suddenly start to profess love for foreign elections observer. Hear him: "We applaud the courage and sincerity of the international election observers." Five years ago he probably would have recommended that anyone who said such a thing about the June 12 elections be sent to the gallows like Ken Saro-Wiwa! But, we are all democrats now, aren't we?

Still, it must be a jolt indeed for many pro-democracy activists that one of Abacha's henchmen is suddenly speaking of June 12 in glowing terms. Hear Hamma again: "That election was widely acclaimed to be the most transparent, free and fair election ever held in Nigeria." Wasn't that the kind of statement that sent many people to an early grave under Abacha? How times change!

It is a culture shock to learn that June 12 has suddenly become an object of adulation for the Abacha gang that now festoons Buhari's inner caucus. If only these people had been willing to do the right thing when it really mattered, perhaps they would have spared themselves all the political acrobatics that now make them look and sound ridiculous and opportunistic. Perhaps, Nigeria could have found a negotiated way out of the June 12 that cost so much and for which the Sule Hammas of this world would continue to pay for a very long time.

Hamma can move beyond praising June 12 into proclaiming MKO Abiola a saint if he so wishes. Or, he can lick the feet of EU observers if that suits him. But that won't make General Buhari president. Nigerians are very clear about the person they want as their president for the next four years. And that person is not Buhari. All the flippant foreign observers in this world and their local megaphones are not going to change the choice that Nigerians have made.

Why tomorrow matters...

Nigeria's third attempt at breaking the so-called jinx of civilian-to-civilian succession is on as elections into the state and federal legislatures gets underway. So much attention is being focused on the presidential and gubernatorial elections scheduled to hold on April 19. So much so that many could thereby be led to conclude that the federal legislative elections holding tomorrow are merely the supporting bouts of a long-awaited big fight. Indeed, for some, nothing matters apart from the presidential election, which is variously seen as a watershed, an albatross and as Nigeria's major political confrontation in the new millennium. This fixation with the presidential polls is understandable but unjustifiable. What happens on April 12 is important in its own right, because the date carries a significance that could determine the ultimate worth of whatever victory is won on April 19.

Therefore, tomorrow's elections into the National Assembly deserve to be taken seriously and watched closely. For too long, disproportionate attention has been focused on the executive branch in the appraisal of Nigerian politics and governance. Many attribute this tendency to lionize executive office to the hangover from traditional society, where power, influence and authority were said to revolve around a sole chieftain. Some have even tried to use this argument to rationalize the seeming ease with which military rule finds acceptance and legitimacy amongst the elite and populace alike.

While this thesis may be contentious, there cannot be denying the fact that the centralized nature of state power under prolonged military rule had stunted the growth of constitutional order of which the legislature is a key aspect, resulting in the continuing obsession with executive office. This much so that many have come to view the legislative arm of government as no more than a mere appendage of the executive branch. Sadly, many executive office holders and even some legislators themselves seem to subscribe to this view. For many

politicians, legislative office is something you seek only when you are unable to make an executive office. This needs to change.

The experience of the past four years tells us that the present democratic experiment could have fared a lot better if only the legislative houses at various levels had a few more representatives who took their work seriously. What we have had instead are parliaments that were either too timid or too venal in their dealings with the executive. Often, law making is reduced to a pay-as-you-go racket with assemblymen becoming tollgate operators. Yet, much as one had cause to disagree with the extortionist motives of some leaders of the outgoing federal legislature in their dealings with the president, it is definitely salutary for the system that the executive be kept on its toes at all times by an agile assembly. In a system in which so much power is concentrated in the executive, the case for legislatures with a little more backbone can never be overstated.

But the situation that confronts us on the eve of the assembly elections is that many state chief executives have pocketed their legislatures, thereby denying people their desired and deserved democracy dividends. Forgers, ex-convicts, murderers, perverts and such other disreputable types have survived in power in the various state capitals often solely at the sufferance of lily-livered state assemblies and a legislative leadership that is perpetually on the take. This makes a compelling case for voting in people of substance at tomorrow's elections. The mistake of 1999 should not be repeated. Without necessarily seeking to create a plutocracy, there is need to take another look at the character and property qualifications of many criminals and hungry people in the outgoing legislative houses. The consequence has been the feeding frenzy that has all but crippled the system. We have people who went from squatting in their uncle's boys' quarters to building eye-popping mansions. Others went from travelling by night bus to acquiring a fleet of state of the art cars. All of this in the space of just four years!

At the federal level, we have had a National Assembly composed largely of people weaned on the Abacha diet. They have expectedly become a drag on the reformist agenda of a forward-looking president. Fittingly, the last major act of the National Assembly was to repeal the anti-graft law, in a brazen endorsement of official thievery that is likely to set the country back several years.

Maturity is clearly lacking in the out-going National Assembly. Consider this: one of the more striking features of the first term that is now happily coming to an end has been the obvious misfit in the comparative stature and gravitas of the occupants of executive, legislature and judicial leadership positions. Who can in any sincerity compare Anyim Pius Anyim with Olusegun Obasanjo? Or, Ghali Umar Na'Abba with Muhammed Uwais in terms of stature?

Some have argued that executive meddlesomeness is responsible for the low calibre of people that emerged into those positions, but such rather than

controvert our point proves it. If the legislative houses had more men of substance, would the executive meddle with their affairs?

Others argue that the legislature has been the worst hit by prolonged military rule which has denied the legislative branch the opportunity for tutelage, institutionalization and self-renewal. This could be right, but does that explain why the legislature is so heavily populated with military apologists?

As the Fourth Republic enters a new phase key items on the legislative agenda of the new president needs to be given sober hearing and informed consideration by the National Assembly. Aside from this, assemblymen themselves need to engage in landmark private members' bills that impact directly on the people's lives. The calibre of people that emerge from the choices we make, make us expect either positive change will happen or more of the same - i.e., senatorial buffoonery, parliamentary petulance and legislative brigandage.

Nigeria is a plural society experimenting with a presidential system. Under such a system, multi-partism blossoms best in the context of a virile legislature, where the executive's agenda comes up for vigorous debate and constant scrutiny in the people's legislative chambers. Which is why as many parties and tendencies are presented in various assemblies. Contrary to what some may fear, that is not an invitation to chaos or gridlock but an affirmation of all that is best about our federalist democracy. That, essentially, is why April 12 should matter to all of us. So, let us all go out tomorrow and vote!

The Patriots' failed coup'

It is becoming increasingly difficult to take a charitable view of the Patriots, a group of grey eminences drawn largely from the South and the Middle Belt. Hitherto associated with great political controversies of the day, the Patriots have now themselves become a source of some of the most dangerous and embarrassing controversies in our national life. The pronouncements of the group in recent times have been quite unhealthy for the body politic as such interventions smack of a sinister hidden agenda. The agenda seems to be to overthrow the democratic order and set the nation on fire. In the heat of the impeachment crisis last year, the Patriots had come up with a rather curious suggestion that sought to reward the outlaw and punish the law abiding. The group had alleged then that the chief cause of the overheat of the polity was the desire of President and State Governors to run for a second term. The truth though, was that agents of confusion working through the legislature were to blame for the largely choreographed crisis.

However, not willing to be dissuaded by inconvenient facts, the Patriots had proceeded from their false premise to advise that the President and the governors should disavow an interest in running for a second term as a recipe for peace. It was a suspicious proposal that was promptly dismissed as such because many people saw through it. For the discerning, it was clear that the proposal was targeted at President Olusegun Obasanjo, whom various powerful interests were (and still are) desperate to remove from office by hook or crook.

Fortunately for the country and unfortunately for the Patriots, the impeachment threat soon collapsed like a pack of cards. The President went on to secure a handsome margin at the PDP convention to run for a second term. He has since repeated his feat at the convention in the general elections of April, beating his closest rival to a distant second place. While a post mortem of this grand victory is still on, the reality is that the election has been won and lost.

* *Vanguard*, May 30, 2003

The adjunct reality is that the Patriots are back to their old tricks. Last week, the group issued a widely circulated statement calling for the formation of an interim national government. They base this bizarre proposal on the allegation that the recent elections were marred by irregularities, which, if allowed to stand, could create an unhealthy precedent and subtract from the legitimacy of any government formed on the basis of what was in fact an overwhelming mandate. As happened during the impeachment crisis, this latest move is being pilloried by many as the continuation by other means of the war of attrition waged on the President by the Patriots.

It is also a war on the Federal Republic. For what the Patriots are doing is nothing short of a coup against a democratically elected government. It does seem that some elements are desirous of setting the stage for a coup similar to the one that ended the country's last experiment in interim government. And in doing this, they seek to play on the anxieties of many Nigerians and friends of Nigeria across the world vis-à-vis the sustainability of the country's young democracy.

Nigerians and the rest of the world had placed a lot of hope on the recent Presidential elections. The success of the elections should give us all much cause to be happy and we should not allow the mischief of some to remove from this happiness, even as we keep our guard.

Okadigbo: passing of a pragmatist

Dr William Chuba Okadigbo, Nigeria's one-time Senate President, who died last Thursday, age 61, was a man of formidable intellect, whose capacity to play the politics of ideas was, sadly, never fully utilized. A politician of rightwing inclination, his ideological conviction had been at turns tempered and reinforced by the complexities and exigencies of Nigeria's unresolved national question. He never pretended to be a progressive, but he was probably more deserving of that accolade than many of his fellow politicians who are increasingly being shown up to be no more than progressives of convenience.

Regardless of the orientation of his politics, Okadigbo's democratic credentials remained largely intact till his death. In a nation of fair-weather democrats, it is instructive that he was not associated in the public mind with military regimes. This was a political feat that elevated his stature as a politician of conviction, making his contributions to the national debate quite credible even when he was seen to be disagreeable.

Beyond politics, he was obviously a social animal who lived life to the hilt.

My most enduring image of Dr. Okadigbo comes from the foyer of one of the halls at the Lagos Sheraton sometime in the early 1990s. I forget now what the exact occasion was but I seem to recall that it was one of those unending talks shops that characterized the Babangida era. In those days, political scientists and similar species loved to sound off on the whys and theretofore of the Babangida transition, amongst other such arcane issues.

Of course, when the chips were down, only very few of them were able to anticipate the confusion and grief that the convoluted transition was to visit on the country.

Anyway, the great Chuba had announced his arrival at the event in a very lively manner, heralded into the hall at very high decibel right in the middle of one of the paper presentations. He had a partner in the making of the ensuing

commotion that held up proceedings for a while. Anyone who has ever tried to imagine what a public exchange of greetings between Okadigbo and Ambassador George Obiozor, the Director General of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs at the time would look like would most likely be able to know why Nigerians at Heathrow Airport are said to not just greet but to "collide" every time they were found exchanging what should be pleasantries.

On that day, the door to the hall was partially open and suddenly some hustle and bustle came from that direction that caught everyone's attention. Wondering what could be amiss, we were all surprised to discover that it was only two able-bodied men greeting. Obiozor had hailed Dr. Okadigbo in Igbo, "Chuba, *nwokem!*" (Chuba, my man). To which the flamboyant politician had replied "*Anyin no ya*" (We are there").

It was obviously a greeting delivered in a lingo that only the two of them could decipher. And, then, for no reason that anyone could fathom, they both broke into a loud and very masculine laughter as they moved into the halls, and the proceedings disrupted until they were both seated.

Of course, having settled down to some semblance of order within the hall, Okadigbo then proceeded to give a good account of himself, consistent with his stature as a scholar of repute. He did not seem to be in any doubt that there was some underlying game to the Babangida transition. But, being the pragmatic politician that he was, he opted for full engagement in the process, becoming a senator of the stillborn Third Republic.

Many people sometimes had great difficulty agreeing with Okadigbo's politics but even his adversaries respected his intellect even if they often had reservations about the uses to which he put his God-given talents.

Chuba Okadigbo personified the confusion and maladjustment of the Igbo politician in his effort to re-integrate into the Nigerian mainstream in the aftermath of an unfortunate civil war. As an adviser to President Shehu Shagari, he was in the forefront of efforts to bring the then rebel leader, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, back from exile in what must have been for him (Okadigbo) a creative approach to returning the Igbo question into the centre of national politics.

It was a propaganda coup of monumental proportions. But what he and Ojukwu then did with that masterstroke is a different matter altogether. Okadigbo soon migrated into the "ranting ant" phase of his public career, which he was never able to live down. Ojukwu, on his own part, promptly jumped into the political fray only to be floored at the senatorial elections by a little known Dr. Edwin Onwudiwe. The "People's General" was to get his compensation by marrying the most beautiful girl in Nigeria, becoming in the process the toast of soft-sell magazines.

I never really knew Okadigbo at a personal level but he obviously had a standing reputation as a tough guy. Sometime in the mid-1990s, some northern supremacists at the ministry of the Federal Capital Territory tried to deny his

former wife her due as a Minister of State. All that the lady needed to do to whip them into line was to remind them that she once lived with Chuba Okadigbo and survived it. The lady's tormentor got the message.

One of the great anecdotes of the Second Republic narrates how Okadigbo found out that one of his cabinet colleagues seemed to have gained in influence and gotten quite close to President Shehu Shagari on account of the fact that he (the colleague) was the first to whip out a cigarette lighter anytime the president needed to get a smoke. What did Okadigbo then do? He was said to have invested in an expensive lighter, which he also proceeded to produce with much flourish anytime the president made for his cigarette pack. Some would call that being creative.

The full story of the latter part of Okadigbo's life was still unfolding when he suddenly died. His outing at the infamous ANNP primaries of last January has been variously described as betrayal, and "pragmatism". He himself spoke of "political arithmetic" but many simply put it down to crass opportunism. Some still wonder what he stood to gain by continuing to play the Buhari script even after the April 2003 Presidential election had been won and lost.

Whatever it was that drove and impelled him, the reality is that Chuba Okadigbo is no more. And our disagreement with his stance should not stop us from admitting that he was, indeed, a man of ideas who added some brightness to the drabness and dreariness of our politics. He was a formidable adversary, but a clear-headed ally. He will be sorely missed.

A day is coming...

Public interest in the latest Senate bribery scandal seems to have ebbed as new sources of commotion seize the front pages. Which is perhaps just as well. While it lasted, though, the controversy that pit Federal Capital Territory Minister Nasir el-Rufai against Deputy Senate President Ibrahim Mantu and Deputy Senate Leader Jonathan Zwingina provided titillating high drama and a few instances of anticlimax. Not unexpectedly, grandstanding, obfuscation, decoys, artful dodging and pretentious sanctimony have featured prominently in this most recent case of alleged legislative finagling. Some have tried to tick the scandal off as yet another battlefield in the perennial Executive-Legislative war.

Last week, one of the star-accused, Mantu was said to have thanked Nigerians for standing by him. Shortly thereafter, his boss, Senate President Adolphus Wabara reportedly claimed in far away New York that the whole episode was contrived. Anyway, people who have just pulled off a narrow escape in a matter so dicey can be forgiven the occasional convenient memory lapse.

In the aftermath of the shell-shock effect of el-Rufai's revelations, the Senators embarked on a hastily arranged clearance of their accused colleagues. Suddenly regaining their voices in the midst of strident national outpouring of unfavourable sentiments, the senators now affect to be more sinned against than sinning. As usual, the press has become a ready scapegoat for a barrage of legislative fulmination. But as the embattled minister said in his testimony before the Olorunnimbe Mamora Committee, Nigerians are no fools. They know who to believe in this matter – and it is clearly not the Senators.

Is the line separating saints from sinners so obvious in the el-Rufai saga?

I don't think so. True, the minister looks and sounds more believable than the people he accuses. His youth and novelty stand him in good stead, suggesting that he is the one that is in earnest. The fact that the National Assembly of the Fourth Republic has not always been a habitation of the

virtuous makes it so easy to disbelieve Senators Mantu and Zwingina, who, anyway are seen to be very much a part of all that is wrong with our country and its legislative branch.

Still, there is a sense in which el-Rufai himself could be suspected of not telling all. Some have said that he led the people on in a matter on which many Nigerians were baying for blood. He has been accused of "editing" his story in order to protect a powerful mentor. It has been suggested that he cannot be so spick-and-span if he lobbied to be confirmed as minister. Casting their minds back to his PIMCO and BPE days, some have even alleged that he must be such a favourable son of the system and, therefore, an unlikely candidate to upset the appcart of graft on which the system is so delicately perched. Regardless of these disqualifications, the benefit of the doubt still lies with him in this matter. Many are quite eager to cast him in the mould of an avenger come to clear the Augean stable. It is a continuing debate. But wherever the truth lies, the el-Rufai testimony has done something to our polity whose import can only be fully appreciated in the fullness of time.

For one, it does appear that people in high public office now care about losing face. This is a far cry from the era when public officials seemed to have lost their sense of shame or fear on issues of public immorality. The robustness with which the accused senators put up a defence suggest that Nigeria's public officials now care about whether or not their fellow men see them as thieves. This is a clear departure from an earlier Senate scandal. And we can also juxtapose this with the situation a few years ago when a Presidential aide, now of blessed memory, was accused of using his position to amass wealth. His prompt retort was to ask his accusers if he should be using his office to accumulate poverty instead!

At another level, there seems to be issues of probity. This may not have any connection with President Obasanjo's anti-corruption crusade. But the truth is that the circle of Nigerians who are willing to show their outrage at blatant cases of corruption is widening beyond those glibly referred to as social critics. As someone said, Nigerians are not lawless, it's just that for a long time they have been led to think that laws do not exist. If they now feel that they have cause to believe that the law actually exists, then it should be a big danger signal indeed for the crooked public official.

The perception that a man is corrupt could sometimes be more damaging than actually catching him in the act. Those who have found refuge in dry legalism over the el-Rufai matter should remember that Jerry Rawlings did not need to present much proof to tie three heads of state to the stakes, have them shot and then proceed to become a hero amongst his people, perhaps the most authentic hero in modern Ghanaian history after Kwame Nkrumah.

We can draw another example from farther afield. People who watched footage from the execution of late Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceasescu and his tempestuous wife, Elena will know that the powerful are often bewildered by

change that creeps up on them and leaves them at the mercies of nemesis. Right up to the moment they were shot, the Ceasescus still believed it could not happen and the wife actually thought that her husband still had the power game. A corrupt ruling class is never too reluctant to sacrifice its own when it does appear like the wrath of the people is about to boil over and consume the entire class.

What has emerged from the subsequent history of Romania is that a smart clique quickly contrived to focus the people's anger on its more visible members as a way of saving itself. Mantu and Zwingina may not be the highest offenders around, but they should pray that things do not get to the point that they will become visible and vulnerable targets to be made an example of. When the people say enough is enough then it is really enough. The weight of public opinion that is now so heavily in favour of el-Rufai should be a warning that things are getting to a head. At no time is a corrupt system more vulnerable than when it starts to reform itself. And as the inscription on those rickety *molue* buses that ply the busy Lagos routes says: "A day is coming..." People must be careful that they are not caught on the wrong side on that day.

Meddlesome Minister

Maybe it is too late in the day for Mr President to try to correct any of his lieutenants with some strokes of the cane administered in the right parts. So we will just settle for the broom instead. But really, some of the president's ministers are now moving from being an embarrassment to becoming an albatross if they are not already. The cabinet literally needs to be swept out.

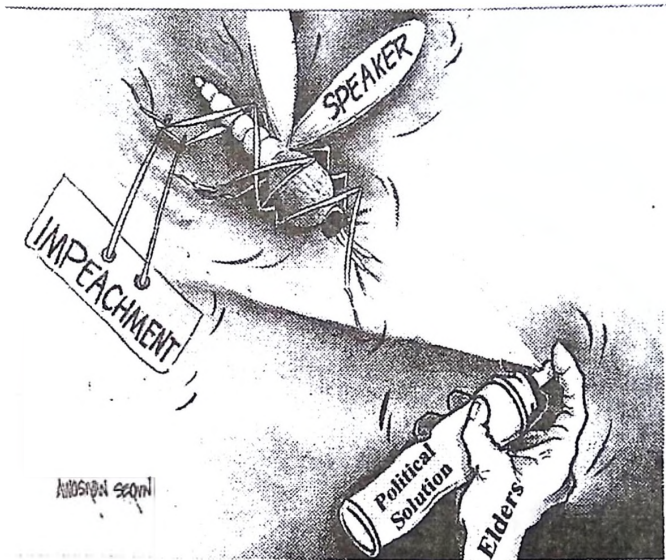
Nowhere is the broom needed more than with many of those ministers presiding over the money-spinning parastatals. The way some ministers relate to the parastatals over which they have been set as supervising ministers can only lead to disaster. As far as some ministers are concerned, the anti-corruption crusade is Mr. President's own private war for which he is strictly on his own. For them nepotism, waste and greed are the defining philosophy of public office. Not only are they not ready to work, they stand in the way of those able people who have put themselves up as guinea-pigs in the experiment of making our ailing parastatals work.

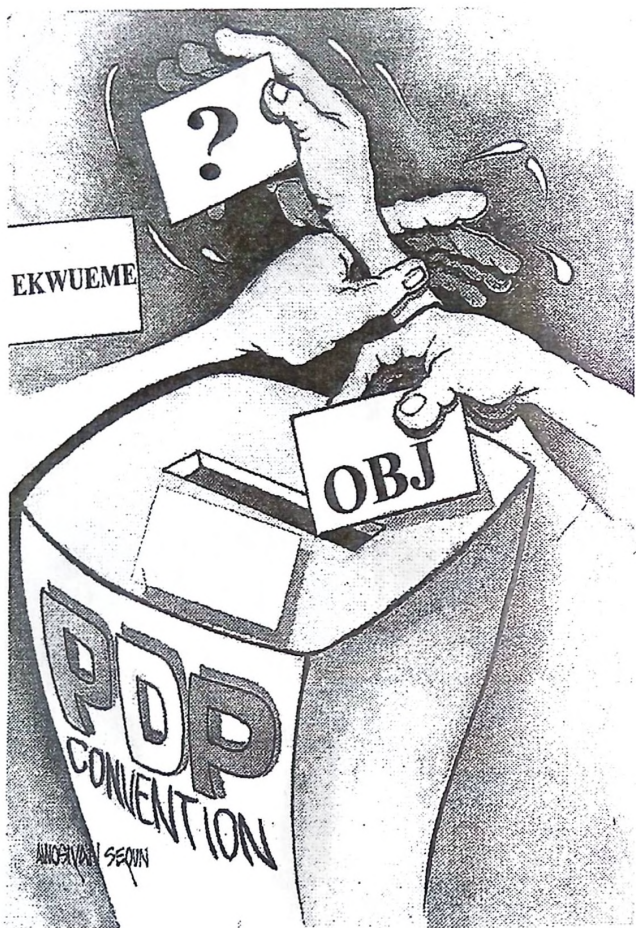
If Mr. President had been half as meddlesome in the affairs of the ministries as some of his ministers are in the affairs of their parastatals, his entire government would by now have been at a standstill. Things might still grind to a halt if he does not do something fast about some of these dog-in-a-manger ministers who continue to invoke his name and their vaunted closeness to him to literally get away with murder.

The Presidency









How far can Obasanjo go?

An old classmate whose dad fared rather badly in the politics of the Western Region came calling at the office the other day. It was our first meeting in nearly a decade and there was, naturally, a lot of catching up to do on both sides. As our discussions veered into politics, it was inevitable that we talk about the Obasanjo presidency.

In explaining Obasanjo's emergence and why he thought it was divinely ordained, the fellow used a somewhat graphic Yoruba allusion to describe how, in his view, we have come full circle over the past twenty years. He said: "*Obasanjo l'ogbe ijoba sile f'awon eeyan buruku, awon eeyan buruku na de ti wa gbe'joba olun pada fun nisiyi.*" Literally rendered, this statement translates as: "It was Obasanjo that first handed over the government to evil people; now the evil people have paid back the favour by returning him to power."

At first, one was at a loss as to what to make of a statement like this, especially coming from someone whose political antecedents would, I had assumed, predispose to being automatically sympathetic to the tendency Obasanjo was said to have favoured in 1979. I then found myself wondering: to what extent is this statement an accurate representation of the history of political power in Nigeria in the two decades spanning 1979 to 1999? The more I wondered, the more tricky and intriguing the question became. However, I find the statement useful as we seek to plot the trajectory of the Obasanjo presidency through the next four years.

One does not have to subscribe to the popular view concerning who or what contrived Obasanjo's second coming to admit that some fancy footwork was on display in Nigeria between June 8 1998 and May 29 1999. Many have sought to explain all that transpired during this period in the context of a self-fulfilling prophecy. This may or may not be the case. The balance of evidence, though, would seem to weigh rather heavily on the side of a human agency assisting the fulfillment of whatever the prophecy was. Which then raises the issue of

whether indeed it is true that those who did the fancy footwork have since found out that they actually shot themselves in the foot and what they might be willing to countenance in mitigating the error.

The renowned espionage novelist, John le Carre, has a rather engaging introduction to *Philby: The Spy Who Betrayed A Generation*. The book, by the way, is a true life account of three young Englishmen – Harold Adrian Russell (Kim) Philby, Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess – who were converted to Communism during their days as students at Cambridge University and how they then manipulated their way into the heart of the British intelligence services, subsequently using their leverage to spy for the Soviet Union. In characterizing the relationship between the British establishment and these upper class traitors who were said to have done so much damage to the interests of the West during the Cold War, le Carre wrote: "The avenger stole upon the citadel and destroyed it from within. Yet, both the avenger and the citadel were largely creations of the same historical conditions."

There are many within and outside Nigeria who have been led (or who have led themselves) into casting Obasanjo in the role of a child of the system who has suddenly become its nemesis. To a large extent, I find this characterization rather fanciful if not simplistic. But even if we are to take it at face value, it is still pertinent to ask: how far can Obasanjo go? To properly answer this question, we need to know where Obasanjo is going or, at least, where he claims to be going.

As far as advertised intentions go, President Obasanjo desires, at the minimum, to return Nigeria to the glory that she was said to have had during his first sojourn in power in the late 1970s. In doing this, he hopes to restore to Nigeria the developmental dynamic that was deflected by four years of civilian incompetence and sixteen years of military thievery. The ultimate goal would appear to be to institute a higher ethical order and a modicum of shared national values, to place Nigeria on a sound footing as a functioning industrial society and to commit her anew to the fulfillment of her manifest destiny as a beacon of hope for the black man.

In all, two critical factors would determine how far Obasanjo can go in achieving these, admittedly, modest goals. One is spiritual, the other political. The first has to do with his keeping faith with the new light, the epiphany, he claims to have received while in jail. The second relates to how imaginatively he is able to apply (or rein in, as the case may be) the forces that claim the credit for engineering his victory and which now also claim a proprietary right to determining how that victory is used.

Even in the context of the limited goal of recreating the past, the magnitude and dimensions of the task Obasanjo has set for himself are humbling enough. Viewed in relation to the tools he has assembled for accomplishing those tasks, the assignment starts to resemble a mission impossible. The forces that have insinuated themselves into the processes and psyche of the Nigerian state in the

intervening years from the day Obasanjo handed over to the civilian wing of the NPN to the day the military wing of the NPN handed over to him are truly formidable. The hue and cry that have attended Obasanjo's limited and tentative first steps speak to one fact: after two decades of unmitigated national rot, many of our compatriots have finally arrived at that dangerous state of mind where privilege becomes its own justification. Too many key political actors and factions have developed a vested interest in the rot. Trapped in this frame of mind, they view any attempt to reconstitute the system on the basis of equity and propriety as an act of hostility equivalent to a declaration of war. Matters are not helped by the fact that they probably see the general leading the charge as no more than a turn-coat playing the politics of convenience.

The forces deployed to defend the existing state of affairs are as varied as they are vicious. Corruption is only one of these and perhaps one of the softer options. The manipulation of primal sensibilities and sentiments is another. So is lawlessness and impunity, especially as perpetrated by those charged with safeguarding the law. The past twenty years have witnessed studied efforts in breaking the national will through mass poverty, sponsored violence, the cutting down of positive icons and the foisting of negative role models. Sani Abacha, far from being the originator of this pernicious process, only symbolized its apogee. At the mass level, this has meant contriving a moral and spiritual climate that foists on our people a mindset that takes for granted what Claude Ake describes as the "impossibility of progress" and the inevitability of decadence. All of these, of course have their internal and external dimensions. The truth is there are forces and interests outside these shores that feel they would be losing a lot if Nigeria were to 'settle down'. And frequently, they appear as friends.

How President Obasanjo swims through the shark-infested waters of our national and international affairs would determine how far he can travel along the path of rectitude. While copious prayers are being said for him by his prayerful compatriots, he should not behave as the one of whom the Yoruba adage says: *won'tori e gbaa'we o'n j'osan*. (No translation here!) He needs all his wit about him. It is his business to ensure that his enemies never find common cause. And to ensure this he must court new friends and avoid opening up too many battlefronts at the same time.

On our own part, we must beware of falling into the perils of premature applause. What the man has done so far are no more than a statement of intentions, opening shots and suggestive gestures all of which can still be reneged upon. For Nigerians and the world at large, there is a need to establish, as was done with South Africa in the twilight of Apartheid, credible thresholds of irreversibility that would determine how much support to give or withhold. This is no time to give any Nigerian leader a cheap benefit of the doubt.

Why Obasanjo's friends are angry (I)

With the benefit of hindsight, it is becoming easier to understand why President Olusegun Obasanjo's sponsors and traditional allies are in an inflammable rage about what the Obasanjo presidency seems to be turning out to be. Sometimes, fact could be stranger than fiction, but let us attempt a careful reconstruction of events from those drama-filled days of December 1997.

The death in prison of Major General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua had a jolting effect on the political elite of Northern Nigeria for two principal reasons. Firstly, it robbed the region of arguably its most viable presidential material with a national appeal. Yar'Adua was a bridge connecting so many critical constituencies in the Nigerian polity, a formidable power broker in the truest sense of that expression. No doubt, General Sani Abacha and many in his entourage must have also recognized the potency of the Yar'Adua factor, which was why the former Chief of Staff found himself in jail in the first place.

Who can have forgotten so soon the motion said to have been sponsored by Yar'Adua at the Constitutional Conference calling on Abacha to quit office in 1996. The manner in which Abacha and his henchmen responded to that motion was particularly instructive. The tyres of the conferees' cars were deflated and they were virtually held hostage until they reversed themselves. This was a decidedly physical approach to power that was to register early in the minds of the discerning and which was to characterize the remainder of the Abacha presidency. Of course Yar'Adua himself was soon to land in jail. But even then, his image still loomed large.

Given General Abacha's preference for settling issues through extreme measures, he no doubt resolved to apply the final solution in eliminating the Yar'Adua threat, which leads to the second reason for northern discomfiture over what was obviously a political murder.

The fact that Abacha was willing to countenance the removal of Yar'Adua in such a surgical manner convinced many a smug northern politician that there

* *Vanguard* September 3, 1999

was, indeed, a new and deadly game in town. Their less favoured southern colleagues had reached that conclusion at least two years earlier, as the statistics of exiles was to show. While many of the so-called northern power brokers may now want to shout themselves hoarse about how Abacha was merely pursuing his own agenda and not doing their bidding, the balance of evidence speaks differently. And it is a damning testament. What it says runs thus:

For as long as Abacha was content to hit only southern targets and "soft" northern ones, that was all well and good. Granted, there might have been something odious and reprehensible about the way he carried on but you can't eat your cake and have it if the sole consuming passion was that power must stay in the north at all cost. To that extent, he was welcome to dispatch all the Rewanes and Saro-Wiwas and Kudirats that caught his murderous fancy if that was what he had to do to enable the north catch its breath and regain its balance after it nearly "conceded" power through the June 12, 1993 elections.

Truth is, a preponderant majority of the north's political elite was content to look the other way and enjoy their PTF quotas while Abacha killed, jailed and exiled whomsoever he pleased for whatsoever reason so long as that person was not one of their own, better still if he was Yoruba. For these power brokers, the cornerstone of state policy appeared to have been to "teach the Yoruba a lesson" for the insolence of insisting on June 12, amongst sundry other crimes. Even now it is not clear how far away they have moved from this mind-set, if they have moved at all. However, what they could neither anticipate nor fathom was the literal interpretation Abacha was to give to their resolve to keep power in the north at all cost.

It is not clear at what point Abacha decided to stop playing the bully boy of northern power brokers and become his own man. A good guess would be that he tested the water with the deposition of Sultan Dasuki and finally crossed the Rubicon with the elimination of Yar'Adua. What seems clear is that in the hands of a fellow like Abacha, regionalist prompting becomes a convenient smokescreen for the prosecution of a self-serving agenda of personalized rule.

Some form of poetic justice was at work here. From insisting that only a northerner was fit to rule (which was the clear message that the annulment sent) it was only a whisper away from instigating any northerner who could muster the nerve to take power and run the show, in perpetuity. And this was exactly what Abacha tried to do. In the event, the most unfit ruler emerged from the ranks of those who had decreed themselves as the only ones fit to rule. Politics had become a game of the lowest common denominator. And with it, the quality of all our lives. There is a lesson here also for President Obasanjo. By declaring in 1979 that the "best man" may not necessarily win that year's election, he inadvertently provided a rationale for the emergence of those creeps in whose hands he was nearly dispatched to the great beyond. But that is just by the way, although I hope the lesson is not lost on him.

It is noteworthy that the so-called Group of 18 which was said to have been the northern voice against Abacha only registered its voice after a prominent northerner had died in the hands of Abacha. Almost too late, it had dawned on the north that the tyrant may not discriminate as to who he would tyrannise once he had the full complement of power. The metamorphosis of G18 into G34 was one of the spin-offs of the nearly belated initiative for mitigating the damage Abacha's brazenness had inflicted on the north's image and interests. It was also the civilian component of the multi-pronged strategy for facing Abacha down, ultimately. But before that, some tidying up needed to be done on the military front to forestall any mishaps. Enter the Diya coup.

Why Obasanjo's friends are angry (II)

By late 1997, two seemingly separate but interwoven factors had emerged in the high politics of the Abacha regime. The first was the failing health of the strongman himself. The second was the widening gulf between Abacha and his deputy, General Oladipo Diya.

Converting both factors to good advantage was an issue that must have sorely exercised the hooded strategists of the regime. On one resolve they appeared united, however: in the event that the health issue resulted in a vacancy, Diya must not be allowed to fill it. This resolve made sense in the overall context of keeping power in the north. And the Abacha entourage could be forgiven if they felt that the north's leaders would brook any option so long as it foreclosed a "power shift".

The death of Yar'Adua threatened this cosiness. It triggered so much outrage and gave rise to an uncharacteristic stridency in the condemnation of a northern ruler by fellow northerners, culminating in the issuance of an ultimatum. The ultimatum was about to expire when a bomb exploded as Diya was about to board a flight. And hardly had the dust cleared at the scene of the bombing when we were told that Diya was planning a coup.

It would make arid sense to continue to insist, as many did earlier, that General Diya and his fellow travellers were not involved in a plot to oust Abacha. Perhaps the most charitable thing to be said about that ill-starred episode was that Diya was an unwary (some might say deserving) victim in an elaborate game of entrapment. The gory details of that game are still emerging and need not bother us here. But the little that has filtered into the public domain no doubt shows how far the politics of the Nigerian military had by then plumbed such bizarre depths of infamy.

Simply put, General Diya "bought" a dummy. The context in which he did so had antecedents that dated back to his earlier miscalculations during the

* *Vanguard* September 10, 1999

tempestuous politics of the annulment and the first anniversary of June 12. The events of that period culminated in the ouster of General M. C. Alli and Rear Admiral Allison Madueke – two of Abacha's first set of service chiefs.

In retrospect, it appears that the ease with which Abacha saw off all those on his first team who counselled an intelligent resolution of the crisis must have emboldened him into thinking that he had at last become the supremo of his fantasies. What followed was the hard-line speech of August 17, 1994. Aptly titled "Enough is Enough", it marked a defining moment in Abacha's emergence as a full-blown dictator, a feat achieved with a lot of help from Diya and his ilk.

Abacha's battle to emerge as maximum ruler proved a lot easier to win than his battle against ill health. For many of his lieutenants who were privy to his actual medical records, the assignment was to keep the man going at all cost. For them and their kinsmen with whom they shared intelligence on the strongman's ill health, the corollary task was to ensure that only an acceptable northerner was positioned to succeed Abacha, just in case.

Two options were open for clearing out the offensive southerner then standing in the way. One was to get Abacha to sack him, which could not be done without disclosing to Abacha their intimations of his impending mortality. The other was to remove Diya somehow, which was the option they eventually settled for.

And so it was that the way was cleared, such that by the time Abacha expired on June 8, the issue of who would succeed him was very much beyond the pale. But the situation in the country in the run-up to Abacha's death, especially the heat generated by the self-succession bid, imposed on the military a duty of making some gesture towards genuine democratization. However, many realized that such a gesture was likely to come to naught unless the holder of the June 12 mandate could somehow be convinced to renounce it voluntarily.

The jury is still out as to whether Chief Abiola's death was "an act of God" or contrived. One is not inclined to pre-empt the work of the human rights panel in this regard. One thing seems clear, though – Abiola's death came at a very convenient time for those who had started seeing his mandate and his insistence on actualizing it as standing in the way of "moving Nigeria forward".

So the man died. But in passing on the way he did. Abiola foreclosed any debate on the issue of power shift. Quite simply, it had become impossible to sell the idea of another *mallam* emerging to succeed General Abdulsalami Abubakar. Coming to terms with this reality was probably the first sensible political move leaders of the north were to make since the annulment.

How they then sought to practicalise the coming to terms is the source of their current anger. Sadly, they chose to do it with the same old arrogance of an ordained mandate to choose leaders for other people. Suddenly, the authentic platforms of those who had been clamouring for change were pilfered and discarded as so many wet rags. All we heard was how Obasanjo was going to be president "with or without your votes". Having got used to playing God in the

affairs of their fellow men, they neither saw nor imagined that the texture of the game might have changed.

The truth is no southerner who understood the strategically skewed constellation of power that carried through the annulment, would be content to just ride along anymore in the name of national unity. Especially, not one who had just emerged from a life-changing experience in the hands of the most brutal ruler from the north.

The crises of 1993–98 posed, with an added urgency, the issue of reconstituting the Nigerian state on the basis of equity. But even more important than this is the issue of establishing society on a basis of credible standards of performance and values. Standards and values have been so thoroughly bastardized over the past two decades of uninterrupted northern rulership that many have started concluding that mediocrity is a northerner. I do not know how all those northern leaders now claiming to be marginalized can still summon the effrontery to show their faces in public. I would feel terribly chastened and ashamed to be counted as a leader in a society that fails to make progress and appears bent on not allowing others progress.

Getting angry with Obasanjo over appointments and retirements and relocations would serve no useful purpose. Nor would plotting revenge. One lesson we should all have learnt from the unfolding Nigerian drama is that in every game of brinkmanship, it pays to know where the brink is lest you topple over. And the north may yet turn out to be the great beneficiary of Obasanjo's shock therapy if only its leaders pick up the correct lessons as they ponder the future.

Playing God and playing games*

On Christmas Eve, a colleague at the office shared with me one of those apt but profound thoughts that these days often arrive via the electronic mail. It runs like this: "There are two things I've learned: The first is that there is God. The second is that I'm not Him." Now, I do not know by what great epiphany the person who said that line came to learn these things. But I daresay that for many of us, the nominal acknowledgement of the existence of God comes easier than the actual acceptance of the fact that we're not Him. In the human experience, playing God has from time immemorial been a recurring theme in man's terrestrial sojourn and second nature for many.

Nowhere is the human propensity for playing God more evident than in the way we play the political game. In his book, *Burmese Days*, Eric Arthur Blair (better known as George Orwell, author of *The Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four*) writes of a corrupt local magistrate in Burma, then a British possession in colonial India. One day, in the town where the magistrate lived, word went round that a native Burmese was to be inducted into the exclusive all-white Country Club for the first time in the history of the club. Expectedly, the competition for this unique preferment was quite stiff as the native elite who fancied that they stood a chance strove to outdo themselves to prove that they were worthy of being admitted into the society of the colonial overlord. Eventually, the competition narrowed down to two motives: the magistrate (who in colonial India was no more than a glorified policeman and local enforcer — with all the crookedness that this implied) and the local physician. In a straight fight, the physician's standing as a professional as well as his reputation for being a good man were more than enough to carry him through the contest and see off his rival. And, as a man of some refinement, the physician was not particularly inclined to trumpeting his credentials or lobbying for the position, let alone of resorting to dirty tricks. His track record, he felt, should speak for itself.

* *Vanguard* December 31" 1999

The magistrate had no such qualms or inhibitions. As soon as the battle lines were drawn, he set to work with great assiduity to discredit his opponent and eliminate the physician from the contest. After mounting destructive whispering campaigns to no avail, he resorted to using his not inconsiderable contacts in the criminal world to frame the physician for a felony. By this stratagem, he was able to contrive a case of illegal abortion against the physician. He then ensured that news of his rival's "wrongdoing" was spread liberally round town and amongst the club membership. Thus was the physician put out of circulation and eliminated from the contest.

The magistrate's wife who was in the know of the dirty plot found the whole sordid business quite disagreeable and told him so. She warned that no one profits for too long from something wrongly acquired. But the man boasted that he had it all figured out. And, indeed, to everyone, including the club members, it did appear that nothing could go wrong. Everything seemed set for the D-Day as preparations went into top gear for the induction of the new member. And then on the eve of the induction the magistrate died for no reason that anyone could fathom, leaving everyone confused and in a quandary.

I think that the moral in Orwell's story speaks eloquently to the way events have unfolded in our country lately when General Sani Abacha and his gang thought they had it all figured out. The sudden death of the magistrate came very much in the same way that the death of Abacha on the eve of his declaration as "life president" caught many of us unawares. Which is why we cannot cease to restate that it is still too soon after Abacha for us to have forgotten that playing God can only lead to perdition. We need to resist the temptation to arrogate all knowledge and wisdom and power to ourselves - all of us, that is, including (and especially) those who would now wish to claim the credit for seeing Abacha off and who are today by the grace of God the ones calling the shots in our country.

Let it not be said that, after all that we have been through, the only lesson that we would be taking into the new millennium is of how to mouth platitudes acknowledging the existence of God while persisting in playing God in the way we conduct the affairs of state. So, let us stop playing games with the people's welfare.

Millenniumania

Talking of the new millennium, by the time we wake up tomorrow, January 1, 2000, a lot of things might have happened. But the sun would still rise from the east and set in the west. There would still be good people and bad people in this world. Women would still wear make up. Babies of both sexes would still be born. And God would still be seated on the throne. In short, very little would have changed except the date. So what's all the fuss about a new millennium?

Well, the fuss is that after all said and done, it would still be a great day to be alive. It would still be a great time to be able to walk the face of the earth.

And it would be the first date within easy recall to mark the beginning of a year, and a decade, and a century, and a millennium. It, also, would be the first day of the year in which Nigeria turns 40. Hopefully, she won't be a fool at 40 or remain a fool forever.

Happy celebrations!

After Obasanjo's prayers...*

The annual convention of the Baptist Church ended in Lagos yesterday, the same day President Olusegun Obasanjo, who is a Baptist, chose to formally declare his intention to run for a second term. The connection between the two events is not clear. But the President had told the nation a couple of months back that his decision to seek re-election would have to be divinely sanctioned and that he was waiting for the voice of God before pronouncing on the matter.

Without trying to trivialize an issue that I am told the President takes quite seriously, this whole business of seeking the voice of God sounds curious. But, may be the Baptist congregation also took it seriously, using the convention to join their illustrious member in the praying and fasting. Now the convention is over and the prayers seem to have been answered. As the Old Testament would put it, the sacrifice has been found acceptable in the sight of God.

A close family friend is, however, not impressed. She says that while the President might, indeed, have prayed hard on the 2003 project, there is very little in his robust frame to suggest that any fasting took place. My response to this observation is that there will always be cynics.

Be that as it may, the President has decided, no doubt, after much persuasion from God and man. Speaking of the latter, it is a wonder why anyone should have worked up an outrage on the circus show that took place at Otta on Easter Tuesday. My view is that it is a candidate's prerogative to decide how he wishes to seek re-election.

The analogy that some people seek to draw between the Otta visit and Abacha's transmutation plan is unfair and inappropriate. Nobody voted for Abacha in the first place and so his seeking election by whatever means was a *non sequitur*. What Abacha tried to do was to legitimize his usurpation via a contrived plebiscite. Even if his candidature had been announced with all the

* Vanguard April 26, 2000

solemnity of a Supreme Court session and not with the commotion of clowns and gangsters, it would still have been fraudulent.

Otta was about comic relief. The other day a friend came to our group's meeting to announce that he had decided to seek election into Senate next year. He then informed us that he would be expecting all of us to journey down to his hometown soon to beg him to run for the election!

With the President's declaration the campaign for 2003 should now be on full blast. From all indications, it is going to be a very interesting campaign. It may, also, be quite violent, given what is at stake. But, in the end, I think Obasanjo will win. Which eventuality seems to be giving a lot of people sleepless nights. A fellow was said to have predicated the outbreak of a civil war if Obasanjo is re-elected. It is an irresponsible thing to say, and I doubt what anyone in a right frame of mind would make of such a proclamation. People who do honestly work for a living have no problem at all with Obasanjo returning. Only frustrated fellows who live on allocation papers do.

Still, some issues should exercise the interest and concern of the President's mind vis-à-vis the 2003 project. First is that incumbency could be a double-edged sword whose effectiveness should not be taken for granted. This is essentially because it is still not very clear whom some of the President's men are working for. Therefore, it matters in whose care the power to deploy incumbency is entrusted to avoid a situation in which the President's side scores own goals.

Second is that this, perhaps, is going to be the first major election in Nigeria to be determined by the depth and dimensions of divisions within the north. How the Obasanjo campaign works on those divisions could also prove critical. But the less said about it the better for all.

Third is that the President must stop treating some of his roles as if they are mutually exclusive. Most significant in this regard is the false dichotomy that is often posed between politicking and governance, and between the statesman's role and the reality of workaday life as a politician. Election year is usually thought to be solely about politicking, and some of the President's men are now busy carrying on as though politics is all that matters. But what is done in the realm of governance is crucial. Government should not have to shut down because the President is seeking re-election. Roads must be tarred, hospitals must be equipped, houses must be built, salaries must be paid and lives must be touched. In the course of doing these things, ample opportunities for politicking could present themselves; people must go into the polling booths in 2003 remembering something tangible that the President had done for them lately.

Concerning the statesman-politician dichotomy, the President is obviously more comfortable in the former role. Often, he seems to have forgotten that he is now out of retirement and back on the hustings. So consumed is he with playing the statesman that he sometimes forgets that the presidency is, first and foremost, a political office. Election year offers no opportunity to indulge in

such fantasies. Home is where the votes will be cast and the man must stay around more often.

Obasanjo craves to be Nigeria's Charles de Gaulle but still shies away from tackling the issue of a viable constitution. Yet, de Gaulle's lasting legacy is the Constitution of the Fifth Republic, which subsists till date. Obasanjo's disinterest in the constitutional issue comes from a reluctance to submit what is his fundamentally flawed concept of Nigeria to scrutiny. This may not be an election year issue but the fear is that Obasanjo may win a second term only to come out of office in 2007 with a much more diminished stature than he had in 1979. This is a real challenge that the President must confront as he makes the deals that will secure his re-election.

Even while we grant that there are some positions that the President cannot be seen to canvass too openly, Obasanjo must seek to master the symbolic gesture during his re-election campaign more than his utterances have shown so far: the Niger Delta problem; he must for once acknowledge that June 12 took place and that sacrifices were made that, in turn, probably made his emergence inevitable; he must be less dismissive of contrary views. Above all, he must rein in his kinsmen now on the prowl and convince them that seeking to take the state of the Southwest by force or fraud will not work.

French lesson

France has been rocked by protests over the surprising strong showing of Jean-Marie le Pen, leader of the extremist National Front in last Sunday's first round Presidential election. If half the people protesting the result had bothered to get to the polling stations to vote, the results would have been different; le Pen beat incumbent Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin to third position to clinch a place in the run-off approach 2003. The lessons from the le Pen earthquake for our situation are legion. We offer only two here. First, if you want something badly enough, you must go out and get it. There can be no luxury of ambivalence. Second, the surest way for evil to triumph is for good people to sit and do nothing.

A president's burden.

President Olusegun Obasanjo certainly chose his audience well in launching his most recent attack on calls for restructuring of the Nigerian federation. The same cannot be said, however, for his choice of words, or the soundness of his logic. In the event, it probably would have profited him a lot more if he had resisted the temptation to answer back and kept quiet on the issue this time around.

A visit to Ibadan penultimate Thursday provided Mr. President with the auspices to again address continuing agitations for a more equitable federal system. The occasion was remarkable for two reasons. For one, it was the first visit to Ibadan in more than a decade by a sitting Nigeria head of state. This fact on its own speaks volumes as it attests to the strains and stress that the federation has gone through over the past decade when national integration suffered a severe setback and mostly northern rulers simply did not feel safe in the southern part of the country. The second reason is that Ibadan is the capital of the West, which is, in turn, the seat of sundry calls for a reconstituting of the basis of political power in Nigeria on the foundations of equity and fairness. In choosing to speak the way he did in Ibadan, Obasanjo sent the message that he was not squeamish about carrying the battle into the enemy's camp, to beard the lion in its den, as it were.

His host, Oyo State Governor Lam Adesina had in his welcome address restated the desirability and inevitability of moving the restructuring agenda forward. In so doing, the Governor outlined once again the major planks of the agenda. These are devolution of power, resource control, revenue allocation, establishment of state police, constitutional review and the convocation of a Sovereign National Conference.

It is quite clear that the President is not the most ardent fan of many of these ideas, which he considers to be both dangerous and silly. And he must have felt that his host's address offered too good an opportunity to let pass in making his feelings known. In fact, he did succeed in making his voice heard by speaking *ex*

* Vanguard, February 9, 2001

tempore, we are told. It is doubtful, however, that he has advanced the debate anywhere beyond the humdrum.

Other than reminding us that he is President, which is not very original revelation, there was nothing the President said in Ibadan that could not have been said by Wada Nas or any of his brothers. Remove the venue and the names and it could have easily been any of the rabid Abacha ministers railing against NADECO in those dark days.

"There cannot be two sovereignties in a nation," says the President. Exactly. The point being made is that there may soon not be a nation to speak of. The reality is that the sovereignty that Obasanjo so stridently claims to have in his custody has been contested in at least six of the northern states that have declared Sharia as their supreme law. And, increasingly, people across the country are making their own arrangements and pressing on with their various near-separatist agenda while the President gives elementary lessons on sovereignty.

Increasingly, it does appear that the restructuring agenda may well be consummated in spite and not because of Mr. President. The choice before him is clear. He could intelligently take charge of the agenda for devolution of power, which has become inevitable, or he could preside over the dissolution of the federation, which could become inevitable if he continues acting the northern spokesman.

Three principal errors seem to inform President Obasanjo's position on restructuring. The first has to do with his reading of our very recent past, of which he was a victim. Obasanjo seems to subscribe to the school of thought that see the grave abuses of the Babangida and Abacha regimes as due strictly to the personal failings of the two men. For this school of thought, the enormities of those eras had no structural basis in how political power was organized, so avoiding a recurrence does not require a restructuring of the federation. The simplest argument against this line of thinking is to be found in the annulment of the June 12 1993 presidential elections. If Nigeria's political problems have no structural basis, how did we find ourselves in a situation where less than a dozen Hausa-speaking soldiers decided who could not be head of state and threw the country into a crisis that it is yet to recover from? And in what way has two years of Obasanjo's rule changed the fact that the *lingua franca* of the Nigeria military is still Hausa?

The second error is the notion that the best way for a southerner to prove that he is a patriotic Nigeria is to refuse to identify too closely with his kinsmen. Many southerners have fallen for this idiocy, which has provided a blackmail point, consistently used to devastating effect while northern rulers literally get away with murder.

The third error has to do with our reading of the meaning and import of power shift. Many of the Yoruba elements around Mr. President seem to believe that the fact of having a southerner in Aso Rock vitiates the need for

restructuring. It is a costly error that they may live to regret if, God forbid, another Abacha takes power. The imperative of restructuring is in no way diminished by the fact of who occupies the Presidential villa. The desired goal is that the ethnic affiliation of the occupant should matter less and less until it becomes virtually inconsequential. The over-centralized state apparatus that is now in place is a disaster waiting to happen, as the dark days of Abacha showed us.

Finally, some argue that the Sovereign National Conference cannot serve any purpose that the National Assembly is not already serving. This argument is easily defeated by recalling what has turned out to be one of Mr. President's innovations in the Human Rights Violation Investigation Commission, otherwise known as Oputa Panel, as an extraordinary response to treating matters that the normal courts were created to handle. Would we have been able to confront the past as the Panel has enabled us to if things had been left to the normal courts to address?

How to enter Aso Rock*

Many mouths must still be hanging wide-open in utter disbelief over the startling revelations being made at the Oputa Commission. For me, the winning line from the latest act in the running drama is ex-DMI boss, Ibrahim Sabo's comment that a lot of the things that happened often ran from the sublime to the ridiculous. This, in a nutshell, captures our country's experience during military era and we are not even sure it has quite ended. We will dwell for now on the ridiculous bit.

As they watched the gung-ho informant, Chief Yomi Tokoya, ply his trade at the Commission, many must have wondered as to the strange company that people in power keep. Not a few could share the feeling of disgust expressed by the Reverend Matthew Hassan Kukah at the close of Tokoya's marathon display. It is, indeed, a shame that the likes of Tokoya still find patronage under this dispensation. But, this fact can only further prove an observation I once made, that is that perhaps up to eighty per cent of the people in office today would still have been holding their present positions if Sani Abacha had become civilian president. Won't it be asking too much to expect that such people would act differently from what obtained under Abacha, who for many of them was a patron of sorts?

The truth is not much has changed. Seers, soothsayers, sorcerers, magicians, mediums, pimps, prostitutes (of both sexes), gossips, talebearers, thieves, drunks, sycophants, ritualists, and such other unsavoury types are still the preferred companions of many of our men of power. I once met an academic at a conference in 1991 whose sole claim to fame was that he shared the same *babalawo* with one of the presidential candidates of that time. And he was very proud of this.

Not that Nigeria is unique in this regard. All over the world, evidence abound that people in power really do keep some very kinky company. Two

* *Vanguard*, July 27, 2001

factors determine the extent of damage that such bad company is able to inflict on a society: the strength of its structures and the character of its leadership.

In Nigeria, both factors are still quite tenuous, so the damage evil types inflict is often amplified several times over. But, first, let us look around the world.

In old Russia, the malevolent priest, Rasputin, was said to have contributed in no small measure to the fall of the Romanovs. The way the man carried on so infuriated the people that by the time the Tsar wisened to his antics and sought to turn him out of the Winter Palace it was already too late. The anger of the people had boiled over, culminating in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Former US President Ronald Reagan once procured the services of an astrologer, at the instance of his wife, Nancy, we are told. The astrologer's brief was to gaze into crystal ball each morning to pronounce on the safety or otherwise of each and every item on the presidential itinerary.

Some years after Reagan, Bill Clinton was president and a debate erupted over whether or not his wife, Hilary, was likely to have too much influence on Clinton's legislative agenda because of her rather intimidating credentials as a law professor. A cartoonist was to tell Americans that they should count themselves lucky that, for a change, they had a First Lady who would be consulting her law books rather than seeking the interventions of witchcraft and crystal balls.

Nearer home, in the predominantly Moslem state of Zanzibar, one of the two countries that make up Tanzania, a law was recently passed stipulating that any mosque that does not mention the name of the president each day of prayers would be closed down. The president really must take pronouncements from the mosques very seriously for him to think that it made such a mighty difference to his fortunes, whether or not his name was mentioned at the prayers. Try to imagine the sheer volume of business a smart Imam could be doing as this president's spiritual consultant.

But, the prize for harbouring curious types in the corridors of power belongs elsewhere, in the office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in New York. In case anyone needs reminding, that office is like the State House of the whole world. Sometime in the early 1990s, a Nigerian professor teaching in an American university had gone to the office in the company of a top African diplomat, to discuss issues related to the West African experience in peace-keeping, then a pet project of the UN scribe. Despite the fact that they were on a scheduled appointment, they were kept waiting for a long time as their host was said to be attending to a very important visitor. And, who did this very important visitor turn out to be? A Nigerian prophet of doom, whose waywardness often set tongues wagging back home. Such are the man's unspeakable proclivities that many often wonder if this title of primate is more a tribute to his bestial instincts than an attestation to a celestial calling. What was such a creature doing in such hallowed chambers, the visitors wondered. They were to learn that the

primate had come to offer prayers and give spiritual advice to the Secretary-General! The professor said this experience left him feeling very small and thoroughly demeaned, the same way Reverend Kukah must have felt on learning of Tokoya's rather easy access to the Presidential Villa.

Why do such disreputable types hold such an irresistible attraction for people in power? I think the explanation is to be found in a combination of two factors, a ruler's acute sense of insecurity and his bloated ego. Many people who get into power, especially in these parts, are usually very disturbed and unhinged personalities with a huge complex and overblown sense of self-importance. Such people cannot stand regular folks around them. Worse, they cannot stand normal people who tell them normal things about themselves and the world around them. Our leaders often live in a reality warp. And, the further anyone can take them away from reality, the more valued that person's acquaintance is. Which is why sycophants and fake prophets do so well with Nigerian rulers who are often unable to draw the obvious connection between the kind of company they keep and the quality of governance they offer.

It is nice to hear that President Obasanjo has publicly disavowed any links with both Tokoya and Primate Olabayo. As, indeed, he should. But, the true test of how much distance exists between him and these men would only come as the desperation for re-election builds up and real and imaginary enemies emerge.

As elections draw near, the doors at Aso Rock would open to all sorts with procurers of the services of such men gaining in influence. It would then be the responsibility of the president to show that he would have no truck with hideous types. If you ask me, I think there are already too many of these procurers in the corridors of power for comfort.

An antidote to all of this is for Obasanjo to heed the words of CLR James, the West Indian writer, who was once a confidante and an adviser of Ghana's first President, Kwame Nkrumah. Every leader, said CLR James, needs around him people who neither owe him something from their past, nor are expecting from him something for their future. It is really that simple or so complex.

The President's cane*

Many people must have bought themselves a large drink last Saturday to toast the story of how President Olusegun Obasanjo administered a dozen strokes of the cane on an over-zealous para-military operative who had obviously reduced law-enforcement to the barbarism of lashing at helpless citizens with a whip. The incident took place at the Kogi State University in Anyigba where Mr. President had gone to commission some projects.

As they say in newspaper reports, trouble started for the errant security operative when the president saw him lashing repeatedly at a crowd of students who had surged to catch Obasanjo's attention. This obviously did not seem right to the president who, in an agitated state, interrupted his speech to perform the onerous chore of administering on the man a dose of his own medicine. No doubt to the surprise of many officials, but obviously to the delight of many, not all of them because they are lovers of mankind. Perhaps, some in the cheering crowd were merely masochists who would have cheered anyway whoever was being caned, or by whom.

As I sat with a friend last Sunday somewhere on Awolowo Road in Ikoyi to savour the caning incident, the irony was not lost on us that we were having the celebratory drink literally across the road from the old headquarters of the SSS. In case anyone had forgotten, that was the house of horror where many fellow travellers of the humiliated brute received their training in sadism and impunity. That was, of course, before Akilu's dungeons and Al-Mustapha's man-holes made the SSS cells seem like a picnic ground.

Reflecting on the glad tidings of the presidential nemesis, someone toyed with the idea of approaching that once-dreaded place to pour libation at the door-steps of Rafindadi's old haunt and chase away any remnants of evil spirits still hovering thereabouts. A cursory reminder of the bad old days promptly cured him of that temptation.

But, seriously speaking, I think that the caning of the overzealous security operative carries with it a powerful symbolism that can only be salutary for our

* *Vanguard*, February 8 2002

young democracy. This presidential gesture may not be the end of all our troubles with overzealous security operatives. But, as long-suffering victims of the casual wickedness of goons and gangsters in uniform and without, it helps to know that we are not all just watching helplessly. This is a good development. And not just for us, but also for the president himself. During his first sojourn in power, the man was not legendary for disapproving of the use of brute force by his men. Nor, was he himself a study in humane conduct. It would be interesting to plot the trajectory of the presidential change of heart that led to last Friday's drama in Kogi State. Did it have anything to do with Obasanjo's own ordeals in the hands of Sani Abacha's people? Whatever be the explanation, it is certainly a most welcome humanization of our head of state, which we hope would percolate down the line.

Of course, there are bound to be pained comments from "civilized" folk who would take a dim view of the president's action, either considering it *infra dig* or seeing it as excessive. We really do make a lot of fuss – much of it unjustified – about who we really are and where we stand as a people on the scale of civility. But, this is the same country where, as Owei Lakemfa elegantly puts it, a mad man helps to untangle a traffic jam that otherwise sane people had created. And these "sane" people would include bankers, professors, clergymen and even media executives!

There can be no democracy without democrats. Nor, can there be democracy without civility. And the bastion of undemocratic and uncivil behaviour in Nigeria remains the security agencies, by whatever names or acronyms designated. A culture of impunity had developed over the years in the security agencies that must be uprooted if our young democracy is to survive. This culture manifests in things that we had become accustomed to seeing as "minor" everyday occurrence but which then become quite major: such as controlling a crowd by whipping people, shooting teargas into university campuses, traffic police slapping a driver, a bullion van brushing someone's car; an official's convoy violently claiming right of way in dense traffic, etc. From little infractions we then moved to the big: shooting students, assassinating opponents, stealing billions, annulling elections. Which was how we got into the situation that the Oputa Panel is now trying to unravel.

The assurance that an offender would never be brought to book is, perhaps, the greatest guarantor of the culture of impunity. Does it really matter how or by whom a stop is put to the excesses of security operatives? I will call for another twelve strokes of that cane...and another drink.

“The leader we can trust”.

Many of us are likely to still recall the origin of the title that this column carries today. But for the benefit of those who may need to be reminded, the words come from the presidential election campaign that climaxed the 1998-1999 transition to civil rule programme of General Abdulsalami Abubakar, Nigeria's last military head of state. The transition, we would recall, produced the presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo, the subject of the quotation under reference.

The formulation of the Abdulsalami transition was understandably shrouded in considerable confusion, just as the environment in which it was implemented was characterized by much bad blood and bad faith. The country was on edge. Everyone eyed everyone with hostility and suspicion as the contending power blocs sought to outsmart one another in a deadly game of wits. After the two most contentious *dramatis personae* in the political theatre of that era – that is, Sani Abacha and M.K.O Abiola – had been conveniently removed, the coast seemed clear to play out the ‘soft-landing’ scenario that was said to have been on the cards since 1996.

Essentially, the soft landing thesis referred to a game-theory strategy of resolving the crisis of political succession that the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections had foisted on Nigeria. The overriding concern was how to resolve the crisis without precipitating a break-up of the country or the collapse of its core institutions. By way of analogy, the situation that Nigeria presented then was very much akin to that of a distressed aircraft that needed to be helped to achieve a soft landing, hence the title of the strategy. The script was said to have been written by some external friends of Nigeria, whose sole concern was to secure vital business (mostly oil) interests and guarantee Nigeria's ability to continue to engage in regional peace-keeping as a dependable ally of the self-styled ‘policeman of the world’. The logic was that so much hinged on stability in Nigeria that the world was confronted with the need to be less fussy about the injustice of the annulment, especially if an

* *Vanguard*, April 5, 2002

insistence on redressing the injustice could lead to full-scale hostilities that would threaten the country's fragile unity.

The domestic constituency that stood against the reversal of the annulment found this thesis quite appealing and quickly latched on to it, opportunistically mistaking the echo for the sound. Abacha and Abiola, the two most troublesome factors in the equation, were soon taken out in short order; in one case with the alleged chief executioners in full attendance apparently to make sure nothing went amiss. The domestic flank continued to make all the right noises, meanwhile.

The stage having been so well set, the power shift chorus then gained in stridency. The Yoruba, we were told, needed to be assuaged for the way Abiola's mandate was stolen from him. So by all means a Yoruba man was to succeed Abdulsalami. But it was not going to be just a Yoruba man. Those who have historically arrogated themselves the veto over who becomes what in Nigeria soon let us know that the suitability of a Yoruba candidate for the Presidency must be inversely proportional to the level of the candidate's acceptability amongst his kinsmen. It so happened that Obasanjo was stepping out of jail at that very moment. And those who thought they had found him a willing tool in the past soon started touting his credentials as just the right man to fill the Yoruba vacancy. His selling point was that he was 'the leader we can trust'.

Those in the know claim that the emergence of President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999 was in line with the soft landing thesis. He was to be nemesis of power shift, a Yoruba President in name only who would run the show as his putative principals dictate. But very much in the same manner that Abacha turned out to be the greatest beneficiary of the annulment, Obasanjo's case once again attests to the time-worn adage that man proposes and God disposes.

It is in this context that we must view the continuing tantrums against the Obasanjo presidency form the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), which claims to speak for the North. I must confess that I get a kick out of the discomfiture of our friends in the North whenever they get into their now frequent gripe sessions on what Obasanjo has done or failed to do. It is really nice to be able to quote their own words back at them that this is 'the leader we can trust'.

Only those whose thinking had been be clouded by too many years of playing God would be surprised at how Obasanjo's second coming has turned out. It was always clear that the man would end up surprising both his supporters and his detractors. What we didn't know was how.

It is a cardinal principle of law that those who would come to equity must come with clean hands. People who now shed crocodile tears over the claim that Obasanjo is marginalizing the North need to ask themselves if their motive in supporting him for the Presidency was pure. Or whether the calculation was that he was going to help them preserve the unfair advantage that they have used to hold the country down for far too long. My thinking is that whatever the Arewa

chieftains get from Obasanjo is strictly their own business and that people should refrain from further disturbing our peace on that account.

Meanwhile, another crowd of persuaders descended on the Otta Farmhouse last Tuesday seeking to convince President to run for a second term. It seemed like a fairly decent group. Except that in the crowd were some people who are likely to end up behind bars once Obasanjo is rid of any IOUs related to securing his re-election. Such characters would do well to learn a thing or two from the fate that befell some of those who persuaded the man to run the last time around.

Why Obasanjo should return*

Anyone who truly believes in the future of Nigeria as a united entity should support the re-election of President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2003. We make this statement, having carefully weighed the options, in all sobriety and with due sense of responsibility. It matters little whatever one might think of the man as a person – and there are indeed many people who reckon, rightly or wrongly, that they have genuine cause not to think too much of his person. Yet regardless of all of Obasanjo's inadequacies, there is one compelling reason why voting him in for a second term makes very good sense not just for the Nigerian project but indeed for every Nigerian who does not belong in the category of people who have proclaimed themselves as "born to rule".

The reason is simple: The principle that anyone from any part of the country can be elected as president of Nigeria needs to be firmly established once and for all if the country is to overcome its perennial politics of tension and transcend the division of its people into first, second and third class citizens. In the present circumstance, this principle can only be established if the point is made that a man (or woman) does not have to be anointed by a bunch of presumptuous potentates from a part of the country to be the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

To put it in plain language what this means is that Obasanjo needs to be re-elected especially to send a clear message that it is not the prerogative of some characters who call themselves Northern leaders to decide at all times and at every turn who should be what in Nigeria.

Viewed in this way, the 2003 election becomes a veritable litmus test and a contest between those who claim to have made Obasanjo president in 1999 and the rest of us whose only power to make and unmake presidents resides in our votes. Obasanjo's vaunted sponsors now claim to have disowned him over some things they claim he should have done that he has not done and some other things that he has done that they say he should not have done. If they were to

* *Vanguard*, May 17, 2002

succeed in removing him at next year's election (or by any other means whatsoever, as Abubakar Rimi has forewarned us) then they would have gotten away with the boast that only they and they alone can decide for the rest of us. Were this to happen, we might as well then forget our claim to equal citizenship and just submit ourselves to be their subjects forever.

One of the breed, a character called Attahiru Bafarawa, whom the people of Sokoto State are unfortunate to have as their governor, was reported to have hallucinated the other day that they want their power back. People like him need to be told in clear terms that they have lost that power forever – if it was ever theirs in the first place. I had always thought that the two great religions that most Nigerians profess – i.e. Christianity and Islam – teach that all power belongs to Almighty God. How a fellow who claims to be a true Moslem, running a Sharia state, can permit himself to make such an insolent statement remains a mystery to me. But, then it only goes to further prove how desperate things have become for some people after only three years of being out of office that they held for nearly four decades with little to show for it. Still, they have only just begun their gnashing of the teeth. If the rest of the country know what's good for them, it should be a very long time indeed before Bafarawa's kingsmen get to the presidency again.

There are people who are now running around in circles seeking the endorsement of so-called kingmakers, now said to be scouting for a replacement for Obasanjo. They and their mentors only labour in vain. And this applies mostly to our brothers from various parts of the south-southeast, south-south and southwest – who still delude themselves that some people in some place are in a position to "dash" them the presidency just to prove that they can get Obasanjo out. I do not think that I can make the point better than Senator Arthur Nzeribe put it last weekend to his Igbo brothers at the formal launch of the Zik Institute in Enugu.

As for some elements from the southwest who still delude themselves about having a shot at the presidency next year, the handwriting on the wall keeps getting clearer and clearer by the day – if only they can read it. One of the most frequent arguments you hear from these quarters is that Obasanjo is not the best Yoruba material available for the presidency. They could be right, but surely the Christians among them must be aware of the verse in the Bible, which says that "God uses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise."

The emergence of President Obasanjo for a second term in 2003 would help to alter for good a lot of silly assumptions about Nigerian politics. It would also serve as the best guarantee that any politician from anywhere in the country has a chance of winning the presidency in future on merit and not by the say-so of some self-styled northern power brokers. Only when such benchmarks are established can we clear all the idiocies that lie on the path to Nigeria's progress and truly commence our journey to nationhood.

Impeachment and unseen hands*

The impeachment saga once again calls painful attention to the warped politics of the Fourth Republic. For, it is indeed warped when politicians gleefully support a motion of the main rival party. For all purposes and intents, the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) as now constituted is dead. It can only resurrect as a platform for the President to stand on in his re-election bid. All efforts to continue to accommodate the strange bedfellows that congregated in the PDP to get Obasanjo into office the first time around must now be abandoned as futile. It does appear that once again, we are moving towards the two-party tendency that many believe should be the natural order of federal politics in Nigeria. You are either for Obasanjo or against him. I think this is the import of Alhaji Adamu Ciroma's call on errant PDP members to declare their stand. People now have to choose the side they belong to, and Obasanjo is the defining marker in this regard.

Speaking of which, the role by the leadership of the Alliance for Democracy (AD) in the house leaves a lot to be desired. The break up of PDP on the issues of Obasanjo's re-election offer the AD its best opportunity yet to rescue itself from the politics of irrelevance at the federal level. Whatever AD leaders may think of their own superior endowments for the presidency, the result on the ground is that it is Obasanjo that has re-defined the context of the national politics in the here and now. We all, including AD leaders, must come to the conclusion that the smart thing to do is to be counted on the side of Obasanjo.

But is it possible that the impeachment motion also has hidden persuaders, probably domiciled within the executive itself? We ask this question because often when an event occurs and culpability appears confusing, the culprit could be the likely beneficiary. In this impeachment matter it is good to ask: *qui bono* (who benefits?). Whoever the ultimate beneficiary is likely to be, the long list of mischievous doings recorded lately make it necessary to sound a note of

* *Vanguard*, August 23, 2002

warning: those who still nurse the hope that this president can somehow be bounced or bullied off the stage so that Number Two can step in have to think again. The country is not yet ready at this material time to accept a president from the north, given the very recent history of how we arrived at this point. If President Obasanjo were to leave office under any circumstances other than a free and fair election, then he must leave with his deputy. We must constantly remind ourselves that in every game of brinkmanship, it pays that every one involved knows where the brink is. A word, as they say, is enough for the wise.

Pact and impeachment*

Was President Olusegun Obasanjo right to have shared with journalists details of the secret pact? Many of the Sunday papers last weeks reported on the pact that the northern caucus of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) asked presidential aspirants to sign as a condition for supporting the emergence of a southern president in 1999. President Obasanjo claimed not to have signed, but that is still being debated. Regardless, I think he was right to have disclosed the existence of such a pact, and not just for the simple reason that you've got to fight with what you've got.

The president was right because since the impeachment crisis started, there has been so much dissimulation about who was behind it, with a lot of characters deluding themselves about what this was all about. Words like probity, transparency, separation of power and such other niceties have been used to dress up a thoroughly dishonourable agenda. Inevitably, the president had to give his own perspective. Firstly, to afford the country the benefit of a balanced assessment and secondly to show his tormentors up for what they really are – over-pampered hegemonists who having gotten so used to having their way cannot bear even a little discomfort.

Increasingly, the consensus that is emerging is that the impeachment threat is, plain and simple, a regional power grab that seeks to achieve four interrelated objectives. First to arm-twist a recalcitrant president and cripple his presidency; second to scuttle his chances for a second term; third to reverse the power shift arrangement that was the basis for the successful take-off of the Fourth Republic; and lastly but mainly to regain the presidency for those northerners who say they are born to rule. What informs the present urgency (some would say desperation) on the part of this breed is that they feel a need to move fast before Obasanjo goes any further in killing off their tribe of parasites that had perfected the art of feeding off the system. I think that rather than debate the

* *Vanguard*, October 11, 2002

rightness or wrongness of the presidential disclosure, we should instead ruminate on how Obasanjo, a much touted nationalist and friend of the north, arrived at what is so clearly an epiphany. Obasanjo is a man who obviously so believed in the country to the point of annoying any other Nigerians who had all along argued (rightly) that there was very little in the country to justify or sustain just such a belief. Obasanjo has spent his entire public career denying that north, south, east or west exist or should exist. In propagating this lie, he often rained considerable abuse on those who did not agree with him.

Being asked to sign a northern pact must, therefore, have been for him a rude awakening that compelled him to think things over. More so, coming so soon after his imprisonment and humiliation under Abacha about which many northerners did very little. It is a sad day for Nigeria that one of the pillars of the Nigeria myth is now being forced to rethink his position. It is sad because often, fresh converts are usually the most fundamental zealots. We need to worry for how Obasanjo intends to use the new light that he has just seen. The country should worry too. Obasanjo had always carried on as someone who believed that the only reason why southerners like Awolowo and Abiola failed in the larger Nigerian politics was that there was something they did not do right and which he had done right. Now, the reality seems to have dawned on him that the only southerner acceptable to our born-to-rule compatriots is one who does not have a mind of his own like Obasanjo of 1976-79. Many of us learnt long ago to live with this reality. Some people argue that disclosing the pact will lead to a hardening of the northern opposition to Obasanjo. So what is wrong if the north is hardened against him? Those who push this line of thinking are those who have obviously brainwashed themselves into believing that the fear of the north is the beginning of political wisdom. Not any longer. Not many people relate to the north on the basis of fear anymore. The annulment crisis and the anti-Abacha struggle put paid to all that. The impeachment crisis could just advance things further as we resume our journey from the point at which an evolving dynamic was deflected by the Abdulsalami transition. No one is afraid of returning to the trenches, and the impeachment crisis could just help the needed face-off that would let thinking men and women from the north also realise this, hence their concern that things should not go out of hand.

Contrary to the claim in some quarters, power shift was not an act of northern magnanimity but an imperative of survival. They knew that Nigeria – and they with it – would have been wiped out if the crisis in 1993-98 had been allowed to reach the logical conclusion. The impeachment crisis questions the imperative in a way that could yet lead to an unravelling.

Farouk Lawan, a spokesman of the impeachment party in the House of Representatives, has already told us that the House will not be swayed by the entreaties of elder statesmen like General Yakubu Gowon and Shehu Shagari in its resolve to impeach Obasanjo. To confirm his seriousness, Lawan has reeled out fifteen fresh charges against the president (making a total of thirty-two),

including one that is still under investigation by a committee of the same House. Some Honourable Members say they are not aware of these new charges, suggesting that a shadowy cabal has taken over the work of the House. Gowon and Shagari know why they are seeking peace. Lawan and Na 'Abba and their fellow travellers can go on pretending that they are wiser than their elders. Perhaps, the reprisal for disclosing the pact is a revving-up of the impeachment engine, may be to forestall the disclosure of other pacts that may even be more damaging. But the resolve of the impeachment party to proceed with what their spokesmen has now openly admitted is a "project", tells us something: those whom the gods would destroy they first make mad.

Has Obasanjo failed?·

The joint statement issued on Monday by representatives of the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) and Ohanaeze Ndigbo again reveals the level of desperation that has come to characterize the "Stop Obasanjo" campaign. Interestingly, this statement, which calls on President Olusegun Obasanjo to forgo his re-election bid, was being hawked around newspaper houses by agents of the ACF at about same time that the Independent National Election Commission (INEC) was announcing the date of presidential election. It is not clear if this was a mere coincidence.

It would seem though that the collapse of the impeachment threat has sent the anti-Obasanjo camp back to the drawing board. The new trick is to get "eminent" megaphones to shout Obasanjo down by pronouncing him a failure and labelling his re-election bid as a threat to democracy. We less eminent folks had always thought it was the responsibility of the electorate to judge the performance of a government and to rate an incumbent's eligibility for re-election on the basis of that performance. There must be a reason why self-appointed regional leaders cannot trust the electorate with this rather straightforward task. And the reason is not far-fetched.

Having come to the inescapable conclusion that Obasanjo cannot be defeated in a free and fair election by any of the presidential aspirants, the opposition has resorted to the questionable expedient of trying to crowd him out of the game, hiding behind a smokescreen provided by some leading figures in society. The obvious objective, of course, is to win the match via a walkover by scaring Obasanjo away from the pitch. The comforting thing here is that this President, as the American would say, does not scare easy. It is also reassuring that because he knows of the often-questionable circumstances in which many so-called eminent Nigerians achieved their "eminence", Obasanjo is not exactly intimidated by their stature.

The joint Arewa-Ohanaeze statement cited approvingly last month's "gospel" from the Patriots. No less is to be expected, considering that both statements belong in the same genre and were probably procured from the same

* *Vanguard*, November 8, 2002

wallet. It is now clear that The Patriots' call on the President to drop his re-election bid was merely an advance party in a convoy of elderly mischief making. The Patriots bore a message that was to be re-echoed in due course. The echoing has started. But, like the impeachment threat, it is likely to die as a whisper.

The Arewa-Ohanaze statement anchors its argument on three major planks. First, that the government of President Obasanjo has failed to live up to the expectations of Nigerians. Second, that the government has exhibited certain tendencies that show that it cannot be trusted to conduct a free and fair election, or to hand over power if defeated in the coming elections. And, third, that the personality of the President has become a problem for the office he holds and, by extension, for the country.

The first charge is clearly not true and would nonetheless require the concurrence of voters to establish its veracity. The second seeks to set the stage for chaos, to the extent that the statement has not identified the angel that should replace Obasanjo to conduct the 2003 Elections. The third allegation bears all the imprint of an *argumentum ad hominem* – having lost the argument at the level of issues and ideas, you target the person of the opponent. It is a favourite strategy of people who have no case to make.

The President's disdain for the press has sometimes had the effect of denying his administration the benefit of a good communication strategy. His enemies often capitalize on this factor to diminish his stature and deny his achievements in the public eye. Mercifully, the President himself now seems to have identified this as a problem, going by the text of his October 1 address. The truth is Obasanjo has achieved a lot, very much beyond what was thought possible.

When people speak of Obasanjo as having failed, it is pertinent to ask: what was the man drafted into office to do? Five things basically: to keep Nigeria one and bring the country back from the brink; to restore Nigeria to international respectability; to restore value to governance; to rebuild vital national institutions and infrastructure; and, last but not the least, to make a mockery of power shift. In all these departments, except the last one, Obasanjo has done splendidly well.

For the first time since the Shagari days, Nigeria now has a President whom no one can truthfully call a thief. This is no mean achievement. Obasanjo has wiped out the fuel queues. He has stabilized power supply, making it possible for many more people – artisans, service providers and factory owners alike – to power their equipment and earn a living. Of course, it is easy for people who have never had to work for a living to downplay this achievement. Obasanjo has put the GSM phone in every palm. Under Obasanjo, the middle class is gradually staging a comeback and civility is being restored to governance. Civil society has regained its voice.

At both the substantive and symbolic levels, Obasanjo has done well. His gestures in office are those of a confident southerner. Some people may not like

this but it has a way of reassuring many more others who have been excluded from power for too long. Obasanjo has restored the spiritual health of the country's citadel of power, the Presidential Villa. Aso Rock is no longer a Mecca for sundry spiritualists and Rasputin-like perverts. Again, this may not make some people happy, especially as English has now been restored as the *lingua franca* of the Presidential Villa.

Perhaps, the question to ask when people try to deny Obasanjo's achievements is this: what has Obasanjo not done? Simple: he has not allowed the same people who brought the country to its knees to do as they please. He has insisted on due process in governance and, especially, in contracting: due process is often seen as anathema by feudal lords. He has all but destroyed the patron-client system that had been at the core of federal governance for decades. He has empowered the Middle Belt to the annoyance of born-to-rule far northerners. He has refocused the national question in a way that makes the search for answers easier than before. Obasanjo has exposed the real enemies of Nigeria. That is enough crime to drive some people to want to get him out at all cost and by all means. And that is what is at the root of all the tension in the land.

The Obasanjo presidency is a watershed in the evolution of Nigeria as a viable nation state. Depending on how things go, the sky could be the limit for us, or we could come unstuck. In this regard, we need to sound a note of caution to the Igbo. Once again, it seems that the Igbo are setting themselves up as cannon fodder in the often-violent resolution of Nigeria's crisis of nationhood. People need to draw the correct lessons from the unravelling of the First and Second Republics and recall that every Igbo-Arewa gang-up to isolate the Yoruba has ended in fiasco for the country and, particularly, in grief for the Igbo. The best insurance the Igbo have in their quest for power is for someone to prove that power can be won and held not at the sufferance of some turbaned heads but by the will of the Nigerian people. Obasanjo is about to prove just that.

Ekwueme and the Arewa game plan

During the heyday of the Babangida transition, one of the big debating points was the intention of General Babangida vis-à-vis his own programme of handing over power to a civilian president. As early as 1989, discerning people within civil society and even amongst the military had suspected that the man, in spite (or because) of his flowery speeches, could have other intentions different from the ones he often advertised with the perennial *Insha Allah*. Soon, this unspoken aspect of the Babangida transition came to be known as the "hidden agenda". Speculations on this enigmatic aspect were to become the staple of many a political discourse, both informed and uninformed. Professors with whom president Babangida loved to adorn his entourage, casually dismissed the "hidden agenda" as a creation of an adversarial press that would not see anything good in any government. Which led this writer to suggest then that the hidden agenda was so open that you needed to be a professor not to have seen through it. Of course, it is now history how the Babangida agenda unravelled, at great cost to the country, with the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election and the crisis that followed that crime. One sees in the current quest for an Igbo presidency a replay of sorts of carefully simulated hidden agendas. It says a lot about the political astuteness of the Igbo, whose astuteness in the commercial realm is often held to be nonpareil. It used to be the case that the sole abiding tragedy of Igbo politics was the tendency that any Igboman who successfully pulls off a scam or imports a container-load of stockfish automatically starts to see himself as a leader of thought. Today, negative mercantilism of the parvenu is being compounded by loss of concentration by the otherwise enlightened. Every Igboman that is invited to present a paper at Arewa House or to shake hands with one or two Emirs automatically sees himself as the anointed presidential candidate for 2003. It is a monumental tragedy.

Like the earlier hidden agenda, the game plan of those now promising the Igbo presidency to all manner of people is so open that you need to be blinded

by something truly unspeakable not to see through it. Now they appear to have hoodwinked even the brightest and best of the Igbo.

After so much dilly-dallying, former Vice President Dr. Alex Ekwueme has finally thrown his hat into the ring of the 2003 presidential race. Ordinarily, this should have been a most welcome development, not least because Ekwueme's entry into the race would improve a field of contest that had become overcrowded with Lilliputians. But that is as far as it goes. The Ekwueme challenge is flawed and is bound to fail, not so much because of the calibre of the challenger but largely due to the fact that this challenger is not on top of the game.

It is instructive that Dr. Ekwueme chose Minna as the take-off point for his renewed bid for the presidency. It is an interesting choice that should tickle those in the business of decoding the complex body language of politicians.

The impression that is conveyed is that Ekwueme, the reluctant candidate, had to be summoned to Minna to give him sufficient backbone to mount a challenge. There is a telling irony here. Consider this:

In 1998, Minna journeyed down to Otta to court the Yoruba candidate in his own farmhouse. In 2002, the Igbo candidate journeys to Minna to receive his marching orders. Those who often wonder why the so-called northern power brokers respect the Yoruba political elite (even when they hate their guts) and show scant regard for their Igbo counterparts need not look any further for an apt metaphor. Have things really become this desperate for the Igbo?

What is the calculation of those who have now drafted Ekwueme? Clearly, they never intend that Ekwueme will go anywhere beyond the PDP primaries. For them, the sole utility of an Igbo candidate is to defeat Obasanjo at the primaries and pave the way for an Arewa son to emerge as the next president. It is the classic case of using the cat's paw to pull the chestnut out of the fire.

The scenario will unfold like this: Igbo ambition and Arewa disaffection with Obasanjo will find a convergence in Ekwueme the aspirant. On the strength of this convergence, Ekwueme goes ahead to defeat the President at the primaries and becomes the PDP flagbearer. With Obasanjo conveniently out of the way, a "strong" northern candidate emerges from one of the other parties. The Arewa vote is then mobilized behind the son-of-the-soil. The Yoruba are too angry to vote for Ekwueme and either boycott the presidential polls or support the northerner. The Middle Belt vote is split and the South-South is promised all manner of things under a northern President. The spectre of a Biafran becoming the Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian armed forces is then raised and northern mobs ensure that everyone gets the message. Power then simply returns to the north via the east. Those Igbo who doubt that this is the game plan need to ponder a few questions at this time: the people now promoting the emergence of an Igbo president failed to support Ekwueme in 1999, preferring instead to back Obasanjo. What has Ekwueme done to now make himself attractive to these same people? The answer to these questions

could be found in another question: What has Obasanjo now done to make himself unattractive to them?

It strikes me as too much of a coincidence that just as Ekwueme was declaring his bid in Minna, the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) was also issuing a statement that Vice President Atiku Abubakar now has the group's blessing to run for the presidency. The Arewa leaders have never made any pretence about their chief obsession, which is to get rid of Obasanjo and install one of their own as president. For now, there is no northern candidate strong enough to defeat Obasanjo at the PDP primaries and they know that once the President gets the PDP nomination, the battle is as good as over. So the thing to do is to find a southerner with sufficient stature to face Obasanjo at the primaries and possibly defeat him. Ekwueme presents such a possibility.

It may well be that the Igbo have their own game plan to counter the scenario painted above. I, for one, would indeed be very glad to be proved wrong when Dr. Alex Ekwueme or any other Igbo man is sworn in as president next year. But one's fear is that all this might just end up the same way as previous East-North permutations and lead the country once again into a cul-de-sac. A clever man, says a Jewish proverb, struggles his way out of trouble that a wise man would not have gotten into in the first place. Those who pride themselves as the Jews of Africa must know that in any search, the worst thing to lose is your thinking cap. No matter how badly the Igbo want the presidency, they cannot afford to lose their thinking cap in the quest for it.

Buhari and ANPP's gamble

High drama was enacted last week at the convention of the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP). And, many who watched the spectacle would have thought they were witnessing the death throes of a party that had all but made up its mind to self-destruct. For a moment I felt so too. I called up anyone I could to share my bewilderment at the free show that Nigeria's leading opposition party was offering anyone that cared to watch in full public glare and on prime time TV.

Upon further reflection, perhaps, things are not really what they seem at first impression. The reality may not tally with that initial flush of outrage at the brazenness on display at the ANPP presidential primaries, for what the ANPP is now doing seems to me like preparing for a war by digging trenches. In the face of a most formidable enemy, the party's ascendant Far North wing has chosen to dig in. It is a great gamble. Whether the trenches it is now digging will soon become its grave, as many fear (or hope, depending on where you stand) remains to be seen.

Sometime ago, at the weekly editorial conference here in the *Vanguard*, some of my colleagues regaled us with stories of how the ANPP was going to shed its northern image to become a truly national party, ready to take power from the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). How was this to be done? Simple, we were told: Anyim Pius Anyim would lead twenty-nine senators out of PDP and, pronto, ANPP will become the majority party. Of course, no such thing has happened, proving once again that gullibility is one of the cheapest commodities in Nigerian politics.

What has happened instead is that the ANPP has forcefully re-affirmed its credentials as a northern party. And it has done so with no apologies whatever to the aggrieved. But, rather than jump to hasty conclusions, its adoption (some would say, imposition) of General Muhammad Buhari will fatally injure ANPP's chances of winning the presidency.

* *Vanguard*, January 17, 2003

But, it would be wise to look beyond conventional wisdom in these matters. What is the arithmetic that ANPP has done that emboldens it to behave the way it is now doing! First, the party seems to have written off the Yoruba vote. Second, it seems to have come to the conclusion that the cost of its conduct at the convention vis-à-vis the Igbo vote may not be as dreadful as it seems at first. Third, it is going to contest every inch of the north in the assurance that, with a zealot like Buhari raising the Arewa banner, the balance could just tilt in its favour. What does this leave us with? An election that is likely to be decided by how the north and the southern minorities vote.

Concerning the Igbo vote, those claiming that their sensibilities were hurt by the manner of Buhari's emergency are, plainly speaking, political lightweight who had always had it coming. With more money than common sense, they failed to correctly read the mood of their northern allies vis-à-vis this "Operation Get Rid of Obasanjo". Intimations of this mood had emerged way back in May with a "position paper" authored by a certain professor from Bauchi. The paper called on the north to forget about fighting Obasanjo through a proxy in the 2003 elections, and urged northerners to close ranks to deliver a "consensus" candidate from amongst their own.

Now that the game is unfolding, with Ekwueme tricked and Ume-Ezeoke and company humiliated, some are saying the Southeast will not take insult lying low. The truth is they have taken worse insult before, which is why their "traditional allies" have always considered them easy to hurt and quite expendable. Is Chuba Okadigbo from the same Southeast not Buhari's running mate! And has this same Okadigbo, sounding more drunk than coherent, not told us that he is only following in the footsteps of the Great Zik by choosing to play second-fiddle?

Buhari may have an excess baggage of political liabilities, but his fortunes in the elections would be determined not so much by this baggage but by the daring and tenacity of his backers and the steadfastness and savvy of his opponents. Those who say that Buhari cannot be sold in the South do not know this country. Alhaji Shehu Shagari went from leading a Sharia boycott at the 1979 Constituent Assembly to becoming president barely a year later.

With regard to the northern vote, it is prudent to bear in mind the fact that Buhari represents many things to many people. Those who focus on his fault will lose sight of his larger utility to the regional agenda he personifies. Just as those who focus on President Obasanjo's idiosyncratic ways will miss what he really stands for in the president national equation.

All those who want a return to the old ways of doing things will vote Buhari, while those who think that Nigeria deserves better will vote Obasanjo. As things stand today, the two sides are almost equally matched and there can be no room for complacency in the President's camp. Such is the trauma that the country has been through; we are today a nation with an altered mind. A curious logic is at work here: those who led the country into the abyss are the ones now holding

themselves out as the country's saviours, telling us how Nigeria has not moved forward under Obasanjo but failing to tell us they are the ones pulling the country backwards.

Muhammad Buhari is too much a part of the problems of the past twenty years to offer any fresh hope on how to get us out of those problems. Problems such as a gaping sectarian divide (which he daily widens with his unguarded utterances), corruption (which his tenure at PTF fostered), and inter-ethnic disharmony (which he fuelled by telling his kinsmen that they can do as they please). Buhari is a vindictive, narrow-minded tyrant, who holds anyone whom does not speak the Hausa language in contempt. Even those that speak Hausa but are not Muslims he holds in contempt. And, then, those that are Muslims but do not come from his tiny corner of the country he also holds in contempt.

He is a presidential candidate whose admirers tout as Mr. Clean. But Buhari's Mr. Clean image makes sense only when juxtaposed with the two regimes that came immediately before and after his own – that is, the Second Republic and the Babangida administration – both eras characterized by legendary thievery.

And so the contest between Obasanjo and Buhari will be a contest between the repented and the unrepentant. The choice seems so clear, but this being Nigeria nothing can be taken for granted. In 1983, Buhari's first coming truncated Nigeria's last genuine effort in democratic governance. Who is to say what his second coming would do!

Rethinking power shift

Is President Olusegun Obasanjo serving the slot of the south or that of the South-West under the zoning arrangement now said to be in place? This could at first impression sound like a needless question. Yet, much of the "overheat" of the polity in the past year can be traced to this question and how the various segments of the political class have chosen to answer it. Indeed, this otherwise simple question has significant ramifications for our troubled polity.

A common thread runs through the current jockeying for power at the centre by the various ethnic blocs. This has to do with the arithmetic of anxiety about the implications of a renewed Obasanjo incumbency. This anxiety has two major strands, each defining the frame of mind of political elite in the key regions now seeking the presidency, that is, North-West and South-East.

For the North-West, the critical consideration is status anxiety. Regardless of what some people from that part of the country say about Obasanjo not having "performed", that really would not have mattered to them one bit if the man had remained beholden to his purported sponsors. And, it is not true anyway that the man has not "performed". Rather, what is true is that there is a deep-rooted desperation on the part of those who love to be called "northern power brokers". Their desperation is for a speedy return of the presidency into their hands before too many people imbibe the "dangerous" idea that one does not need to be anointed by them to become the president of Nigeria or to survive in office. An Obasanjo second term will demystify this breed. And there is a lot of anxiety about this eventuality that is now taking on the hue of inevitability.

For the South-East, the concern is to see a president emerge from Igboland as a supposed cure-all for an amalgam of perceived disabilities. But the legitimate desire for a president of Igbo origin cannot explain the current stridency of the quest. The clue is to be found in the argument of many among

the present crop of Igbo political elite that giving Obasanjo a second term would rob others in the South of their chance. When you hear people speak this way, you get the impression of a "now-or-never" mindset, as if Nigeria would have disappeared by 2007. What they fail to admit is that driving this desperation is what, for want of a better expression, we call here "generational anxiety". The simple truth is that some Igbo politicians fear they would either have died or become too old to take a shot at the presidency by the time Obasanjo serves out a second term. They could be right and I know of many people who actually hope they are.

From recent developments, it is obvious which of the two blocs is more serious about the race to unseat Obasanjo. Today, there are four notable Igbo "sons" vying for the presidency compared with just one Fulani from Kastina. You do not have to be an expert in rocket science to guess which side stands a better chance.

Once, again, we see a lot of dissimulation at play. For reasons that range from the mischievous to the plainly silly, many people have allowed themselves to be led into a state of anxiety about what President Obasanjo's re-election could mean for the aspirations of the South. In so doing, they merely play according to a script authored elsewhere.

One point needs to be made in this regard: After Obasanjo in 2007, the only ethnic bloc that is precluded from contesting the presidency is the Yoruba of the South-West. In the spirit of rotation and to further consolidate the idea of power shift, any of the five other geo-political zones can contest, but perhaps none would be more qualified to contest than the South-South and the South-East in that order. Rotation and power shift must be mutually reinforcing. In this regard, the operative geo-political categories should be the six zones recognized by the 1995 Constitutional Conference and not some nebulous areas called North and South. The name of the game after all is power rotation not swinging pendulum.

The subterfuge of presenting rotation as a pendulum has sent our compatriots from the South running in circles. Politicians from the South-East and the South-South seem to have allowed themselves to be stampeded and bamboozled into accepting the inevitability of a northern succession to Obasanjo. But there is no law on earth that says a northerner must succeed Obasanjo especially so soon after the previous 20 years of Shagari, Buhari, Babangida, Abacha and Abdulsalami – all northerners and all from the North-West.

Power shift and rotational presidency should be anchored on the six-zone structure and not on Lugard's two-Protectorate structure. The South-East and South-South should push this case and stop playing the politics of weakness that always sees the northern position as unassailable. Those who fool themselves about their chances must take a cue from the ANPP presidential primaries.

Thus, the surest guarantee for the emergence of a President of South-East or South-South origin is the consolidation of Obasanjo's reform agenda as it seeks to create a level playing field for everyone. It is for the southern power blocs to

see beyond their noses and stop being held hostage to the generational anxieties of sixty-somethings who cannot relate their ambitions to their people's well-being. Vice-president Atiku Abubakar already has a formidable head-start in the 2007 race, if he remains sensible. Anyone seeking to catch up with him must set to work without further delay and stop wasting precious time seeking to supplant Obasanjo.

Buhari's Easter message

Many of the national dailies last Tuesday carried reports of the letter written to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) by the ANPP President candidate, Major General Muhammadu Buhari. In the letter, Gen. Buhari was said to have called on INEC to shift the April 19 Presidential elections because that date falls within the Christian voters' Easter celebrations. My view is that politics certainly does some very strange things to people. But if it has to take politics for Buhari to acknowledge that Christians could indeed have rights worth defending, then we must thank God for little mercies, and accept this gesture of goodwill in good faith.

What Buhari presidency means*

As the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) formally flags off its presidential campaign tomorrow, this seems an appropriate time to take another look at the party and its candidate, Major General Muhammadu Buhari. The reasons for paying close attention to the party and its flag-bearer are obvious enough. ANPP is ranked number two among the country's thirty political parties. If it were to get its sums right, nothing stops it from becoming number one. In terms of national spread, if for every little else, the party is the leading contender for the power now being held by the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Concomitantly, the ANPP presidential candidate, who like the incumbent, is a former military head of state, is seen as the one most likely to give President Obasanjo a stiff competition at the April polls. Indeed, for the knowledgeable and the *hoi polloi* alike, the presidential race has already been narrowed down to an Obasanjo-Buhari square off, with the other candidates featuring as no more than also-rans or comic relief as the case may be.

Although the man has not done much yet by way of mounting the rostrum directly, the outlines of Buhari's campaign manifesto are clear enough as it is becoming crystal clear what the man intends to do with the power that he now seeks via the ANPP president ticket. The emerging temper of the Buhari campaign is a very churlish one indeed, not unlike the candidate himself. Its defining strategy is to deepen the country's division as a ploy for winning power. Why this should be considered a viable strategy for winning the presidency can only become evident in the fullness of time. But it is becoming increasingly clear that General Buhari has plans for Nigeria that can only bring the country to grief.

The Yoruba have a saying that the man who is accused of being a thief should not be found dancing with a baby goat. The logic being that the man could be tempted to do a disappearing act with the goat and thus confirm

* *Vanguard*, March 7, 2003

people's suspicions of him. Since he emerged as the ANPP candidate at the party's abracadabra convention, General Buhari has done everything possible to confirm the worst fear of everyone who thought his candidacy was bad news for the unity and progress of the country. At every turn, he has raised the stakes in a way that presents him as being an agent of malevolent vested interests, the interests desperate to visit chaos on the land by using his candidature as a major plank for starting another civil war. Intimations of this malevolence have been legion, but the clearest indication yet has come via the interview General Buhari granted the Voice of America Hausa service last week.

In the interview, Buhari reportedly called on politicians from the northern part of the country to mobilize against the national identity card scheme since, according to him, the scheme is nothing but a ploy to put the north at a disadvantage. Buhari revealed that he decided to sabotage the scheme during his earlier tenure as military head of state because he saw it as a means of marginalizing the northern part of the country by presenting it as having a low population. In his thinking, the identity card scheme would not only de-populate the north, it would also deny millions of northerners in the rural areas of their citizenship since many rural dwellers in the north do not understand its importance. Buhari then warned that if northern politicians do not oppose the scheme, they would have betrayed the confidence that their people reposed in them.

Three issues immediately arise from this thinly veiled attempt to blackmail northern politicians. First, that there is anxiety in the quarters that Buhari represents that the age-long phenomenon of inflated population figures in some part of the country is about to be exposed by the identity card scheme. Second, that Buhari thinks that the progress of the country, which the identity card represents, must be subjected to the irrationality of perpetuating the myth that some parts of the country have more population than logic or acute observation can sustain. Third, that Buhari believes the rural people of the north whom he says are ignorant do not deserve to be helped out of this ignorance through a policy that can only make their lives better.

It is noteworthy that the national identity card scheme was conceived twenty-four years ago with the primary aim of promoting development and security. People must be alarmed that a man like Buhari, who once ruled Nigeria, and who now wants to be president again, would take such a brazenly sectional stance by fostering divisions on a policy whose usefulness was so self-evident. But, this is really quite in character with Buhari. And this must make us ponder the implications of a Buhari presidency for the country.

In the Hegelian dialectic of thesis and anti-thesis, a Buhari presidency can only be the anti-thesis of President Obasanjo's reform agenda. We now have a presidential contest that pits a *reform agenda* against a *revenge agenda*; northern hawks are quick to dress Buhari up in the toga of a northern avenger of the perceived insolence and temerity of a president from the south who has dared to

attempt to create a level playing field for all Nigerians. In their view, this is an unpardonable crime as it runs against the grain of their conventional wisdom that all other Nigerians are not and must not be equal to them.

The upshot of this mindset is that a Buhari presidency will seek to restore the *status quo ante* by promoting the re-enslavement of those historically oppressed people that the Obasanjo regime has now given a voice, especially in the Middle Belt and the South-South zone. But such retrogression as Buhari seeks to foist on the land can only invite its own nemesis, as it is bound to be resisted with such determination that leads the country into war and disintegration.

Buhari is an unreconstructed fascist who seeks to impose a hegemonic theocracy on a secular republic. He is a self-proclaimed puritan who nonetheless has a knack for being associated with missing public monies. With his recent statements, Buhari has shown that he will be a sectional leader in the Abacha mould, and would not mind playing the regional or sectarian card to get power, even if it means taking the country to the precipice. The people he surrounds himself with these days already foster a sense of *deja vu* about the Abacha era – Jerry Useni, Bashir Magashi, Don Etiebet, Sule Hamma, Ali Modu Sheriff, Victor Malu and Attahiru Bafarawa, to mention a few.

In appraising Buhari, the symbolism of the Oputa Commission should not be lost on us. Out of power, Buhari has elected to show such disdain for due process, considering it as beneath him to appear before a duly constituted panel set up to promote national reconciliation. What will such a man do when he returns to power? In 1984, his revenge agenda was to jail people as a way of intimidating the country into quiescence about the NNPC's money that went missing while he presided over that agency. Twenty years later, his revenge agenda could be to stop people from raising questions about what happened to 25 billion naira while he was in charge at the PTF.

Neither IBB nor Atiku

Firstly, I must tender my most sincere apologies for the rather long absence of this column from these pages. No, I did not go on an elongated summer holiday. (Wish I could!) Nor was the break in transmission due to power failure, as they say on television in these parts.

The story is that since May, I have found myself drawn into the affairs of government in my home State, Ogun, working with the new administration of Governor Gbenga Daniel. And it has been such that in the first couple of months that the administration needed to settle down, keeping pace with the weekly regimen of column writing became a most impossible task. Sometimes, the work pace made it appear like twenty-four hours were not enough for all that needs to be done in one day. And even days just seemed to disappear too fast to get through the week's schedule. I have come away from this experience with a lot more respect for people like the late Chief Bola Ige, who was able to keep a column going while serving as a minister. Hopefully, one will be able to write the story of one's experience someday soon.

But one story that we can take on right away is this whole business of preparations for 2007. Not that this is the only newsworthy event of this loaded season. Far from it. Indeed, so much has happened in the past three months that you just simply wonder where you begin.

There was the fuel price hike and the ensuing riots, which got quite bloody. And there was the Ngige abduction saga, which bears the telltale template of an Igbo home video, complete with stark naked grown up men at the shrine, moneybag godfather, forged documents, and a lot of other untoward spectacles. It is still a running show. And, then, there is the depressing drama of the Bola Ige murder trial, which is also still a running show. The case is now before a fourth judge and Iyiola Omisore is back in detention. At another level, the

* *Vanguard*, August 15, 2003

composition of the federal cabinet neatly dovetailed into the entertaining fireworks of the Obasanjo-Soyinka exchanges. Some of the president's people have tried to draw a linkage between the two. Many wonder if one really exists.

On the foreign scene, Saddam Hussein's two sons, Uday and Qusay, whom the Americans labelled as the "twin-terrors of Iraq" were gunned down. And, then, suddenly the world seemed to be full of Siamese twins. A president was ousted in tiny Sao Tome and Principe. He was then reinstalled, all thanks to Nigerian muscle-flexing. Another African president eased out in Liberia, thanks again to Nigerian diplomacy. Charles Taylor has now found refuge in Calabar – to the consternation of many Nigerians. He has been heard to boast that he would soon return to power, taking care in the process to equate himself with Jesus Christ. It would be interesting to hear what Christian leaders think of this bit of sacrilege. On the Sao Tome coup, there is one bit of statistic that I found most fascinating: the entire armed forces of that country is said to equal the exact number of troops that AIG Raphael Ige led to abduct Governor Chris Ngige in Awka – 200 men in all! My proposal: the same men who abducted Ngige should be mobilized for action whenever it becomes necessary for us to send a peace-keeping force to Sao Tome and Principe.

But, back to the preparations for the 2007 presidential elections, which is now said to have shifted into high gear, with campaign offices springing up all over the place. All shades of political jobbers are now striving to outdo themselves in what is clearly a most lucrative venture. It is still a surprise to many how anyone can have the nerve to project so far ahead in a game as delicate and dodgy as Nigerian politics. But, maybe they know something we do not.

The speculated presidential bid of former military head of state, General Ibrahim Babangida, is of course, the *cause celebre* of the season. It has suddenly thrown a lifeline to many spent forces and political has-beens, as all manner of creatures now find in it an opportunity to lay claim to political relevance either by shouting vociferously against IBB or by loudly proclaiming their support for him.

Decibel levels have gotten quite high but sometimes the motives of proponents and opponents of the Babangida restoration coincide – people rail against the man in the hope that they are then favoured in the long queue of those to be "settled." In this notice-me game, one finds that elements of the Alliance for Democracy in the Southwest, who were routed in the last elections, seem to be doing very good business. There is talk of resurrecting NADECO. No one ever told us it died in the first place. And talking of talk, the former president's spokesman, Chief Duro Onabule, is back at his loquacious best. His principal is still keeping mum about the whole hullabaloo, but watch out for those packaged seminars and more appearances at out-of-the-way football matches.

Babangida's equally speculated main opponent is also busy planning a roll-out. Vice President Atiku Abubakar now seems intent on putting his semi-retirement during the second term to profitable use, having gotten his fingers badly burnt in the power games of the first term. The news is that his wife will soon be rolling out the campaign machinery. Hopefully, this roll-out will not take as long as Globacom's. Considering the amount of ill-will that the man has garnered in the past four years, however, it will take a miracle for Atiku to find his political feet again. And, as we once had cause to observe here, the record of Vice Presidents who have succeeded in becoming President is not very encouraging.

Yet, whatever becomes of the ambitions of these two men, the fact that their names are coming up for mention at all is a very sad commentary on our country, especially the state of our mental health as a people. Writing in *ThisDay* newspaper last Tuesday, my friend, Yusuph Olaniyonu, condemned the tendency for our politics to be reduced to permanent electioneering while no one bothers to scrutinize the incumbents. Bad enough as that is, I would add that the quality of politicians doing the "permanent electioneering" should bother us even more.

It cannot be the case that Nigeria is condemned to a self-perpetuating merry-go-round of recycling past uniformed men – be it the uniform of the army or that of the customs service. It cannot also be that all you need to qualify to be President of Nigeria is that you must have a lot of money of suspect provenance, as we are told that Babangida and Atiku have.

The Military

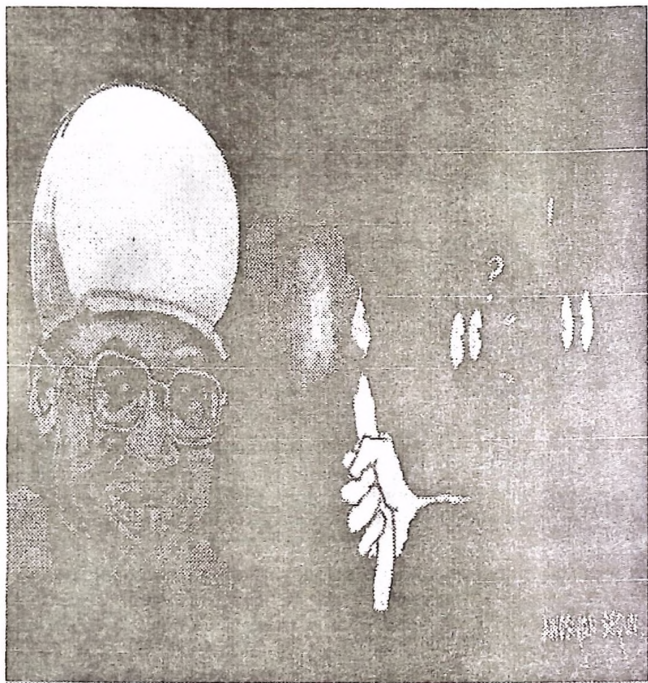
In The Spiritual Realm...



INSIDE SEAN







Diya's new song*

As the Diya family gets ready to celebrate a most appropriate thanksgiving tomorrow, it is fitting to highlight some useful lessons from the recent experience of the clan's most famous member. This is advisable lest the true message of the occasion be lost in the din of merriment. For if the General's narrow escape calls for jubilation, the trajectory of his travails provides not a few reasons for sober reflection.

General Oladipo Diya was the archetypal southern military officer who lost his way in the dense jungle of Nigerian politics. He had several fellow travellers on that route – those who got so carried away by the Nigerian idea that they started playing games with their roots. Which is why it is comforting to learn that Diya has finally come round to the wisdom of joining other patriots to work towards convening the Sovereign National Conference as basis for restructuring our troubled federation. This has not always been his position. But one might not get that impression reading through the interview he granted in last week's edition of *Tell* magazine.

In the interview, the General sought to build around himself a cult of victimhood that neither stands up to scrutiny nor tallies with the records. He laboured to explain his role in the Abacha junta and the frightfully sorry pass in which he later found himself as he trod the tragic road to powerlessness. One got the distinct impression that the man has yet to come to terms with some home truth about Nigeria. Hopefully, he may yet discover the true meaning of his own near-elimination as the full significance of what he went through imprints itself on his consciousness.

The way I felt after reading the Diya interview was the same way I felt after reading Professor Omo Omoruyi's account of the annulment sometime last year. In each instance, I was torn between pity and outrage – pity because what they both obviously felt when the truth dawned on them was genuine pain; and outrage because one felt they had been around long enough to have known

* *Vanguard*, October 8, 1999

better. In each case it amazed me the consistency and ease with which otherwise bright southerners have been duped by their northern "friends" in the game of politics.

Concerning the Omoruyi case, many Nigerians had sensed by the end of 1989 that the Babangida transition was designed to fail. How it was going to fail they didn't know, but the coinage "hidden agenda" had gained currency even before Gideon Orkar made allusion to it in his coup day proclamation. Like someone used to joke, "the hidden agenda was so open that you needed to have been a professor not to see through it." And Babangida did have those professors aplenty: many of them, admittedly, one's mentors and teachers and role models.

I had a few problems with General Diya's reconstruction of some events that took place during the Abacha era. To him, Abacha only turned bad after he had been annoyed by Yoruba leaders. That is not exactly true. Abacha played his hand quite openly very early into his tenure but got away with it because he read everyone of us (his colleagues and kinsmen in particular) correctly as a people disinclined to face hard choices. Abacha knew that while he consolidated power, Diya could be kept busy with chasing the shadow of "creating an alternative Yoruba leadership" or reduced to such weighty matters as struggling for office space with Lawan Gwadabe!

Abacha exhibited his faithlessness right from the very first words he publicly uttered after the coup that brought him to power. On November 18, 1993, he read his maiden speech as head of state. It was a markedly different script from the one he and Diya had laboured, all night we're told, to put together. I'm not sure if the No.2 picked up the issue with his boss, but it was an instructive take-off for a presidency that was to be signposted by sundry act of brazenness and disregard for those it used to get into office.

In virtually all the schemes Abacha contrived to manipulate himself into office and to stay put, Diya was a recurring presence – be it as a willing accomplice, a reluctant tag-along or as a schemer in his own right. On very rare occasions was he merely an innocent bystander. Two examples are particularly revealing here. The first was that famous pro-democracy speech by Abacha in those heady post-annulment days on the platform of the War College where Diya was then Commandant. The second concerns the politics of the UNCP, the leading party in the Abacha transition

General Diya would have us believe that it was NADECO's ultimatum that turned Abacha into a monster. That, if you'll excuse my language, is utter rubbish. He tells us that each time Alex Ibru entered Abacha's office, Abacha shivered. That may or may not be true. But can anyone forget how Abacha used to curtsy so low to Sultan Dasuki? Diya tells us that it was hard for him to believe that northern officers playing agent provocateur in a simulated coup plot could be carrying tape recorders on their persons as they sought to draw out an unwary southern collaborator. Where was he when General Salihu Ibrahim declared that the Nigeria Army had become an army of "anything is possible"?

Diya reminisces about his course mates who fell in the civil war and hinges his faith in Nigeria on the need to ensure that their sacrifice was not in vain. I think it is high time southern officers reconciled themselves to the possibility that all the people who fought in the Civil War may not have fought it for the same purpose.

I believe General Diya was involved in a coup plot. I also believe that it was a patriotic duty for anyone to have tried to remove Abacha who was then leading the country on a roller-coaster to ruin. Indeed, I liken Diya's involvement to the 1944 plot by the German General Staff to remove Adolf Hitler at Wolfshannze. I am not sure, though, that all of this entitles the man and his fellow travellers to a pardon. Granting a pardon might set a bad precedent and in fact trigger a rash of convenient interpretations of what constitutes a patriotic duty once an ambitious fellow gets itchy about grabbing power. Perhaps a reopening of the case is all that Diya and co. can hope to achieve, to ensure that none of the other plotters now roaming free escapes unscathed.

After all said and done, it is good to see General Diya live to tell his tale upon his return, as it were, from the land of the dead. As we look out for his memoirs, I wish him all the best.

Mohammed Abacha's rosary*

I don't know about you, but for me the most poignant image from the celebrated court appearance of penultimate Thursday was not Al-Mustapha's beard or Shofolahan's shifty eyes or even Rabo Lawal's burly frame, it was the image of Mohammed Abacha forlornly caressing his prayer rosary and muttering some inaudible things. As I sat somewhere in the Niger Delta last weekend, kept indoors by a curfew clamped on a tense locality that remains a sad reminder of his father's devious reign, I watched footage from the arraignment on TV. My immediate reaction was to hope that the young man was not trying to cast a spell on the honourable court. Which wouldn't be far-fetched considering the dubiously creative things his late father was said to have done with sundry mediums and marabouts. But then my host reassured me that the fellow might indeed have been praying for a reprieve.

Seriously speaking, if anyone amongst the accused persons needs prayers, that person is Mohammed Abacha. And the reason is quite simple. Amongst the ill-starred cast now facing trial for heinous offences (Mr. President's word, not mine) committed during the regime of General Sani Abacha, Mohammed is perhaps, the only person who can not provide any plausible or justifiable explanation for having been found anywhere near the scene of crime.

In some quarters conventional wisdom holds that Al-Mustapha and the others, including the ubiquitous "Sergeant Rogers" might yet get away with something lower than a capital sentence. On one condition: If they can convincingly argue the case that they were merely obeying lawful orders in doing all that they are alleged to have done. I know a lot of people who are also caressing their rosaries in fervent prayer that such conventional wisdom would be proved wrong this time around. But, at least, this conventional wisdom and not a little legalistic mumbo jumbo implies that there could still be some hope for the "public officers" amongst the accused.

* Vanguard October 22, 1999

Mohammed Abacha does not have the benefit of such a loophole. If he could claim to have been obeying any instructions in doing the things he is alleged to have done, *those instructions were purely private with not a chance in hell of being construed as public service. Plain, and simple, the alleged crimes of Mohammed Abacha must have been committed solely for personal aggrandizement and to keep the loot in the family.*

Two issues are worth highlighting here. One relates to the intensely personalized mercantilism of the Abacha presidency and the other has to do with what that approach to governance eventually did to the Abacha children. Both are interwoven, especially as Abacha was, in spite of being the rumoured companion of countless whores, the husband of one wife and a man who in his own way appeared to have doted on his children.

Emerging evidence would seem to suggest that Mohammed Abacha was not averse to deploying extreme viciousness in the defence of what he saw as his family's throne. A true son of his father, he seemed to have had a commercial instinct that was permanently on overdrive. For him, the bottom line was just that, the bottom line – money. It says a lot for the quality of the minds that held Nigeria hostage from 1993 to 1998 that power was a phenomenon that could only be denominated in cash.

Abacha's sole driving passion in power seemed to have been to become the richest Nigerian ever or better still, the only Nigerian with any money at all. That mindset was indeed, a throwback to the Dark Ages which was probably where he belonged.

With such a mercantilist orientation to power, it was little wonder that the Abacha children viewed any attempt at threatening their father's tenancy at the Presidential Villa as a crime akin to trying to take away the family heirloom. Such attempts were then to be met with the most robust reprisal including the liberal application of vicious treatment on the general's numerous captives.

One of the more worrisome things that are likely to emerge from a thorough audit of the Abacha years is the extent of damage the inflicted on his own children. He literarily deprived those kids of a normal childhood exposing them so early in life to the power of money.

The streets of Abuja are littered with hard luck stories of your professionals terrorized out of their share in business bargain by the Abacha kids and their goons. As for older businessmen who had cause to visit the Abacha household to negotiate contracts with the late dictator, the common refrain that virtually become a password was "have you seen the children". That was said to be the general's favourite line, which the potential contractor must decode as appropriate if he knew what is good for him.

Of course, it is too early yet to put judgement on the young Abacha who may after all, have been wrongly accused, but I think it speaks volumes that his mother is going about protesting his innocence in one breath while asking that he be granted pardon in another breath. Concerning Mrs. Abacha's statement in

that regard. I have nothing to add to or subtract from what Hajjiya Binta Yar'Adua was claimed to have said earlier in the week. But I think somebody should please spare us this whole sickening campaign against the death penalty. Coming at a time like this, such a campaign sounds suspicious and sponsored. Trite as it might sound. I think the law should be allowed to make its course.

And so we await the next adjourned date, which interestingly falls on the anniversary of General's takeover six years ago. The Abacha's family may need to mobilize all the rosaries in this world to be able to meet November 17 in the same grand style they have been used to celebrating that date in the past few years.

Was Abacha an aberration?*

We keep returning to the theme of Sani Abacha, the infantry general whose turbulent tenure will for a long time remain a reference point for ill in our country's annals.

Our preoccupation with the Abacha phenomenon and the era it defined is at once a matter of self-audit and an exercise in further understanding of the society in which one belongs. As gory revelations cascade upon bizarre testimonies from that infamous era, enlightened self-interest should lead us to wonder how such a creature emerged from our midst. What does that say about us? Does it say something more about us than it does say about him? Or, vice versa? Above all, is it possible that such a plague could ever be visited upon the land again?

The impetus for writing on this issue derives mainly from the two divergent schools of thought that seem to crystallize around the question of how to understand the Abacha era. Over the past fortnight, the two schools have found expression in the pronouncements of two eminent Nigerians, each of whom was in his own way a victim of Abacha era of atrocities. One is the incumbent President, General Olusegun Obasanjo, at once Abacha's predecessor and successor. The other is the Nobel laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka.

In an interview he granted to *Tell* magazine of November 8, President Obasanjo was asked how the Nigerian military could have produced an Abacha. His response to that question was "Abacha was an aberration in the army". In making this claim, Mr. President employed the analogy of Jesus Christ and the twelve disciples, and how one of the twelve, Judas, played the betrayer. Abacha, he declared, was the product of a selection error.

This reading of Abacha's emergence would seem to contrast sharply with the position canvassed by Professor Soyinka in an address he presented in New York on the occasion of the relocation of Radio Kudirat, the clandestine

* *Vanguard* November 19, 1999

mouthpiece of the Nigerian opposition during the Abacha era. A part of that statement merits reproducing here, verbatim:

For every uniformed individual that ground society under his heels, there were at least a hundred eager servitors who collaborated and profited, whose notion of a national agenda dovetailed neatly with the predatory mission of the military. And not merely individuals but groups, powerful, organized groups, whose obsession with a privileged control of the fortunes of the nation both directly and indirectly made the incursion of Sani Abacha on the national scene possible, and nurtured his regime.

Which of the two schools of thought one subscribes to is a really a matter of how one answers a simple question: was the Abacha era merely an episode that came upon us by sheer happenstance or was it part of a process that had been long in the making?

I think for many of our countrymen, as for Mr. President, the answer would be that the Abacha era was merely a fluke, just as the man himself was an anomaly. That would be a convenient answer because to think otherwise would be to raise very inconvenient questions about ourselves. Denial is ingrained in the human nature as a defence mechanism against uncomfortable truths.

The yogi looked in the mirror, saw the commissar and promptly smashed the mirror. Thus Arthur Koestler, author of the 1945 essay, "The Yogi and the Commissar". In the lore of the early Soviet era, no two character types could have been more diametrically opposed than those of the yogi and the commissar. The one was ascetic and humane; the other, worldly and brutal. One was given to intellectual pursuits; the other was by definition a philistine. The yogi was forever seeking to elevate the soul through meditation, the commissar was essentially a soulless creature of appetite, a party whip and military enforcer rolled into one.

Koestler's allusion to the smashing of a mirror that bore an offensive image speaks eloquently to the way man is often at pains to distance himself from the darker aspects of his being: as with individuals, so with nations. In a sense, therefore, the imagery of the yogi and the commissar bears a powerful message for us as we seek to grapple with the benumbingly evil revelations from the Abacha era.

We have two significant examples to draw from with regard to how other nations that were similarly afflicted by evil regimes sought to exorcise the past. One was Germany after Adolf Hitler, the other the Soviet Union after Joseph Stalin. From both experiences we learn that the first step towards exorcising and transcending an evil era is to fully understand how what happened came to happen.

For Germans and Soviet citizens, as for the world at large, it mattered that we know how in each case one man's obsession became a nation's tragedy. Or, how do you exorcise an evil that you do not fully understand?

It was to this end, and with particular reference to the Nazi era, that Theodor Adorno propounded the theory of the "authoritarian personality" in his work of the same title. His thesis was that there must have been something in the German personality that predisposed a people who were then touted as the most cultured nation in Europe to fall under the heels of a common corporal.

With regard to the Soviet Union, Harvard Professor Adam B. Ulam in his book, *Stalin The Man and His Era*, sought to debunk the whole notion of the "cult of personaiity". In his words, this was "a skilful slogan intended to convey what went wrong" under Stalin. For Ulam, Stalin, "operated as a conspirator throughout much of his life, even when he was a dictator."

Does that have a familiar ring? Colonel Lawan Gwadabe it was who in one of his prison notes described Abacha as a permanent conspirator. And surely, for every conspirator there must be collaborators. Which then leads us to ask the inevitable questions: Was there something in the Nigerian character that made the emergence of an Abacha inevitable? Was he one of us or was he not? If he was, what does that say about us? And, if he was not, how did such an outsider come to attain such a pedestal from which he inflicted so much damage?

The answers would probably become clearer as we obtain a full rendering of accounts and when that ever comes. But, while we are at it, we should pay heed to Soyinka's warning that "the factors that make the Sani Abacha of our world possible have not disappeared." And these factors would include both "selection errors" and "eager collaborators". Or, what do you think?

Remembering Orkar coup*

It is often said that many Americans who lived through November 22 1963 remember almost to the last detail what they were doing when they heard the news that President John F. Kennedy had been shot. Indeed, that event is such an important landmark in American history that the myth and the reality of the date have almost become interchangeable in the consciousness of most people. A not inconsiderable industry has grown around the commemoration of the date as the Kennedy mystique continues to capture the imagination of people across the world. Even now, many still ponder the true meaning of that assassination, especially as a conclusive finding remains elusive.

To the extent that there has been an event of similar dramatic impact in Nigeria, I think it was the uprising of Sunday April 22 1990, otherwise called the Orkar Coup. On the tenth anniversary of that fateful event and I remember quite vividly what the day of the Orkar coup was like.

I lived then in one of those cute bungalows around the upper reaches of Festac Town in Lagos. Sparsely furnished as became the abode of a journalist, it was nonetheless a dream bachelor pad with its own frontage that had an almond tree for shade. It was a house that friends loved to visit, each in pursuit of a variety of agenda. There had been quite a few visitors the night before and it was already the wee hours when the last guests left. Which was how come I slept quite late.

That morning, I had woken with a start to bangs on the gate from my neighbour, Mr. Uzonwanne. A coup had been announced, he shouted, and everywhere was upside-down, to use his exact words. Everybody thought the journalist on the street should have an angle on what was going on, so he felt he should let me know that my attention was needed. The excitable sort that he was, I was disinclined to taking him seriously at first until I then heard the announcement myself.

* *Vanguard* April 21, 2000

From the tone of the radio address read by Major Gideon Orkar, it was obvious that this was no ordinary coup. The venom in the speech virtually filled the room, the anger was palpable. It was the first coup to openly declare an interest in the wholesale re-constitution of the territory of Nigeria. (The makers of the revenge coup of July 29 1966, we are told, also had similar plans, but at least they never had the opportunity to verbalise that desire on the airwaves). Coups in Nigeria are traditionally staged to take over the apparatus of state and to redefine its personnel profile. The Orkar coup was different, and to that extent one may have to agree with recent returnee, Colonel Tony Nyiam, that theirs was not a coup but an uprising. He should know.

Anyway, my first instinct on getting out of the house that morning was to get a feel of the neighbourhood. My initial impressions were not too encouraging. One felt particularly worried by the feelers that were then emerging as to how people might react to Major Orkar's declaration that five states had been excised from the Republic. Festac Town is a federal government estate with a healthy mix of people from various parts of the country. Yet, what one was able to gather in those first few tense hours after the coup announcement was that with only a nudge either way, things could get really dicey.

With this at the back of my mind, I then decided to look up Abubakar Yusuf, my friend and ex-colleague at *Vanguard* whose home state, Kano, was one of the five that the coup sought to de-link from Nigeria. He had been part of the crowd in my house the night before and one felt that it would not be out of place to see how he was taking the news. He took the news quite well even though he could not completely conceal his nervousness. He told me the coup would fail, a statement that struck me as being more an expression of hope than an informed prognosis on the situation at hand. As he spoke, one of his neighbours volunteered he had just returned from mass at the Catholic Church on 22 Road where the service had to be cut short due to exchanges of gunfire at the telephone exchange next door. This added to the general apprehension and we decided to venture out to see things for ourselves.

We did not get too far. In fact, we could not go beyond the Festac first gate where we witnessed hot exchanges of gunfire between the loyalists and the coupists. Obviously, the coup had at that time degenerated into street fights. And once we realized then that Festac Town lay smack in the middle of the approaches to two or more military formations – the Ojo Cantonment and the Signals Command, away we beat a retreat back home to monitor developments from safe confines. And that was how we learnt that the coup had been crushed.

Ten years after the Orkar coup is a good time to reflect on the events of that day. Many who were convinced then that some of the far-reaching pronouncements of the coup were ill-advised have had cause to rethink and, perhaps, regret that position. What with benefit of the hindsight provided by the events of 1993–98 and the continuing crisis of nationhood? A former federal permanent secretary from Adamawa State once said that one of the saddest days

in his life was the day some former southern colleagues told him that the only thing wrong with the Orkar coup was that it did not succeed. He said he was particularly worried by this line of argument because these were colleagues with whom he put in so much energy to sustain the cause during the Civil War.

Nigeria survived the Orkar coup. But from indications, we thereafter spent the whole 1990s trying to prove the coup's pronouncements right. And we seem bent on starting out another decade on the same note. *As we ponder the true meaning of the events of that day, perhaps we also need to wonder as to what really was the tragedy of April 22, 1990 – the fact that the coup took place or the fact that it failed?*

Omo Omoruyi's book

One morning in the early days of the Abacha regime, I was at breakfast with the late Dr. Adesina Sambo in the restaurant of the Abuja Sheraton when a retired military officer of my acquaintance joined our table. For me, the encounter was remarkable given the antecedents of the two men who sat facing each other that morning. The officer was reputed to be one of the hardliners behind the annulment of the June 12 1993 presidential elections, a role from which he eventually profited very little. Dr. Sambo was, on his own part, the head of the Nigerian Election Monitoring Group (NEMG), the body whose largely understated exertions contributed in no small measure towards making June 12 the phenomenon it was to become. If both men knew each other, it could only have been by reputation and I did not reckon that a detailed introduction, especially of Dr. Sambo, would have been auspicious in the circumstance.

The officer had lost his commission in the turbulent aftermath of the annulment and was obviously still smarting from the fact that he was unable to reap where he thought he had sowed. Not that one could have in any way been sympathetic to his plight, if that indeed was what it was. But courtesy, at least, demanded that one asked after his welfare. I naturally inquired as to his mission in Abuja, a town that for him would rightly have been considered dangerous territory at that point, given that there was said to be no love lost between him and General Abacha. The conversation then inevitably veered into the gathering momentum for the re-validation of June 12. At the mention of that topic, the officer's countenance changed and I cannot forget what he said that morning, or the virulence with which he said it: "June 12 would have been a buried issue," he said "if Omoruyi and his people had not chosen to internationalize it by inviting those foreign observers."

* *Vanguard*, August 4, 2000

Seeing the way he had gotten so worked up on the issue, it became even more advisable that one dared not reveal to him at that point that seated right across the table from him was Omoruyi's right-hand man, the head of the group responsible for bringing in those observers. We soon left the man to take out his anger on his breakfast, but as we made our way out, Dr. Sambo posed what was obviously a rhetorical question: "You see why Prof. is not likely to be returning home anytime soon?"

The Professor in question was, of course, no other than Professor Omo Omoruyi, founding director-general of the now defunct Centre for Democratic Studies (CDS), the intellectual powerhouse of the Babangida transition. Sambo had worked with Omoruyi at the CDS as a director in the director-general's office and it was in that capacity that he ran the affairs of NEMG. Significantly, at the time of the encounter related above, Omoruyi had just been flown out of the country for urgent medical treatment abroad in the wake of a near-fatal gun attack on him in Benin City by yet unknown persons.

One recalls the breakfast encounter on the occasion of the launch of Professor Omoruyi's book on June 12, both in thanksgiving and in regret. Thanksgiving to the Almighty God for sparing the life of Professor Omoruyi to, literally, live to tell the tale of, perhaps, the most dangerous period in our country's political history. And, regret not just for the fact that Adesina Sambo is no more with us to share in this moment, but also because the fall-outs of the annulment still dog our every step on the chequered journey to national rebirth. There is hardly any crisis in the land today that does not have its roots in the annulment. Yet, there was no inevitability to that event.

The election of Chief Moshood Abiola as President of Nigeria was to have been the single most significant affirmation of the irrevocability of our nation's unity. The annulment of that watershed election, adjudged by local and international observers as the freest and fairest in our country's history signalled, to all purposes and intents, the death of the Nigerian nation-building project. In a lot of ways, all that has been happening since June 23 1993, the day the annulment was pronounced, have been motions for a befitting burial. Can Nigeria be raised from the dead? I think, yes, but only if we first acknowledge that a murder was committed in the first place with the act of the annulment. Those involved in the crime must show contriteness, confess and seek forgiveness from the nation.

Professor Omoruyi's account is unique for the fact that it can claim to be truly authoritative, given the man's centrality in the drama he narrates. Regarding the extent of Omoruyi's access to and influence with General Babangida, there can be no doubt. In the cut-throat milieu of the Babangida presidency, he enjoyed a very special place as the president's father confessor and sounding board. A newspaper editor called last week to find out if it was true that Professor Omoruyi would not be attending the launch of his book because there might still be a price on his head. I told him I was not in a position

to state categorically that there was, indeed, a price on the man's head. All that one can say with some certainty is that the man definitely knew too much than was good for his health of a period that many powerful forces – not all of them in military uniform – would prefer that we knew very little or nothing at all.

Like a classical tragedy, all the fates played their part in the making of the annulment. But, if anyone other than the chief culprits can bring together a near-authentic account of the June 12 debacle, that person is Omo Omoruyi. That he has chosen to do so, even while admitting to his role in the nasty events of that period, should be regarded as a major contribution to the process of national healing. People in the know must come clean on June 12. That is the only way that the ghost of that tragedy can be exorcised, while its spirit is used to breathe new life into a nation that seems to have lost its will to live.

Babangida: a tragic hero*

One of the big business names in Lagos once told the story of how he got his finger badly burnt because he took-ex-President Ibrahim Babangida for his word. What happened was that based on personal assurances from the President on his government's seriousness in promoting local sourcing of raw materials and food items, the man had invested heavily in starting a food processing facility. He borrowed heavily to put a huge acreage of land under cultivation, install equipment and bring in very expensive technical expertise to manage the project. However, just as his investment matured and the time for the first production neared, government gave out a licence for the importation of tons and tons of same commodity he was to start producing in a few months time. Before he knew what was happening, the local market had been flooded with a cheap imported brand of the product. What pained the man most was that while the rumour made the rounds that government was about to reverse itself, his friend the President still assured him at two separate meetings, that nothing was amiss. The import license, he later learnt, went to a member of one of the well-connected business families in Zaria to whom the President had also given his word even while still reassuring the hapless fellow. Today, all that our man has to show for his labours are court notices from his creditors, a gaping hole into which millions of dollars had disappeared and a business reputation in tatters. The man has still not gotten over the shock.

Nor has Nigeria, the country that Babangida took through a rigmarole that cost so much in time and money, devalued every aspect of life, only to end up nearly leading us into war.

Between 1985 and 1993 Nigeria was ruled (engineered?) by a man who was obviously quite smart but not very wise, who enjoyed a surfeit of goodwill, but who is apparently not destined for true greatness or glory. Today, this man continues to grapple with his baleful legacy. Sometime last week, he and some

* *Vanguard*, October 20, 2000

of his unreconstructed cronies were at a symposium in Jos seeking to dress up what is so obviously a ruinous legacy.

Still, the man must be credited with making an effort to elevate the discourse. Hear him: "In the final analysis, it must be acknowledged that part of the essential outcome of our approach and our method is that Nigeria has changed irrevocably, perhaps beyond recognition. We now know and appreciate our problems more clearly. The stark realities of our nationhood, its strengths and its weaknesses, are now clear to us in the horizon in their true and natural colours."

Babangida knows how right he is that "Nigeria has changed irrevocably", although I doubt if the direction of the change is one that he would love to claim credit for. As ethnic militias take over the country and the streets become killing fields, no one can doubt that we have indeed changed for the worse.

On the strength of bold new initiatives alone, Babangida qualifies for greatness. But what did he then do with those initiatives? Babangida was a leader who has an uncanny knack for subverting every initiative that he took that could have earned him a good mention in the history books. From the abolition of import licensing to the abrogation of Decree 4, from MAMSER to ECOMOG, from the two-party system to the open ballot, the pattern repeated itself with amazing regularity. The annulment was only the final and most cataclysmic in a long chain of betrayals.

What explains this capacity to wilfully self-destruct to almost epic proportions? Babangida anchors the *raison d'être* of his entire stewardship on the engineering paradigm. "I never wished to rule Nigeria and I never did," he says, "my goal was to engineer it." Even if we were to engage him strictly within an engineering framework, many questions still arise. Was the failure of the Babangida project a design problem or a construction problem, or was the problem with finishing? Could it be that the engineering framework was simply inapplicable to the project?

I would hazard a guess that for a clue into the Babangida tragedy, look not to engineering but to metaphysics and psychoanalysis. This is essentially because the Babangida presidency was one in which the personality defined (and sometimes defied) the institution.

Two passions appeared to have driven the man that many people fondly call IBB. One was an all-consuming need to be fully accepted as a true son of the north. The other was a determination to ensure that certain aspects of his life that could not bear scrutiny ever come to light.

Both speak to a monumental insecurity that manifested as policy flip-flops and failures of historic proportions occurring at critical points in his political career. Babangida is a deeply insecure and vulnerable historical figure who never rose beyond both the conditions of his origins and the circumstances of his emergence into power. Only he knows what these conditions and circumstances are. The contradictions that seem to define his life can only be emblematic of a

deeper inner one. Those who know him intimately (or think they do) often speak of how solicitous he could be of his friends. Yet others speak of the dispatch with which he sacrificed people close to him. To stand one of the more oft-quoted verses of the Bible on its head, "Better self-love hath no man than his, that he should sacrifice his friends for his own life."

The point here is not that Babangida is more sinned against than sinning, or vice versa, it is not even that he should be excused because he ruled a complex country. He was part of that complexity. The simple truth is that he had ample opportunity for a place in history but failed to seize it. He struggles in vain to regain that opportunity.

In the *Iliad*, Homer writes of how the boy king Demophoon lost a chance to receive a gift of immortality and become a god. His anxious mother had stopped his governess, Demeter, herself a goddess, from fully subjecting the boy to the rigours that were required to translate a mere mortal into immortality. Maybe IBB's handlers need to probe deeper into the Homeric legends for a clue into how their ward lost the immortality that history could have conferred?

An evening with Paul Okuntimo*

One day in mid-August 1998, I sat next to Colonel Paul Okuntimo. The venue was the Cape Sierra Hotel in Freetown in the suite of late General Maxwell Khobe, the gallant Nigerian officer who became a hero of the Sierra Leone war. I doubt that my mother would be pleased to learn that her son was once in such close proximity to a man who boasts of knowing 204 ways to murder a person. But, whatever untoward spirits hovered in the vicinity on account of Okuntimo's presence seemed to have been tempered by the goodness of our chief host, General Khobe and others in the room, including the lively Brigadier-General Abu Ahmadu, then ECOMOG Chief of Staff, Chief Segun Olusola, Nigeria's former Ambassador to Ethiopia, and a sprinkling of Nigerian businessmen and soldiers.

We had arrived Freetown that day at the beginning of a mission to promote the involvement of Nigerian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the peace process that was then underway in Sierra Leone. In spite of continuing hostilities, there was at the time justifiable reason to entertain optimism on the prospects for peace in that war-torn country. The ousted democratic government of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah had just been restored by ECOMOG troops led by General Khobe. The usurping junta of Johnny Paul Kuroma had fled into the bush. A fresh breeze of freedom blew over Freetown. And many people rightly hailed Nigeria as the harbinger of these happy developments. *Apropos* of which General Khobe had emerged as Chief of Defence Staff, a foremost protector of Sierra Leone's fragile peace and guarantor of its frail democratic order.

The thinking, which was then shared by many international organizations in Freetown, was that having made great sacrifices towards restoring normalcy, Nigeria should play a leading role in managing the peace. As an officer in one of the UN agencies told us, it is not okay that so much Nigerian blood should be shed in the battlefields of Sierra Leone only for the peace dividend to be appropriated by white people running around Freetown in jeeps, claiming to be doing good. This school of thought argued that the process of rebuilding both

* *Vanguard*, February 2, 2001

commercial life and civil society in Sierra Leone should have a large Nigerian input. It was a school of thought that General Khobe enthusiastically subscribed to, although I doubt that he received the kind of political backing that the idea needed and deserved from his superiors back home.

Anyway, there we were trying to grapple with the issue of how best to get Nigerian NGOs actively engaged in the Sierra Leonean reconstruction and reconciliation process. The Defence Ministry in Lagos had been gracious enough to give us impeccable referrals that worked wonders all the way to the topmost echelons of the ECOMOG high command. Word soon spread on our mission and General Khobe had insisted on hosting us on our first evening in Freetown. Speaking to Khobe on our mission was like preaching to the converted. It was a very lively and enlightening conversation that we had that evening, with many lamenting how Nigeria always seemed to end up with a bad name everywhere she had helped people with their struggles. Constant reference was made to Zimbabwe and how all our sacrifice there got us nothing but hostility.

It was generally agreed that unless we sought creative approaches to consolidating the memories of Nigeria's military contribution in Sierra Leone, things might turn out the same way. In between bites and gulps, everyone chipped in on what needed to be done. Everyone that is, except Paul Okuntimo. My skin had crawled when he first came into the room and I espied the imprint on his nametag. I simply refused to believe my eyes until he was introduced by the same name. Matters were not helped by the fact that he then proceeded to serve the drinks while a junior officer helped with the food. Accepting a drink from Okuntimo was not one of the things I thought I'd be doing in Freetown – or anywhere else for that matter! My unease was further heightened when I noticed that he was the only one in the room not drinking anything stronger than a soda. But having gotten over the initial shock, I then found a way to change my sitting position to get a full view of the man. What I saw were shifty eyes, at that time not yet hidden behind designer glasses, and a sullen, withdrawn look. The man seemed to have no interest in what we were talking about. But, he was quite prompt at replacing the drinks whenever the need arose.

I had once read what Ken Saro-Wiwa's son wrote about his impressions of Sani Abacha during a get-together held in his father's house in Port Harcourt sometime in the mid-1970s. Abacha, he said, was not part of the flow of the conversation that day. I must say that Okuntimo did not strike me as though he were part of the flow that day in Freetown. Does that say anything about why the two men – Abacha and Okuntimo, that is – were able to work together so well?

Now, Okuntimo seems to have suddenly found his voice at the Oputa Panel's sitting at Port Harcourt where his role as commandant of the dreaded Rivers State Internal Security Force has come up for scrutiny. On Monday night,

I saw on TV a woman who said that her two sons were shot dead, her husband abducted never again to be seen and she herself severely raped, all on Okuntimo's orders. I also saw a lot of other victims narrating one tale of horror and gore or the other. And then the footage shifted to Okuntimo in the regalia of a tribal chief, trying to tell us that all the baleful evidence does not add up. Part of his rebuttal was that the woman who claimed to have been raped could not be sure that her assailants were soldiers since in 1994 there was no electricity anywhere in Ogoni-land to have permitted such clear view. He does not seem to see any connection between this and the assignment he was given – which was to keep the land in darkness and snuff out all bearers of light in Ogoni-land.

We are not in a position to publicly pronounce on the veracity or otherwise of the damning details that are now coming to light at the Oputa Panel. Suffice it to say that we now know enough about the era in which people like Okuntimo operated to reach our own private conclusions. The tragedy for our country really is not that Okuntimo and his ilk now seek to bluff their way out of the consequences of their sordid past. The real tragedy is that they seem not to see anything wrong with that past. And, that there may still be many like him lurking in the security forces, waiting for the next ruler that would call up their "talents".

Okuntimo boasts that he was the saviour of the Ogoni. If you ask me, I think he needs to have his head examined for saying this. He also claims that he is a Chief of Ogoni-land. Again, I think all those who had a hand in conferring that chieftaincy title on him need to have their heads examined – or worse.

Ironsi and Fajuyi

It would have been a very interesting development indeed if the seventeen governors of the southern states had scheduled their quarterly meeting to hold in Ibadan around July 29. That would have been a happy coincidence and a very bold but loaded statement on southern solidarity. It would also have been a grand way to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the assassination of Major-General JFU Aguiyi Ironsi, Nigeria's first military head of state and Lt. Col. Adekunle Fajuyi, former military governor of the Western Region. Both men were felled in Ibadan in the revenge coup mounted by military officers of northern origin on July 29 1966 in circumstances that sorely diminished the humanist and nationalist credentials of the Nigerian army.

In lieu of the political mileage (and not inconsiderably distemper) that such a choreographed southern governors meeting would have brought, we must acknowledge that the occasion of the Fajuyi memorial that held in Ibadan last Monday was fitting enough, with the widows and children of the slain heroes in full attendance. The appearance of Lady Aguiyi Ironsi at the occasion was definitely a propaganda coup of sorts. Politicians, attention-seekers and sundry creatures in search of a photo opportunity were also in full flight at the event. The tempestuous Orji Uzor Kalu was reported to have declared that he was attending the Ibadan memorial in his capacity as Governor of Abia State, "the home state of the late Aguiyi Ironsi". Sometimes, one is not sure if otherwise solemn events like this one are mounted to honour the departed or to serve the vainglorious hidden agenda of the living. But we digress.

Belated and grudging as it does appear, the federal government's decision to honour some of the military victims of the two coups of 1966 is a gesture worth commending. One hopes that the naming of the streets in Abuja is only a beginning. I particularly think that the decision to have Lawal Batagarawa, the minister of state for defence in charge of the army, lead the federal government

* *Vanguard*, August 10, 2001

delegation to the Fajuyi memorial in Ibadan carried a symbolism that demonstrated immense political savvy on the part of the government.

With specific reference to the matter of Ironsi and Fajuyi, it is not far-fetched to say that the government must have found itself in a very delicate and difficult position in deciding to honour the two. And the reason is simple: some of those said to have featured prominently as perpetrators of the gory events that led to the death of Ironsi and Fajuyi are today leading lights of the Obasanjo government, holding very high positions. It is hard to say how these people must have felt about the gesture. How does one feel about having to live with the fact that someone you thought deserved to die is being brought back to life? For what honours do to the dead is to bring them back to life in a way that serves as a constant reminder and reference point for the living and an unremitting source of torment for their killers.

But, perhaps, the passage of time has changed people's perspectives on some of these things. May be the past thirty-five years have afforded some lead actors in the "revenge coup" the opportunity to reflect on their role as hunters in that evil season. And, may be some of them have had cause to ask themselves whose cause they served in doing what they did. The questions that would tug at the conscience of those concerned would be as pointed as they would be unsparing: Were we used? Whose coup did we execute? Whose war did we fight? Did we help win a war so that we'd be treated as part of the conquered army? Did we fight the real enemy? Or, were we sold a decoy? What did we get for our labours, for all the blood that was shed?

These posers must exercise the minds of many, especially Middle Belt officers who, under the banner of "One North", took part in the killing spree of late July to early August 1966. The answers may not be as straightforward as the questions but the balance sheet, let us be frank, leaves you wondering.

Ironsi may have had his faults in those six months that he ruled. And those faults may, indeed, have been quite dreadful in the estimation of the times. Yet, the truth today is that the ostensible reasons for the revenge coup – i.e. the threat of centralization that the Unification Decree No. 34 posed and Ironsi's alleged delay in trying the leaders of the January 1966 coup – have since been surpassed multiple-fold by successive northern rulers from Gowon to Abdulsalami.

The sheer extent of the centralization that has taken place over the past twenty years especially would clearly beat the imagination of anyone who witnessed the hullabaloo that greeted Decree 34. Northern leaders today fight tooth and nail to maintain an over-centralized state apparatus that now feed their parasitic tendencies but for which Ironsi was shot and Fajuyi made collateral damage thirty years ago. It was under northern rulers that murder, including that of elder statesmen and an elected president, became a deliberate instrument of state policy. Leaders of the north also fight with gusto to thwart the prosecution of their kith and kin accused of these murders. In the end, it does appear that Decree 34 was a sin only because it was an Igbo officer that committed it. Ours

is a country built on double standards, with the north always getting away with murder – literally and figuratively.

But, we will refrain from further dwelling on reminders, which can only make reconciliation difficult and render integration quite intractable. There are bright spots. By acknowledging Ironsi and Fajuyi, Nigeria is finally confronting some of its demons and laying to rest many of the ghosts that continue to haunt it. And in this season when we are celebrating our ticket to next year's World Cup, is it not time to properly honour the first Nigerian to win a medal for the country, Emmanuel Ifeajuna, hero of the 1954 Commonwealth Games and one of the five majors of the January 15 1966 coup.

The richest general

Sometime early in 1994, General Sani Abacha received a senior official of one of the United Nations' agencies in his office at the Presidential Villa, Abuja. By protocol, it was actually beneath Abacha as Head of State to see the official other than on a courtesy call or to have anything to do directly with the man's mission in the federal capital. That was the responsibility of the minister in the relevant ministry or even a more junior official of state. But Abacha insisted he would see the man because, according to him, he had a personal interest in the matter that the official had come to discuss with the Nigerian government. The nature of that "personal interest" was to fully reveal itself in due course.

It transpired that the UN official was in the country to finalize discussions on the release of Nigeria's match funds for a project that his agency was financing. The original agreement for the multi-year project had been signed during the Shagari regime, with disbursements scheduled over six two-yearly tranches spanning 1984 to 1996. The 1994 payments were to cover the last tranche meant for equipment pre-testing and recruitment of key project staff. Ordinarily, there should have been no cause to worry that Nigeria would in this instance meet its match fund obligations as it had faithfully done throughout the five earlier phases. But this was not to be.

As soon as he was ushered into Abacha's presence, the visiting official said he was welcomed with a tirade on how the UN agency had been so irresponsible in its handling of the project and how he (Abacha) had a good mind to call off the entire thing. The official was taken aback by the outburst because, according to him, not on a single occasion prior to this encounter had the Nigerian government expressed dissatisfaction with the progress of the project. Having calmed down from his fury, Abacha then told the official that the release of Nigeria's match funds for the last tranche was to be contingent on one condition. And the condition was that a percentage of the 25.4 million American dollars match fund was to be paid into a private offshore account of the head of state. The official was to later say that throughout his long career as an international

civil servant, he had never been confronted with such a request and certainly not at such a high level.

Of course, the official refused to accede to the request, reminding Abacha that the project in question and Nigeria's match fund obligations had been negotiated and agreed to over a decade earlier. There was, therefore, no way a variation could be accommodated, and certainly not for such an outlandish request. Abacha flatly refused to see the man's point and told him in very plain language that the money was either paid to him as requested or the entire deal was off. From what later became of the project, it does appear that the late head of state made good his threat, leaving Nigeria with yet another uncompleted project and a lot of money down the drain.

The details of this sordid and disgraceful encounter got to the hearing of some of General Abacha's lieutenants. At this point in the life of the Abacha administration, the head of state had not yet become a demi-god and not all of his lieutenants had succumbed to the lures of fawning sycophancy. Two of them, a military assistant and an intelligence chief, decided to confront Abacha over the matter. They told him that such unbecoming conduct only further exposed the country to ridicule in the midst of the political and diplomatic crisis of the time. One of them told him, "stop behaving as if your entire mission in government is to make all the money you couldn't make under Babangida!" Needless to say, all their efforts to convince him on the need for rethink fell on deaf ears. He insisted on his cut and the correctness of demanding it as of right. He was to end the argument, as he often ended most arguments in those heady days, by reminding the two gentlemen "I am the C-in-C" (short for Commander-in-Chief).

From the records of the Abacha regime, this particular instance of graft and greed was not an isolated incident. Nor was Abacha the only head of state to define the *raison d'être* of his being in power in the context of a desire to steal the country blind. The jury may still be out, but it is fast turning out that perhaps the most critical factor in the crisis of the past two decades has been the obsession of each of the generals who scuttled the Second Republic to emerge as the richest man in Nigeria. Regardless of the understandable malign intent of some of the testimonies, revelations at the Oputa Panel show that much of the country's troubles under the troika of Babangida, Abacha and Abdulsalami revolved around money.

Curiously, I find this somewhat comforting because I had always feared that Nigeria's problems might have a more sinister spiritual origin. If it is all about money, this should be a relatively simple problem to address except that, as my wife often says, money itself could be a spirit. And doesn't the Bible say that money is the root of all evil.

At the height of the crisis of military rule a few years back, Pat Utomi came up with a suggestion that I am not too sure many of us paid attention to. Utomi had surmised that if the root of all our problems was that the military felt it

needed to steal the country blind, then perhaps what we should do to have peace was to dedicate our oil revenues to the armed forces. I am not certain that this suggestion is quite as simplistic as it may sound at first encounter.

Consider this; Babangida overthrew Buhari in order to cover his tracks and empty the treasury. Abacha plotted Babangida's exit to have his turn at the public till. He did wonderfully well. And Abdulsalami dispatched both Abacha and Abiola to make up for time at the bazaar. He, too, did wonderfully well. Going by the figures now filtering out, there was on the average more concentrated stealing during the eleven months that Abdulsalami ruled than in all the thirteen years of Babangida and Abacha. But, the man was smart enough not to succumb to the temptation to sit tight. I rather think that that might have also been Abacha's plan until he heeded the siren voice. Even the gangly general, also a latecomer to the money game, has not quite discharged the burden of proof in the way he ran PTF, which was a *de facto* alternative government.

In essence, it now appears that people have ruled this country animated by no other consideration than an obsession with accumulating money. This could explain a lot about all that had gone wrong with Nigeria. It certainly explains the viciousness with which power was sought and used. It tells us why people of like mind, regardless of ethnicity, always found it easy to rally behind a thieving general to achieve the objective of stripping the treasury. And, it also explains why their falling apart often comes with such cataclysm and mayhem.

It is instructive that one of the most frequently cited reasons in military circles why Abiola could not be President was that he was "too rich". That, to my mind, is exactly the same reason why Babangida could yet emerge as Nigeria's next president unless something really drastic happens.

Democracy and the military

As Nigeria celebrates the forty-second anniversary of her independence from Britain, the returns are still coming in on the multiple ravages of military rule on the country's psyche, institutions and structures, especially in the decade-and-a-half spanning 1984 to 1999. A few days before last Tuesday's celebrations, families, friends, and colleagues marked the tenth anniversary of the death of an entire generation of officers from the three services of the armed forces who perished as the C130 transport aircraft in which they were travelling crashed into the marshes of Ejigbo on the outskirts of Lagos. To date, the circumstances of that crash have not been fully disclosed or explained, another horrific digit in our country's litany of unsolved blood-drenched mysteries. Many ask themselves why such a terrible toll in human lives was treated with what can at the best be described as levity by the military brass of the time. Many wonder too if such an incident, had it occurred under a civilian regime, would not have been seized upon by military adventurers as a convenient excuse to stage a coup against the government of the day. Sadly, such adventurous elements may not be as far away in the past as some of us would like to believe. Since the return to civil rule, so much has been said and written about what the military did to the country – the desecration of values, the pilferage of our resources, and the destruction of public infrastructure. What we often gloss over is what the military did to itself, which was also bad enough. So deeply did the military sink into a morass that things got to a point where weeping generals prostrated before majors, where major-generals organized a football match to entertain a major and where senior officers strapped listening devices onto their persons to ensnare fellow officers. The C130 crash was only one of the high points in the sustained assault on the military. How can we forget so soon these monstrosities that made a laughing stock of the otherwise noble profession of soldiering? Happily, the soldiers themselves are not as remiss in this regard as many of us are. They seem to be quite aware that military rule was bad for the military. This

is why it is a happy thing to find officers and men of the Nigerian armed forces speaking up on the side of democracy not just out of professional conviction and sad experience but also out of enlightened institutional interest. This is in spite of the inspired mischief of people like Umaru Shinkafi, who told them some time ago that it was wrong for the military to affirm its loyalty to the government of the day. I was at a discussion forum organized by one of the arms of the military to mark the nation's forty-second Independence Anniversary earlier in the week. I was struck by the forthrightness with which officers and men engaged the unhappy consequences of the military's misadventure in power for the country but especially for the armed services. And I was struck by their resolve to ensure that the military never again falls victim to such self-inflicted subversion of its constitutional role from which only a few rascals among them benefited. The imperative of re-professionalization has now become a battle cry in the military. This concern is the rest of the country, especially the political leadership. We should stop running down our soldiers on the strength of the crimes committed by a few of them. What we should rather concentrate on is isolating those elements among the political class who still nurse nostalgia for military rule in order to continue business as usual and as a convenient way out of the discipline of democracy.

The reforms now being championed by the Obasanjo presidency touch the military services as vitally as they affect civil society. Among the civil populace the reforms are meant to benefit those who prefer to work for a living. For the military, it favours those who define their career path in terms of excellent military service rather than political adventurism.

The present dispensation affords us an opportunity to reflect on issues that are germane to the institutional coherence and operational readiness of the nation's fighting forces. As Nigeria continues to undergo challenging transitions in various facets of life, key national institutions are required to build up their internal structures, capacities and processes towards defending the young democracy with courage and patriotism. The Nigerian military, regardless of its recent past, remains a vital national institution. An investment in military professionalism is an investment in democracy. Under rogue military regimes, Nigeria literally missed out on opportunities for the professional development of its armed forces. It is time once again to build up our military into a formidable fighting force.

As the situation in the sister African nation of Cote d'Ivoire continues to evolve dramatically, duty beckons once again for the Nigerian soldier. Our renewed participation in foreign operations implies that our military cannot afford to lag behind the rest of the world in all the attributes that make for an effective fighting force. Nigerian soldiers should be able to relate at international engagements on an equal footing with their colleagues from other countries.

The foregoing domestic and external imperatives make it advisable that the political authorities strive to meet the needs of the military with promptitude and

understanding. The executive branch needs to treat the requirements and demands of the military with dispatch and the legislature should learn to treat such requests with more seriousness. There is an urgent need to strengthen the hands of reform-minded officers who continue to soldier on valiantly with inadequate supplies and obsolete equipment. Many of them recall that the military fared a lot better during the Second Republic than under the four military regimes that came after Shagari. They hope that this present democratic dispensation will be a repeat of the last one in that regard. For the military, the challenges of modernization and democratization are intertwined and related in a critical way. And need we add hostile forces still lurk around, hoping to be able to cash in on the grievances of a disaffected military.

The Arewa challenge

Which North?·

Two divergent views offered recently put in clear perspective, the emergent outlook to Nigerian politics from the far North. The first is from one Professor Mahmood Yakubu of Bauchi, who penned a treatise titled, "Working paper on 2003 Presidential Election: Options for the North". The paper was obviously intended for restricted circulation, having allegedly been commissioned by the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF). But, it has since been variously leaked by people obviously not very friendly to Yakubu or his patrons.

In his submission, Yakubu rehashed the tired argument about why Obasanjo does not deserve re-election because he has been a letdown to his northern friends and sponsors. The paper then examined options open to what the writer calls the North vis-à-vis next year's presidential elections. These options include a South-East/North ticket, a South-South/North ticket and a North/South-East ticket. Having perambulated half-heartedly around the possibility of finding a replacement for Obasanjo from either South-East or South-South, the writer submitted that it would be too dangerous for the North to risk giving its support once again to an outsider, warning that "the North may make a costlier mistake if there is no intermediate Northern presidency before power shifts to another geo-political zone." Then with the arithmetic sleight-of-hand of working towards a predetermined answer, Yakubu concluded by arguing for what he calls "a consensus presidential candidate from the North".

Professor Yakubu's treatise has since attracted scathing comments from aggrieved quarters. Many see it as confirming the impatience of over-pampered Northerners after only three years of being out of presidency. Others say it bespeaks the contempt with which such Northerners hold the rest of the country whom they see as only fit to be second class Nigerians. The consensus is that this is the perspective of the North that the ACF champions.

* *Vanguard*, August 23, 2002

An alternative perspective has since been offered by Dr. Ibrahim Ayagi, a renowned banker from Kano and Chairman of the National Economic Intelligence Committee who was once in the eye of the storm over "irreconcilable differences" with former President Babangida. In a provocative paper titled, "The North: what is the North; who are the Northerners?" Ayagi questioned the competence of the ACF to speak for the North and accused it of being "an extremely elitist group of self-appointed people who carry no mandate whatsoever from the people of the north." He debunked with copious evidence the allegation that the Obasanjo presidency has marginalized the North, arguing that what Obasanjo has done is to "spread the benefits of the feeling and sense of belonging" to all Nigerians. Instructively, Ayagi's paper does not wear the cloak and dagger mantle of Yakubu's "working document", having been freely circulated by the author himself. But, then, Ayagi is someone that people can easily associate with, working for a living and standing for principles.

Between the contending perspectives of the North presented by Yakubu and Dr. Ayagi the discerning can see for himself which North is against Obasanjo and why. The discerning can also see which adds value to the federation or the one that can only spend down the federal purse; the North that works for a living or the one that persists on being insolent in its indolence; the North that accepts common citizenship with other Nigerians or the one that sees the rest of the country as slaves? Whichever you choose, I think the long overdue decomposition of northerner solidarity is good for Nigeria.

Sharia and the North's three errors

By the time the Sharia gale sweeps through the states of the Far North, the emergent political elite of that area would have successfully carried through their third major miscalculation this decade. For many across the country, especially those who have had to bear the brunt of their decades-long arrogance and insolence, the prayer is that they should persist in compounding their errors. As has been said, there is a fate worse than not getting what you want – it is to get it in full!

Their first error was the sustenance of the annulment of the June 12 1993 presidential elections and the resultant re-invention of its winner, M.K.O Abiola as the best president the north never had. Mark you, we speak here not of the perpetration of the act of annulment itself, for until the principal *dramatis personae* in that infamous episode speak up, we must take it that the jury is still out as to who did what, when, why and how. What concerns us here is the way the injury of the annulment was perpetrated, and the gains therefrom consolidated, seemingly as a cardinal cornerstone of northern policy.

The determination to sustain the annulment would appear to have led this breed into their second major political error, that is the support, sometimes tacit but often brazen, given to General Sani Abacha by northern leaders as he took the country on the road to disintegration and ruin. Politics being one province in which appearance could be as important as, if not more important than, reality, the impression that the north egged Abacha on in his demolition job remains indelible in the minds of many across sizeable constituencies in the country. And, it is an impression that is not entirely unfounded. It was, after all, the cream of northern leadership that first endorsed the self-succession gambit before the dregs from all over then took up the chorus.

We readily recall the formidable credentials of those personages who first volunteered the position that there was nothing wrong with Abacha succeeding

* *Vanguard*, November 12, 1999

himself. They come into painful recollection here. One is the otherwise revered former Chief Justice of the Federation, Mohammed Bello. Another is the equally respected Justice Mamman Nasir, one-time President of the Court of Appeal and Chairman of Abacha's Transition Implementation Committee. And, yet another is the late Alhaji Abdurahman Okene, Chairman of the Committee on Devolution of Powers and, more significantly, Chairman of the Northern Elders Forum. At the time these grey eminences spoke up in support of Abacha and what he stood for, only as much as a whimper could be heard from across the Niger by way of a disavowal of the sentiments they expressed.

In saying this, one is, of course, not unmindful of the redemptive but well nigh belated exertions of the likes of Alhaji M. D. Yusuf who along the line sought to undo part of the damage inflicted on the system by their kinsmen. The reasoned intervention of such fellows, and the sufferings of people like Major General Shehu Musa Yar' Adua and Colonel Lawan Gwadabe is perhaps what still makes it possible for many that were afflicted under the Abacha tyranny to continue to have anything to do with the political north today. In any case, it was Abacha's excesses, culminating in the death of Abiola in confinement that made power shift inevitable, an albatross for which I am not sure many northern power brokers would forgive Abacha in a hurry.

The current dalliance with sectarian politics in the Far North represents a strategic response to power shift. It is the third major error and it is likely to prove the costliest. Without prejudice to the need to reconstitute society on the basis of a higher morality – a key objective of Sharia truly conceived and sincerely applied – I think the Sharia kite as it is now being flown is bound to come down like a deflated balloon. But, it would be coming down as a balloon loaded with rocks that may end up crushing its handlers. In this regard, it is perhaps fitting that Sheikh Ibrahim el-Zakzaky, leader of the Islamic Brotherhood and a man who should know a thing or two about these matters, has promptly denounced the Zamfara experiment as a fraud.

For an elite that used to be credited with so much political savvy, the constancy with which the leaders of the Far North have lately shot themselves in the foot bespeaks a fast diminishing comprehension of extant political reality. Losing touch? What explains this?

Two factors I think, both related to power shift. With power shift, the northern voice for a place in the scheme of things has gained in stridency. But it is instructive that for those singing this song, the new north does not include the Middle Belt. Also, for now, the marginalization chorus is still an elite refrain, sung mostly by a few power brokers now losing out in preferment and contracts.

However, when the score card comes in on the real marginalization – of the millions of northern folk whose future has been mortgaged by governments led by fellow northerners – there is bound to be so much anger over there. In anticipation of this, Sharia becomes a potent weapon for staving off the inevitable questions that the long-abused people of these areas may soon be

asking as regards what the north did with its being in power for three-and-a-half decades.

The second factor flows from the first and it has to do with the use of Sharia as a bargaining weapon by political elite of the Far North in their negotiations with the rest of the country. This elite's strength in national politics had traditionally been based on unsubstantiated claims of holding brief for a large electorate. But, the new politics that seems to be emerging may neither recognize nor require their brokerage role. In this event, Sharia represents a rallying of the troops behind sectarian ramparts.

By closing up their societies, these leaders who in normal times would probably be lynched, would then re-emerge from under their Shagari caps as the turbaned keepers of a public will that they would have effectively denied expression. They would thereby still be able to hold the rest of the country to ransom, as is their wont.

Whether or not they would succeed in this game depends on how far the rest of the country is willing to go to humour them along. But it is rather fascinating how fast we seem to be moving towards a fulfilment of Gideon Orkar's agenda – with a lot of help from those who should know that they would be the ultimate losers.

Atiku and Arewa agenda*

Two divergent tendencies are now emerging in the north's outlook to the Fourth Republic. One has found expression in Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, Vice-President of the Federal Republic. The other has a spokesman in Senator Joseph Waku, the fellow reported to have called for a coup. Left to me, I'd rather take the VeePee more seriously than some characters whose name already sounds like he might have gone wacko. Anyway, the less said about that fellow the better.

Penultimate Saturday, Alhaji Atiku joined some of his more forward-looking compatriots to x-ray the issue of education in northern Nigeria. The forum was the Northern State Education Summit, held at Arewa House in Kaduna. It was not the first time that the Vice President would engage this very crucial theme at the same venue. Consistent with his earlier intervention, and as becomes the budding statesman that he is, Alhaji Atiku had some very useful comments to make on the intricately interwoven issues of leadership and education in the north. His apprehension over the ever-widening educational gap between the south and the north is at once understandable and heart-warming. For too long, eminent northerners have approached the matter as though they had a vested interest in keeping their kinsmen away from school.

The price the north has had to pay for that mindset has been nothing short of devastating. Last June, I was in a community called Dogondawa, just seventy-two kilometres outside the university town of Zaria and was confronted with a spectacle that I found quite strange and disturbing. Right in the heart of the town was this primary school with a total attendance of only thirteen pupils in all the classes, from Primary One to Primary Six. No, the town had not just come out of a plague that killed off all its children. In fact, between the school and the chief's palace, barely a stone-throw away, I counted no less than a hundred kids roaming the neighbourhood in various stages of bashful insouciance. Some were in such a blissfully playful state that indicated no one had suggested to them that

* *Vanguard* Friday February 11, 2000

they could be otherwise engaged at that time of day. It was 10 o'clock in the morning.

The story was not much different in many of the other communities I visited during the particular field trip around the Kaduna-Katsina axis. Like the proverbial ostrich, some would say that the so-called preference for Islamic school is the reason for the poor attitude to western education in the north.

The truth is, however, less fanciful. Plain and simple; many northern kids are not engaged in any kind of learning at all, and the parents and leaders are not doing much about it. Yet, for as long as Nigerians are made to belong in one country, the north's continuing antipathy for western education is a danger not just for the north but also for the entire country.

Virtually all the factors held as being responsible for the north's educational backwardness have to do with leadership, or the lack of it. The philosophy of controlled entry into the elite remains a key issue. True, every elite seeks to control entry into its ranks. But this natural instinct seems to have become a subterfuge for denying huge numbers opportunity for even a modest start in life. Northern elite appears to have perfected the deliberate use of mass exclusion from life chances as an instrument of state policy.

Most guilty in this regard are those who have had considerable schooling at public expense and who should know the value of education. Or, who, because they so know the value of education are all the more determined to deny it to their compatriots.

Sometime ago, I listened to one of this breed intone with all sobriety that the problem with the south was that too many people from that area went to school. I knew he was not joking when he then added that the reason for the relative tranquillity of the north was that it did not have a large population of those he referred to as "frustrated intellectuals". And, this was coming from a "progressive" just a few days after the death of Sani Abacha! Sadly, this man echoes the views of today's dominant elite regardless of ideological pretensions.

A lot has been said already, about how today's northern elite has betrayed the dream of the region's founding fathers. Alhaji Atiku alluded to this much in his remarks. Perhaps, the greatest damage this breed has inflicted on the north is to kill the striving spirit of the region's up-and-coming in the ill-advised drive to slow down the south. But, your candle does not shine brighter just because you put out the next man's candle.

For some time now, the driver's seat in the affairs of the north had been captured by leaders without the kind of legitimacy or stature that the Sardauna and his colleagues had. To make up for the deficiency and hold their people's loyalty, they chose to foist a regime of indolence underwritten by other people's sweat and to sell it to fellow northerners as the natural order of things. Easy life has a way of becoming its own justification. People have so thoroughly imbibed privilege as fact of life, that weaning them now seems like punishment. Many of us have been in school and at work with many northerners of our generation to

know that in the right environment they are perfectly able to compete and get ahead without a dubious quota policy. But, many of them have found it hard to resist their leaders' offer of an easy ride in someone else's stolen limousine. Such is the basis of the mindset that reduces the Arewa agenda to counting how many Adamus are generals or how many Shehus are ministers without brothering about how many nameless others never get a chance to go to school or become anyone in life.

This is the Waku mindset and it poses a great danger to the corporate existence of Nigeria. It is also the reason the north's leaders have added nothing but rot to the legacy of the Sardauna and why they continue to pay scant attention to human development.

The world has yet to come up with alternative to education as an instrument of human capital formation. This is the Vice President's key message. Policies, rooted in plain wickedness, have, for too long, been rationalized by northern leaders at the altar of religion and culture.

Yet, the north has the creativity and resourcefulness to blend the modernizing influence of western education with the positive aspects of its traditional society. India, on whose model the British sought to pattern Northern Nigeria, has recorded some measure of success in this regard. Managing the creative tension between continuity and change was a recurring theme in the nation building efforts of the north's founding fathers.

People of Alhaji Atiku's persuasion know that time will soon run out for the north if its soul is not quickly reclaimed from the clutches of degeneracy. They also know that the Obasanjo presidency provides the best chance in the circumstance to do something and fast. Their challenge is to fashion for the north an agenda that is not mutually exclusive with the peace and progress of the country at large. And, with the Wakus of this world to contend with, they need all the luck that they can get.

The events in Kaduna*

It is comforting that the federal government has so far refrained from reacting to the Kaduna crisis in a rash manner. This levelled response is most welcome because what the instigators of the current round of rascality obviously want is to goad government into taking precipitate action.

Such ill-considered action would then be mischievously interpreted and cited as evidence that the federal government, under the leadership of a southern Christian, is not even-handed in its response to the various flashpoints that have erupted in the wake of the restoration of democratic rule in the country.

But even-handed or not, the sponsors of violence need to be put on notice that they may yet find their comeuppance in a way they least expect.

First, let us take in the milieu in which the Kaduna mayhem took place while the appropriate authorities consider the facts and sequence of this particular phase of what has now become a recurring mischief. The most important background information in all of this is that Kaduna is a contested territory that happens to be home to the headquarters of the old Northern Region.

It is in the context of this fact that we can start to appreciate the meaning and significance of the state government's current attempt to expand the scope of Sharia to cover not just Islamic personal and civil law but also criminal and other matters that may affect non-Moslems. This attempt, if the truth must be told, is itself a grossly insensitive act of provocation.

Kaduna is an area notorious for its deep division and historical animosities largely traceable to the determination of migrant nineteenth century jihadists and their heirs to force Islam and the emirate system on an equally recalcitrant indigenous population.

* *Vanguard* Friday February 25, 2000

The area shares this make-up with many parts of the Middle Belt and some parts of the Far North. Thus, Kaduna's political and social rhythm has, since pre-colonial times, been defined by a delicate and often volatile mix of religious, ethnic and other forces and interests, each constantly on the alert, ever suspicious and highly mobilized to checkmate any undue advantage by rival tendencies.

Kaduna also has a symbolism in the political and social dynamics of northern Nigeria. As the creation of Lugard and the seat of the Saraduna, Kaduna occupies a central place in the heritage of the north. This character, for some, should be both Islamic and Hausa-Fulani, a line of thinking that largely dovetails into a supremacist reading of northern social structure and the national politics that it had defined for many years.

The traditional surefootedness of this supremacist tendency has in recent times been assailed. Simultaneous with the rise of fundamentalist Christian militancy and aboriginal resistance at home have been the June 12 1993 elections, the crisis of the annulment and its horrendous aftermath that painted this tendency black at the national level. Today, the tendency finds itself reduced to an oligarchy in retreat, whose survivability is being called to serious question by power shift and the concomitant emergence of a *kafir* as president of the Federal Republic.

It sorely needs to rally its troops before disarray and before a rut sets in. And why not try religion?

It is in this context that Kaduna becomes both a test ground and a last ditch in what, for this tendency, is a veritable battle for continued local supremacy and national relevance. The cut and thrust of ethno-religious contestation have over the years immersed the politics of Kaduna in a rather heady brew.

The Kafanchan riots of 1987 and the Zangon-Kataf war of 1992 are only two of the more remarkable recent manifestations of the area's historic tensions. Into this heady brew has now been introduced the fad of Sharia as a strategic response to power shift.

As already noted, Kaduna occupies a unique position in the mindset of northern hegemonists (many of whom hardly ever go to their impoverished home towns). Given this fact, they must have thought that it would be *infra dig* that their headquarters should be governed under any other code than that which puts a definitive, Islamic/Hausa stamp. But, because those on the other side are also very definite about what codes they want to live with, a clash between pro- and anti-Sharia elements in a part of the country legendary for its flare-ups was only a matter of time.

And so the inevitable clash came and with it several bonfires and countless lives lost. The body count is still on. Meanwhile, the usual calls for restraint have been pouring in. It is good to call for restraint.

But, it is even better that people are advised to advise themselves as to what is fit and permissible in today's Nigeria. And while we are at it, perhaps, we

need to ruminare on what President Obasanjo was reported to have said last Tuesday; "attempts by men to achieve victory on their own in matters that relate to God have invariably led to calamity." Between amity and calamity, the choice is ours.

Identity and integration in the north

A condolence call on a bereaved big brother during the week provides an opportunity to see first-hand the benumbing aftermath of the bloodletting that overtook Kaduna last January. In a way, the entire town of Kaduna is itself one huge bereaved metropolis that is also in need of our collective condolence, given the sheer magnitude of the disaster that was still on display even two months after the incidents.

The town authorities have obviously tried very hard, with varying degrees of success, to put a smart face on some of the more gory sights. Still, even for an off-and-on visitor with only a casual acquaintance with the town, the extent of the damage in those parts with which one was familiar bespoke a tragedy of befuddling proportions. And, it was little comfort to hear my guide say that all I had seen was actually child's play compared to the damage in some other parts of the town.

Yet, if the physical damage is dreadful enough, it only tells half the story. As often happens in these matters, the deepest scars usually lie within and creep up on us ever so slowly. A friend tells me it was one day during the raging crisis, as she and her two teenage kids crouched and cowered, praying to survive it all, that it suddenly occurred to her that she was the only Christian living on her street, somewhere off Rabah Road. In all the nine years that she had lived on that street, she said, it never crossed her mind that it would matter one day how she worshipped God. Now she has concluded arrangements to move to another part of town where she would feel safer and have a better sense of community. Significantly, she is from what we have for long known as the north – an identity that she says means very little to her these days.

The tension between identity and integration lies at the root of the current troubles in northern Nigeria. One of the (unintended) consequences of the Sharia mayhem is the way it has brought to the idea of the north as a national linguistic

* *Vanguard* Friday April 7, 2000

community and the concept of the north as a sectarian enclave. Sharia, or its abuse, has thrown up the underlying tensions between the idea of *Arewa* (northern community) and the contending reality of the *ummah* (Islamic community). It is a tension that the north's founding fathers, many of them direct descendants of the Fulani jihadists, appeared to have managed fairly well with their focus on the centralizing vision of "One North, One Destiny".

Their successors have proved to be a lot less adept at managing this tension as witnessed in the present retreat behind sectarian ramparts. This retreat reduces the gains of the *Arewa* concept and squanders the immense benefits that are derivable from the unifying factor of a common language, Hausa.

There are many who would argue that this decomposition of the *Arewa* idea and its concomitant regional integrationist possibilities is a positive development for Nigeria. Viewed from this perspective, the durability of the *Arewa* notion and the survival chances of the larger Nigerian project are both mutually exclusive and inversely proportional. Is this reading necessarily correct?

My view is that "One North" is a threat to "One Nigeria" only if the idea is to misuse the size of the north as a deadweight on the country's progress or as a stumbling block on the way to national integration. Sadly, this appears to have been the case. Over the past couple of decades, evidences of the onset of a debilitating brand of cockiness and flabbiness on the part of the Fulani and their satellites have emerged. This has eaten away at the north, manifesting in an inability to manage power, a tendency to take friends for granted and a penchant for treating allies as though they were part of the conquered army.

In the light of this development, some argue that it is doubtful that the kind of fiery revanchist regionalism that drove the July 1966 coup can be re-enacted in the present circumstances. Who wants to be used now only to be told later that he is an outsider? Or, what is anyone supposed to think when they hear things such as "Isaiah Balat does not represent the core north" or "Victor Malu is not a northerner"? What was it that that made Paul Buba or Sunday Awoniyi or P.S Achimugu northerners to the Sardauna but makes his successors not to consider the successors of these people as northerners?

I think the crucial difference was the fact that the north's founding fathers were not so carried away with *looting the treasury* that it beclouded their vision. This sobriety informed a realization on their part that, in the context of Nigeria, the region laboured under so many disadvantages that there was no alternative but to get all hands on deck. The realization is now being questioned by elements who confuse the fact that they individually fared so well from over thirty years of federal patronage *with* the reality that the north has disadvantages. The loss of vision is what has led some overfed leaders into digging up trouble.

But, playing up the conflicting identities that the north has managed so well in the past can only put paid to regional integration, or what John Paden, in his book on the Sardauna, called "the consolidation of northern community". If you push the sectarian or tribal identity too far, you lose the cover provided by the

regional community. And, it is the regional community that has been the conduit for securing all the strategic advantages garnered by the north in the context of the national community.

The poser a Benue chap put before us as we watched the Kaduna TV news report of the meeting of the nineteen northern governors might be instructive: "What is our governor doing amongst northern governors?" he asked. And, I ask myself: what is it that drives people to asking such question?

Sanusi and the Fulani saints

Three things struck me in the essay that appeared in *The Guardian* of last Friday, 23 June under the title "The Fulani factor in history" written by one Sanusi L. Sanusi, who provided no address or affiliation.

First, was the content of the article itself. Ostensibly, the writer seeks to make a case on behalf of Fulani people in Nigeria, a people he feels have been much maligned for no just cause. However, in stating his case, the writer overstates it such that the essay actually comes across as a clever-by-half apology that raises more questions than it provides answers. It could still end up generating more heat than it throws light on the contentious issues it has raised.

The second thing was a rather curious coincidence. The write-up appeared on the same day as a report on the row that has erupted in Germany over a book award given by the prestigious Konrad Adenauer Foundation to a controversial academic. The awardee, Professor Ernst Nolte, had written in support of the contentious thesis that mass murder and other atrocities committed by Adolf Hitler and the Nazis were an understandable reaction to the threat of communism. Expectedly, there has been a lot of hue and cry over the desirability or otherwise of giving such an esteemed award to a man pushing such views.

Professor Nolite's thesis falls into a pattern of denial of the enormity of the crimes of Nazism. It comes from an intellectual tradition that dates back to the immediate post-World War II years, and which is obviously still on the march as the recent storm in Austria over the issue of the Far Right amply demonstrates.

Denial is a recurring theme in revisionist hagiography. And it appears that increasingly, the revisionist interpretation of Nigeria's recent history has started to assume neo-Nazi proportions.

Sanusi's essay seeks to propound an exculpatory thesis on the origins of the Nigerian crisis, especially with regard to who did what, when and how in the

* *Vanguard* June 30, 2000

country's descent into the abyss. In joining battle with those he calls "champions of ethnicity", Sanusi notes, rightly, that "...a more intelligent and respectable analysis of a Nigerian malaise should look at the role played by a corrupt elite drawn from all over Nigeria in the deprivation and exploitation of our suffering masses." But having said this, he then proceeds to push a brazenly contradictory position. It is not an accident, he says, that the beginning of the country's slide into moral decadence and abuse of office coincides with the period when the Fulani were "completely isolated from political power in Nigeria."

The first point to make is that there has never been a period that fit that description in Nigeria's history. It is understandable that people of Fulani stock should somehow feel imposed upon by recent developments in Nigeria. I would probably feel the same way if I were in their shoes, with the whole world laying the blame for the country's collapse at my doorstep. But, to claim that the Fulani were at any time innocent bystanders in the rape of Nigeria is to stand facts on their head.

The thesis that any nationality has a monopoly of virtue is as suspect and as unacceptable as the one that confers on a people a monopoly of villainy. Sanusi argues that the Fulani have been such legendary saints, a great force for rectitude in Nigeria's history of tragic leaderships. This claim flies in the face of available evidence. It is true that Ahmadu Bello and Aminu Kano died without leaving much in their estate. But, for every Sardauna who did not pilfer from the public purse, there were, at least, ten Fulani treasury looters who more than made up for these two.

Our country's sordid history is still too recent for the kind of selective exoneration that Sanusi now seeks to pronounce. So, no Fulani ever stole in public office? How does that sound? Shagari's Second Republic was so saintly that it had to be replaced by another set of Fulani saints on account of rampant corruption. Umaru Dikko was so clean he had to be put into that famous crate. And Buhari's PTF? Well...

But, beyond these depressing samplers is a most revealing aspect of Sanusi's exegesis. I find it quite instructive that in all the attributes he listed as defining the Fulani as Nigeria's chosen race, enterprise does not feature at all.

Virtually, every other nationality in Nigeria takes pride in possessing the enterprise spirit. It is obviously an attribute that is not shared by those who have for so long appropriated the rulership of the country to themselves. Shouldn't that be telling us something about why we have so far failed to make progress?

At the beginning I mentioned that Sanusi's article was remarkable for three reasons. The third has to do with the date the article appeared. Perhaps, it was just sheer coincidence or may be there was a hidden message? But, I think that it was perfect timing to have put out such a provocative article on the seventh anniversary of the annulment of the June 12 1993 presidential elections. What can we say to this other than: "Thank you very much. We get the message."

The North's grouse*

Certain elements claiming to speak for the north seem to have an axe to grind with the Obasanjo administration. Some say that these people speak for no one but that is a matter for debate. What is not debatable, however, is that the stakes in the controversy have been raised by the Kano State House of Assembly, which was recently reported to have pointedly accused the Obasanjo administration of pursuing an agenda of ethnic cleansing against the Hausa and Fulani in the federal public service.

Whatever one might think of the quality of the Fourth Republic's legislative chambers – which is likely to be not much – their members, at least, have a nominal claim to being representatives of the people. This is why the tone and thrust of the statement from the Kano assemblymen hikes the threshold of volatility in an already explosive issue. Increasingly, the marginalization mantra is gaining in stridency, graduating from mere whispers and grumbling to heckling and threats. Is the Obasanjo presidency marginalizing the north? Which north?

In an interview he granted to the *Observer*, a British newspaper sometime during the Civil War, Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu articulated one of the key conditions for national unity. According to the Biafran leader, the north must come to terms with the reality of its membership of the Nigerian federation. To him, the root of crisis in Nigeria lay in the north's refusal and/or reluctance to integrate itself into the larger national community in a manner that promoted peaceful co-existence and mutual respect amongst the country's constituent units. The north's preference, it would seem, was to stand outside or above the Nigerian union. This mindset is at once separatist and supremacist, and it can only be a recipe for systemic instability and crisis.

Nearly two decades after Ojukwu spoke, Professor Jacob Ade Ajayi, one-time Vice Chancellor of the University of Lagos, elaborated an enduring paradox of the Nigerian state. Reflecting on the vexed issues of federal character

* *Vanguard* Friday, September 22, 2000

and quota system, the emeritus professor of history observed that Nigeria provided a curious study as a country where the ruling group unilaterally declares itself as being the "disadvantaged", seeking hereby to entrench privilege by both subterfuge and brazenness.

Taken together, these two submissions offer unique insights into the Nigerian dilemma. At the heart of this dilemma is the issue of how to organize a national community in which none of the consistent units claims more than its due from the commonwealth on the strength of some pre-ordained mandate or dubious, self-inflicted disadvantages.

A careful reading of Nigerian history reveals that the most resilient theme in national politics has been the push for northern domination. This push, manifest in many ways and under several guises, includes the use of proxies to confuse issues and present a smokescreen. It has largely defined the trajectory of the nation's fortunes – or the lack thereof – since Independence.

What is the north that we refer to here? It has been said that a nation is a people who consider itself a nation. In the context of the contest for political power in Nigeria, the north defines that sub-nationality which takes its vital life-source from the centralizing vision of Fulani hegemony. This hegemony reached its apogee with the conquests of the early nineteenth century and was re-energized by the arrangements under which Nigeria won independence in 1950. The north, therefore, equals the Fulani plus their satellites.

What unites them is their common interest in lording it over the geographical area called Nigeria, which they see as being no more than an expanded version of the empire they sought to create. For them, British imperialism, rather than marking the inauguration of a new nation-state, only signalled a consolidation of the territorial gains of a pre-existing settler hegemony. It is this system that has been variously resisted in the south and which the resurgent Middle Belt consciousness once again seeks to tame.

Thus, when self-appointed spokesmen argue that the north is being marginalized by the Obasanjo administration, their grouse has to be placed in proper context. It is not an accident that the Kano assemblymen make a pointed case for the Hausa and Fulani, merely appending the remainder of the north as an afterthought. Stripped of its regionalist pretensions, the so-called northern interest translates to no more than a defence of the privileges enjoyed by a section of the north.

The Fulani have an imperialist vision that cannot coexist with the vision of nation-building that the rest of the country shares. What the Obasanjo administration has done is to strip this clash of visions of the thickets of confusion in which it had for a long time been enmeshed, hence the present outcries. But, it is to be expected that in the current efforts to reconstitute Nigeria on the basis of equity and fairness, those who have benefited the most from rigged policies and unfair practices are the ones that would and should also bear the greatest brunt of reform.

Yet, the sensible way to respond to the re-arrangements now going on is not to insist on privileges that have led the country nowhere. Rather, what to do is to take the Obasanjo regime as an opportunity to re-position the north for enhanced competitiveness in an emergent modern industrial society.

The north must stop wasting precious time crying marginalization, and start to build up its own structures of survival and develop coping mechanisms similar to those that made it possible for the rest of the country to pull through so many years of northern misrule. The north must commence without delay a massive investment in human development, to democratize access to life-chances for its teeming poor. It must encourage rather than stifle its sons who are striving to develop for the north performance-based advantages in its exchanges with the rest of the country. The challenge is for the north to creatively use this window to access greater economic relevance without seeking to slow others down.

We must all come to an acceptance of the new reality. Gone for good are those days when every major federal appointment or policy had to be vetted or sanctioned by a few turbaned heads. There is a sizeable body of opinion in Nigeria that still thinks that the north is getting off rather lightly for the combined atrocities of the Shagari –Buhari –Babangida –Abacha years. Must we add insult to injury by harassing a regime whose reform agenda many still see as not even moving far and fast enough?

Atiku's rhythm*

The on-going realignment of forces in the north is increasingly assuming the dimension of a regional referendum on the political future of Atiku Abubakar, Vice President of the Federal Republic. This is both a welcome development and a scenario that the rest of the country needs to watch with keen interest. It is a welcome development because Atiku is, as the American would put it, "just a heartbeat away from the President." To that extent, the man deserves all the scrutiny that he can get in these very uncertain times. If nothing else, such scrutiny is likely to help the north clarify issues as to where its genuine interests lie in the drama of Nigeria politics. It is equally wise to keep a tab on Atiku's progress because doing so might help clear quite a few of the ancient and modern confusions in this unfolding national drama.

To properly situate the Atiku persona in the context of the new politics, there is a need to state a preliminary fact: Atiku is no Yar'Adua, and need not be. Attempts to equate the two as a way of either boosting Atiku's image or shoring up his fortunes are quite needless. An inventor and the man who adapts his invention to meet changing needs both have their distinct claims to greatness. And the resourcefulness with which Atiku has tended the Yar'Adua flock has portrayed him in an admirable light as a politician who has come into his own in his own right.

Still, his Yar'Adua link provides both a basis and a clue to the man's political effectiveness. From being just another silver spoon northerner, General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua had by the time he passed on transformed into the stuff of political myth-making. Two factors have often been credited with being responsible for this transformation. First, of course, was the efficiency of his political machine. Second, was the way he stood up to Abacha, literally to the point of death. But, there was in my view another factor, admittedly less dramatic, but which was to have more profound implications for future political

* *Vanguard*, Friday, April 27, 2001

development. It has to do with Yar'Adua's elaboration of the tripod theory of Nigerian politics as the basis for deploying his famed machine.

As the Second Republic collapsed, Yar'Adua came to the inescapable realization that traditional East-North coalition on which government at the federal level has been based was only strategic. He reasoned that there was a need to fashion an arrangement that did not exclude the West at the centre as an irreducible minimum condition for the sustainability of any democratic experiment. Such thinking, which he was to seek to practicalize in all the political platforms that he put together, was what made many people to regard him as a bridge-builder.

We do not know how much of this thinking informed the permutation for Obasanjo's second coming. But, it is a thinking that does not find much favour with conservative elements in the north. These people had always indicated a preference for the East-North coalition – obviously in the cynical but largely correct belief that such an arrangement guaranteed for the north the number one position as no easterner would in a long while be considered electable into the presidency. The way Atiku is now refining and adapting Yar'Adua's approach to power bloc realpolitik in the federal game is strategic in a profound sense and further distances the conservative north, military and civilian, from power.

Atiku's choice as President Obasanjo's running mate in the February 1999 elections was probably one of the very few independent decisions that Obasanjo took throughout his well-simulated return to power. It may yet turn out to be the single most critical determinant of the future of his presidency, especially as the waters of the contest for 2003 get murkier and murkier. The emergence of Atiku as a powerful Vice President could also mean the end of the road politically for many in the north.

The presidential election of 2003 is probably going to be the first major national election to be determined by the depth of the division in the north. Usually, the divisions used to be on the other side, and were exploited to the fullest by northern power brokers. It would be most interesting to see how things play out this time around. And, it would be wise to watch how Atiku fares in the run of play.

The man has been doing some fancy footwork that has fascinated many, mesmerized some and upset quite a few. Many people wonder if in all that he is doing – taking titles, accumulating a war chest, setting up offices – the man is working for his boss or for himself. My answer is that any self-respecting Vice President must be able to do both in a delicate balancing act that hurts neither his boss nor himself. I think Atiku is wiser than many of his northern brothers in acknowledging the fact that this dispensation needs to be strengthened even when it occasionally appears to hurt some northern interests. And that is why I think the Atiku agenda goes beyond 2003, aiming for something that delivers a more permanent strategic advantage for the north.

Atiku's body language, like that of his mentor, remains largely inscrutable, but one thing is clear: the man is empowering a new crop of young northerners in a way that is likely to alter the face of Nigerian politics for good. A lot of perceptive southerners who think strategically are alarmed at this development. But, the truth is that if Nigeria must continue to be one country, the north needs to be helped to build some real economic muscle beyond accumulating fleets of Honda cars while the south must be made to gain some more political backbone beyond heckling and sniping all the time. The Vice President stands at a critical intersection in both efforts, and it would be nice to keep this in mind whichever way the north's referendum on the man's political future goes.

...Segun Awolowo's dance

It is hard to find appropriate words to express the gloom and dismay felt by many of Segun Awolowo's friends over his dalliance with the newly formed National Solidarity Association (NSA). Many see NSA as a band of wreckers whose common denominator is that they are ex-President Ibrahim Babangida's acolytes craving a return to power to continue their wrecking job. Segun is free to keep whatever company he fancies as he plots a political future, but not while he still keeps his present surname and certainly not if his constituency would be located in the region once ruled by his revered grandfather. Segun's presence in the midst of the NSA gang may further confirm what is fast becoming a widespread view in this part of the country: that the Awolowo name is taken more seriously outside the old man's family than within it. A shame.

Atiku's transformation*

Some of the views I expressed in this column last Friday obviously ruffled a few feathers. In particular, many seem to have read the concluding part of my write-up on the impeachment threat as an attack on Vice President Atiku Abubakar, at least going by the reactions I have received from a few of his associates, one of whom pointedly accused me of trying to cause divisions in the presidency.

First, I did not set out to attack anyone. My concern was only to offer some timely advice and to sound a note of caution. Second, I rather doubt that the labours of a newspaper columnist are sufficient to cause cracks in the presidency if mutual goodwill exists in-house. The vice president is someone for whom I have tremendous respect. Sometime ago this column featured a rather complimentary article entitled "Atiku's rhythm" in which I tried to situate the man in the context of the evolving politics of the Fourth Republic and the realignment of forces in the country. This seems an appropriate time to reproduce the piece. Read on:

The on-going realignment of forces in the north is increasingly assuming the dimension of a regional referendum on the political future of Atiku Abubakar, vice president of the Federal Republic. This is both a welcome development and a scenario that the rest of the country needs to watch with keen interest. It is a welcome development because Atiku is, as the Americans would put it, 'just a heartbeat away from the president.' To that extent, the man deserves all the scrutiny that he can get in these very uncertain times. If nothing else, such scrutiny is likely to help the north clarify issues as to where its genuine interests lie in the

* *Vanguard* Friday, August 30, 2002

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north the number one position, as no easterner would in a long while be considered electable into the presidency. The way Atiku is now refining and adapting Yar'Adua's approach to power bloc realpolitik in the federal game is strategic in a profound sense and further distances the conservative north, military and civilian, from power.

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that if Nigeria must continue to be one country, the north needs to be helped to build some real economic muscle beyond accumulating fleets of Honda cars while the south must gain some more political backbone beyond heckling and sniping all the time. The vice presidency stands at a critical intersection in both efforts, and it would be nice to keep this in mind whichever way the north's referendum on the man's political future goes.

People who now claim to be concerned about the bad press that the vice president has been getting lately may wish to ask themselves how and why things have suddenly taken this turn for someone who was up till very recently the object of so much adulation. Those in the know say it started with the tango of permutations on a so-called Mandela project. I do not know what that is.

Blaming the North.

These days, I find that I visit the Gamji website a lot. For those who may not know, Gamji is one of the sites on the Internet offering news and analyses on Nigeria. Much of what is posted on this site is presented from a core northern perspective. And there is really nothing wrong with that. Gamji remains a useful website nonetheless for the simple reason that it fosters debate. However, as the tempo of political activities heightens in the country preparatory to the coming elections, it does seem that some of the write-ups posted on Gamji nowadays have assumed an increasing desperate tone. Which is both an amusing and a discomfiting development. On the one hand, it is interesting to know that intellectuals and publicists of the core north now feel sufficiently under pressure to articulate their position in doomsday terms. It used to be the case that this approach was considered a prerogative of the so-called Lagos-Ibadan press. On the other hand, the danger in this development is that quality thinking is sacrificed as extremist posturing and outright falsehood displaces deep reflection and balanced discourse on national issues.

One Abdullahi Bego, who claims to write from Tehran but provides no further affiliation, posted a rather provocative write up on the Gamji website last Friday. It is entitled "Towards correcting the 'Wrongs' in the Nigerian Project". The article, part diatribe, part lament, condemns what the writer calls an "ominous trend" towards placing a collective guilt on northerners for Nigeria's problems. He accuses those who push this line of "using a media establishment that is largely objective only when the interests it defends are challenged" to hang the failures of the Nigerian state on the north "as an article of faith."

In Bego's words, "...if anything negative happens at all, it is the "north" and "northerners" that are responsible." With pained self-righteousness he pronounces: "History, indeed, has never seen such a totalistic and closed-ended operationalization of national problems."

* *Vanguard*, Friday, November 1, 2002

Bego is wrong on that score – the Jews and the Tutsis fared a lot worse. But that offers no one any comfort here.

Why is it that the north, howsoever defined, has become the convenient shorthand for explaining the problems of Nigeria, a reason surrogate as it were? A clue could be found in an insight provided over ten years ago by one northern elder for whom I have a lot of respect. And it is captured in one word: insensitivity.

The man, a former Federal Permanent Secretary, said he had noticed a worrisome hardening of positions in some of his former colleagues from the south, especially in the wake of the acrimonious primaries of the two Babangida parties (SDP and NRC) when it did appear that the country was about to be presented with two presidential candidates from the north. His concern, he said, was heightened by the fact that these were colleagues with whom he had worked tirelessly to push the federal cause during the Civil War and whom he knew were genuine believers in "One Nigeria". Concern was to turn into alarm for him the day one of his former colleagues actually told him that the only thing that was wrong with the Orkar Coup was that it did not succeed! He said he knew from that point that the country was in trouble. All of this took place well before the June 12 1993 election and the annulment.

But he lamented that all efforts to convince fellow northerners that something needed to be done about what was happening to the country was rebuffed. Their standard response to the concern was that his problem was that he had stayed too long in Lagos! The long and short of this story is that northern leaders, who now feel a sense of siege, had sufficient warning about the current fad of blaming the north for everything. And they bear some of the responsibility for the trend because they failed to be sensitive to the needs and concerns of the rest of the country.

Of course, it is not right to generalize blame for the country's woes to all northerners or to collectively criminalize the north. But, *you cannot claim the right to rule and then disclaim responsibility for the misrule arising thereby.* Having held a disproportionate share of power in Nigeria's years of misrule, it is only natural that the north should also bear a disproportionate share of the blame for the consequences of that misrule. It is now left to any northerner who is convinced he was not part of the misrule to enter a disclaimer.

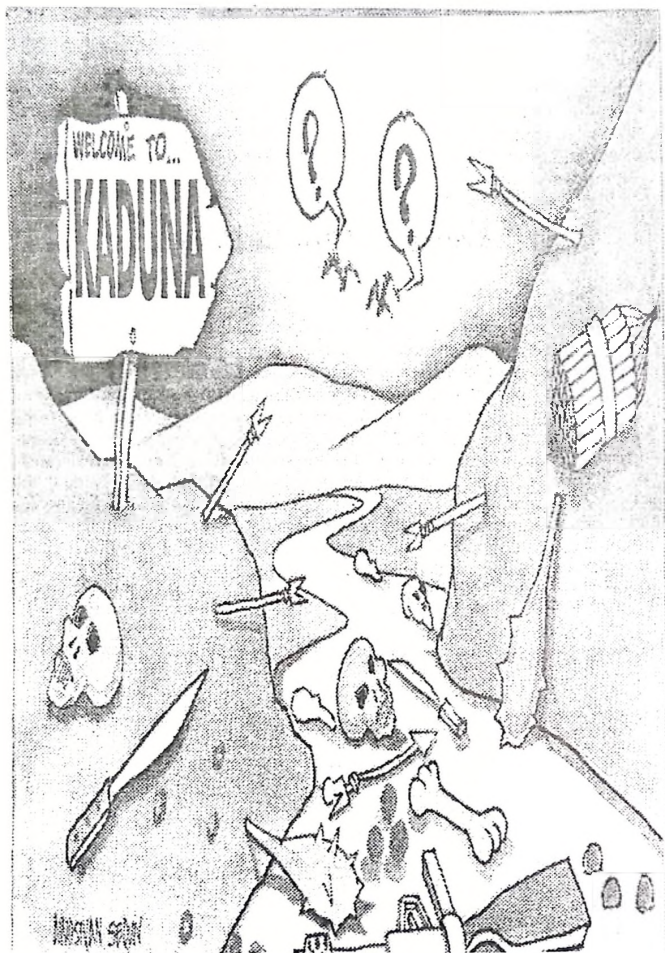
Listening to some people speak these days, you get the impression that the north is more sinned against than sinning. The reality suggests otherwise. And the chronicle of who did what to whom gives a vivid but depressing account – from quota system to the annulment, from Buhari's acute tribalism to the Abacha death squads. Today, there is hardly any household in the south that will not recall an instance in which privileges accorded northerners in the scheme of things affected it adversely – of children denied school admission, of people denied jobs, of careers cut short, of preferment denied – all in the name of federal character.

Many southerners are increasingly reaching the conclusion that, shorn of all its pretentious scaffolding, the main grouse that some northerners have with the present administration is that an elite used to taking nine out of ten national assets is now being asked to settle for five. And, while it may be wrong to hold all northerners responsible for the crimes of some of their kinsmen, the attitude of "my brother, right or wrong" can only fuel the tendency to generalize blame. Northerners must stand up to publicly condemn their own who behave wrongly. They should not continue to nurture a negative solidarity that only ends up putting everyone in the same box. There is nothing good about a culture that praises wrongdoing just because it is a neighbour whom you do not like that points out the wrong. It may be true, for example, that northerners as a people were not responsible for the annulment. but, then, where did those who benefited from the annulment come from? Like Abacha and Abdulsalami who mounted the throne while an elected president was in jail.

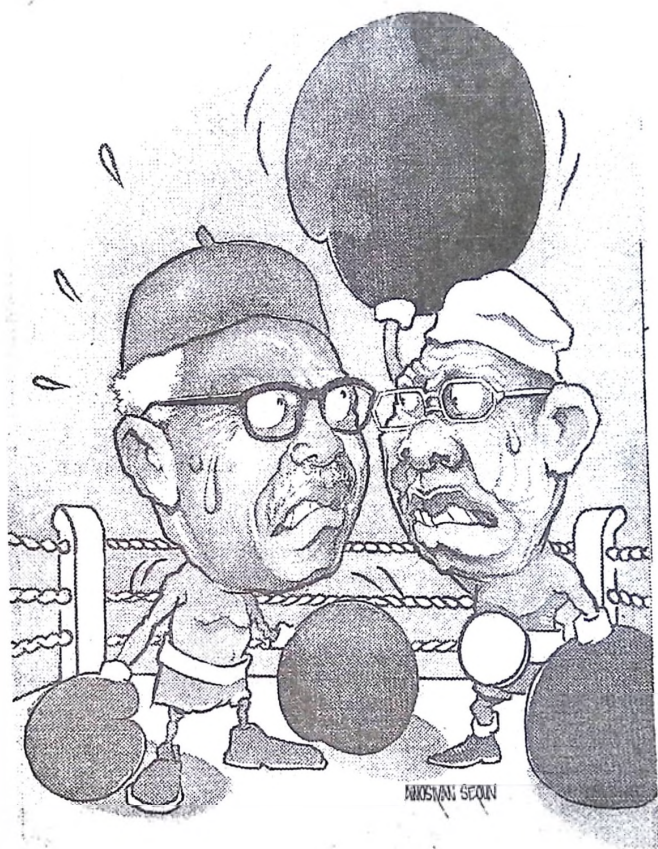
When northerners celebrate Mohammed Abacha and some northern governors gang up to short-circuit the judicial process in the case of Hamza al-Mustapha and Ishaya Bamaïyi, the message they send to the rest of us is that the northerner can do no wrong. When Bafarawa tells us that the north wants its power back and no northerner of substance cautions him on such a loose statement. people are left to conclude that he indeed speaks for the north. The point is such people may be charlatans, but no one puts them in their place and the next thing you hear is that they have become the toast of the ACF. How is the rest of the country expected to respond to that?

Arewa at Oputa Panel

It was not a very good outing for the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) at the Oputa Commission the other day. And that is putting it mildly. The competence and comportment of its secretary, retired Colonel Hammed Ali, as he presented ACF's rebuttal of the Ohanaeze petition left much to be desired. Which, again, calls to question the calibre of officers being processed by the military these days. Whatever else may be his vaunted abilities and, even if he is being prepared to be the next premier of Northern Nigeria, I think that the ACF must do everything in its power to keep Ali away from further exposing the north to ridicule. The man is just not it, and he actually subtracts from the quality of leadership that someone like MD Yusufu now projects for the ACF. I doubt that the man could have risen to be administrator of a state under any ruler apart from Sani Abacha. Or, what do you think?



MURRAY SCHWARTZ



The Igbo question

Wise men from the East

My favourite Christmas story is the one about the Magi, the three wise men from the East who brought gifts to the infant Jesus in the manger where He was born. The Magi's visitation is a major highlight of this happy season, and not just because it is anchored on the glad tidings of the Saviour's birth. The story's popularity consists in the fact that it is one of the earliest and most significant attestations to the deity of Jesus Christ – as stellar intimations proclaimed a Nativity that was witnessed and worshipped by shepherds and noblemen alike in far-flung lands.

Little wonder then that the story of the Magi has been told and retold in countless idioms across many lands over the ages. Its primary source, of course, is the Holy Bible, where the story is captured in the Gospel of Christ as recorded by Matthew at the second chapter. Each Christmas, this passage is read in churches and schools and concert halls and even battlefields, and, in any place for that matter, where the Carol service of Nine Lessons is celebrated.

The story is also to be found in more temporal forms and artistic renditions. It is often dramatized, with its soaring lyrical accompaniment, in the lovely Christmas play on the three kings of the Orient, who brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Michelangelo, one of the greatest painters that the world has known, also tells the story of the three wise men on canvass, in his masterpiece 'Adoration of the Magi'. Kindergarten ditties are woven round the Magi's visit. It is a story whose significance and symbolism has neither waned nor wavered by the retelling.

Yet, beyond the spirit of goodwill and merriment with which it is rightly associated, the story of the Magi carries a powerful message and a transcendental meaning for Christendom and for mankind. For the visit of the three wise men marked a defining moment in the founding of the Christian faith. In a sense, the Magi were the *deus ex machina* by which the infant Jesus was spirited out of harm's way, with the family's flight to Egypt. The significance of

their divine agency is amply borne out by the fact that since the birth at Bethlehem two thousands years ago, Christianity has grown to become the single most potent force in the affairs of mankind.

The scripture records that the birth of Jesus greatly troubled the temporal powers of the day, especially Herod who was the king at the time. His discomfiture was greatly aggravated by the visit of the three wise men who came from the East to Jerusalem inquiring as to the whereabouts of the king whose star they had seen in the east and desiring to worship Him. King Herod must have reckoned, rightly, that He who had just been born must indeed be a greater king than he, or why else would such great men seek to worship Him.

And so he devised to kill the infant Jesus. It was a plot whose success might have changed many things, including that Christianity could have been stillborn. Herod charged the wise men, "Go and search diligently for the young child; and when you have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also." Of course, the wily king intended to do no such thing, as his subsequent actions showed. So, God warned the wise men in a dream not to return to Herod, but to depart into their country through another way. And they listened to the voice of God.

Matthew further tells us that after Herod realized that the Magi had tricked him by not reporting back, he went on a vengeance mission, decreeing the death of all children of two years and under – that is, anyone that could have been born around the time of the birth of Jesus. But, before the king's edict could be put into effect, Jesus has been safely spirited away to Egypt, the family only returning to Israel after the death of Herod when an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream to assure him that the coast was clear.

For me, the high point of the story of the Magi was not so much the gift they brought, or the fact that such great chieftains would worship an infant child. Rather, it was their refusal to return to Herod. On that single act of sound judgement and obedience to God's voice hung many things – salvation, greatness, immortality and the birth of a faith.

In this season of goodwill, it is fitting that we should reflect on the meaning not just of this occasion, but also of the various elements of the Christian story. And, I cannot find a more appropriate audience to which to commend the moral of the Magi story than our brothers from across the east of the Niger, especially my cousins from Igboland, interestingly the only part of Nigeria that is truly predominantly Christian.

It is not out of place to say that the Igbo have for good and for ill affected the fortunes of Nigeria. Indeed, they do possess the capacity to determine the direction, or the lack thereof, of the country. However, the way they have sometimes deployed this capacity has smacked of self-marginalization. Often, they are found barking up the wrong tree in the turbulence of Nigeria politics. This has not done much to raise their esteem in the eyes of admirers and detractors alike.

But, the past decade should have made all of us wise as Nigerians. And having wisened up, we cannot afford to return to our local Herods. The destiny of Igholand is inextricably tied up with the fortunes of the progressive people of Nigeria. And this for a simple reason: the Igbo are a people who live on work and mostly survive by their wits. How can such a people find common cause with those who can only live off others? Or, put in another way: how can a people who celebrate such a masculine sport like wrestling agree to be reduced to the politically effeminate role of "beautiful bride"?

Two thousand years ago, the three wise men from the East turned their back on Herod and were used by God to midwife the birth of a faith. Wise men from east must also turn their back on the local Herods and make possible the birth of a new nation. I sincerely hope that this is the task that the newly formed Eastern Elders Forum has set for itself. Merry Christmas.

Igbo presidency

The other day at a meeting, one of those funny debates of indeterminate origin suddenly broke out. The issue was silly enough and it had some very argumentative folks ranged on either side. The topic? Who is the richer-young Yoruba professionals or young Igbo traders? People soon warmed up to the topic as arguments that conveyed varying degrees of sense and nonsense were marshalled to support one side or the other in a debate that I thought was thoroughly needless.

One of the parties to the debate sought to support his position by narrating the recent experience of his friend's community in the east. The road to the community had gotten so bad that it threatened to cut the area off from the rest of humanity. Endless entreaties from the community to the appropriate authority had yielded no results as things went from bad to worse. As the next rains neared, the elders of the village challenged the youth to do something about the road.

A meeting was soon called and, as is now customary in many parts of Igboland, a fundraising drive was organized. Again, as has become customary in the east, the appeal fund launch presented an opportunity for the *nouveaux riches* to show off their newly acquired wealth. In one afternoon, the fellow told us, the community youth raised fifty million naira in cash. The contributors were mostly electronics and motor spare parts dealers, many of whom, he declared, rather approvingly, "had never seen the inside of a university". How many Yoruba communities can achieve such a feat, he teased. And, what better evidence did anyone need to show in whose favour the balance of wealth weighed in today's Nigeria, he asked?

While it all sank in and everyone seemed to have been awestruck at the spectacle of a few young men contributing fifty million naira in one afternoon, someone asked two very simple questions: One, don't people pay tax in that

community? Two, isn't there supposed to be a government that should attend to things like building roads?

Another fellow then wondered whether such a "feat" should be celebrated or lamented. In his view, the fact that people had to "tax" themselves to construct a road that the government should have built cannot be an evidence of strength but a sign of weakness. Why? In other places, all it would take to get the same road built was a few well positioned write-ups or documentaries in the mass media or a determined campaign to make life difficult for whoever was responsible for not putting things right. When last did anyone see the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway get so bad to the same level that the Port Harcourt-Enugu Expressway routinely degenerates? Or, why would Ilorin have an airport built with federal funds while the airport in Owerri can only be built through "self-help"? What explains the difference?

I think what explains the difference is the sense of collective interest and the determination with which the interest is pursued. It has become hackneyed, but it still bears restating, that if the Igbo devote to the pursuit of their collective interest half of the enthusiasm and energy that they deploy in pursuing individual gains, things would be a lot better for them. Saying this is not to denigrate the legendary self-help spirit of the Igbo, which is quite admirable. But, there is a need to know that self-help should only go thus far. In the end, it can only be complementary to government's legitimate responsibility – not a replacement for it.

All of which should call attention to the need to understand structures of power and influence in a country such as ours. It does seem to me that this understanding is still very much lacking in the way the campaign for the emergence of an Igbo man as Nigeria's next president is being prosecuted. And, this is what makes both the message and the medium of the campaign rather ineffectual, if not laughable in the current circumstance.

Anyone from any part of Nigeria has a right to aspire to be the country's president. This right belongs as much to the Kanuri as it belongs to the Kalabari, it applies as much to the Igala as it applies to the Itsekiri. But, there is a difference between having an Igboman become president of Nigeria and asking that the presidency of Nigeria be handed over to the Igbo to fill the position with whomever catches their fancy. I do not think I can put it any better than Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe did recently. Nor, do I think that we need to get down to the level of cynicism that Bayelsa State Governor, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, did the other day, justifiable as his expressed sentiments were. The governor had wondered if the Igbo were not likely to treat the presidency of the country with the same levity that they have treated the senate presidency zoned to them, which has changed hands thrice in less than two years.

Governor Alamieyeseigha's views speak to a source of understandable concern that the rest of the country shares on the cash-and-carry mentality that a large majority of the Igbo political elite have often exhibited, even in matters

our journey into nationhood, the disability when they entered best. When you make a habit of say someone will try to offer you

that the Igbo have subsequently jobs in times of national crisis. Think of Nzeribe. Think of of the country where someone doing the kind of things that people seriously, no matter their e's enemies.

o-for-president crusade is to be sed to push the case. We won't racters in the forefront of the n. Many people have reasonable residency, they can definitely do ns. Unless, of course, the people g to be pushing the Igbo agenda r own individual agenda. Which up in smoke.

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Igbo and the governance of Lagos (1)

Three fashionable fallacies lie at the root of prevailing Igbo attitudes and outlook to Lagos, the former federal capital. The first is that Lagos is a no man's land with no indigenous population. The second is that federal government money was used to build Lagos up into the gigantic metropolis that it has now become. The argument goes further that since the "federal money" allegedly belongs to all Nigerians, the political control of Lagos should willy-nilly be open to just about anyone and everyone who claims to be a Nigerian. The third is that Lagos is a hunting ground, a jungle city where all being "joiners", the predatory instinct must rule. By this pernicious thesis, Lagos is a place in which regardless of one's roots (or the lack thereof) one can seize the trophy. It is an Eldorado where anything goes and in which everything – including political authority – is up for grabs since the place does not belong to anyone anyway.

These are erroneous claims, now being given new life in the current debate on Igbo participation and representation in the politics and governance of Lagos. Granted, the continued perpetration of these fallacies is not restricted to Igbo elements. Others, including some Yoruba (especially those that Lagosians refer to as *ara oke* – upland people) are equally guilty of the first if not all of these fallacies. But the current debate marks the first time that an institutional claim to the governance of Lagos would be made by a non-Yoruba group. The commentators, Joe Igbokwe and Uchenna Nwankwo, among others, have done well in marshalling the arguments from the Igbo perspective. Spokesmen of Eko Pioneers, a group of Lagosians, have answered back from the other side. It is a debate that should be encouraged rather than stifled.

The fallacies are, of course, easily dismissed. The Yoruba identity of Lagos is not in doubt, regardless of its ethnically mixed composition. If the no-man's land claim is true, then Lagos must be the only metropolis of its size anywhere in the world without an indigenous population.

* *Vanguard*, Friday May 3, 2002

Concerning the use of federal money to develop Lagos, four points need to be made. First, Lagos was a thriving metropolis even before the British created Nigeria. Second, it is doubtful that the people of Lagos were consulted before their city was made the federal capital, or that they were forewarned that being conferred with such a status meant that they would lose their city to stranger elements. Third, rather than invoke the "federal money" argument to dilute a people's right to control their land, the rest of Nigeria and, in particular, the Igbo, should be grateful to the people of Lagos for according them a conducive environment in which to conduct their business and nurture their creativity – an environment in which lives and property are relatively safe and in which the throats of settlers are not routinely slashed by sponsored zealots.

Fourth, only a fraction of what is now Lagos State was ever under the federal government. Strictly speaking, only four of the present twenty local governments in Lagos State – Lagos Island, Eti-Osa, Mainland and Surulere – were part of the then Colony of Lagos. The rest belonged, first, to the Southern Protectorate and then to the Western Region, before that state creation exercise of 1967. And, anyway, Lagos was not the only city on which federal money was spent.

As for Lagos being a hunting ground, the self-defeating logic of that argument is clearly brought home vividly to all of us – aborigine and settler alike – by the frightening crime statistics in the state.

Perhaps, before I proceed further, it is appropriate that I state my qualifications for pronouncing on this matter, aside of course from my rights as a citizen of Nigeria. I am a Yoruba of Awori descent with strong Egba links. My mother, however, happens to be Igbo from Owerri in Imo State. Based on these affiliations, I can claim a fair measure of familiarity with the issues in the current debate on both sides. I understand the feelings of Lagosians on this matter. I am also fully apprised of the passions and pressures that drive Igbo into internal economic exile and impel their push for a place in Lagos. While I empathize with the Igbo condition, I share the interest of all trueborn Yoruba people in maintaining and possibly deepening the Yoruba character of Lagos. And no one should have to feel apologetic about that.

The Igbo, perhaps more than any other Nigerian group, are in a vantage position to appreciate a people's attachment to their soil and the unbreakable linkage between a people and their land and language. A critical aspect of the validation of that linkage is the exercise of cultural and political authority over a land space to which one has aboriginal claim. More than any other group in Nigeria, except perhaps the Fulani Bororo, the Igbo move around the country a lot for considerations of geography and economics. Unlike the Fulani, however, the Igbo often become sedentary in large clusters in the lands they move into, including Lagos. This naturally raises an interest in participation in the affairs of their place of domicile. Yet a legitimate interest in participation cannot translate

into a contest for control, which is the way the current claim is being canvassed and construed.

Advocates of the Igbo claim to Lagos often refer to the era of pan-Nigerianism spanning the 1930s to the 1950s. It was a time, we are told, when all Nigerians lived as one and when it did appear that all ascriptive barriers had dissolved in the ferment of nationalist politics. This period has become a fanciful reference point for people with all kinds of agenda. But was the reality not indeed less glamorous? There was, of course, a fortuitous convergence of circumstances in those times. An emergent commercial and educated elite needed to come together in the nationalist struggle to send the British away and so the city seemed to have become a melting pot overnight. Yet, the hometown unions remained strong and affectations to unity were soon exposed as only skin deep as the struggle to ensure the departure of the British became the struggle over who would succeed them. This is the reality that we continue to live with to date. And it would be asking a lot to expect that Lagos should offer itself as the guinea-pig for experimenting with the possibility of a new pan-Nigeria vision. Especially, since there is as yet nothing on ground to suggest or guarantee that the gesture would be reciprocated.

As things now stand, the Igbo in Lagos must decide what they really want from the state: participation, or representation, or control. Currently, their spokesmen seem to be using the three terms interchangeably, raising the spectre of a hostile take-over. This approach is bound to be resisted by a people barely recovering from the debacle of June 12 and the Abacha persecution, in which they saw the Igbo – with admirable exceptions – as having played a less than salutary role.

...m the jaws of victory in every good policy. The movement has
... as a punishment for the Yoruba and as a reprisal for the centra
...s played as the seat of the opposition to the annulment. Again
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...ay, Abuja is the only Federal Capital Territory they have for now.
...peaking seriously, Igbo claims to an expanded role in Lagos S
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... federal interest in Lagos, given the peculiar demands on the state an
... home to all. Rather than fantasizing about taking over the state an
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...nd their weight to push for special federal recognition for the needs of
... further enable the state play its role as a safe, liberal and prosperous
... all.

Igbo presidency: matters arising*

The campaign for an Igbo president in 2003 continues to gain in stridency even if not in logic. As we put yet another anniversary of the annulled June 12 1993 president elections behind us, this appears an opportune time to examine what has now become a highly emotive issue. Because June 12 continues to loom so large in every political controversy that has followed it, let us make some preliminary remarks using the annulled elections as our point of departure.

The first point to make is that, barring a few commendable exceptions, the stance of mainstream Igbo political elite on the June 12 crisis left a lot to be desired. This stance has now proven counterproductive. For one, it did not impress with their anti-Yoruba rhetoric. Second, it was so overdone that it fuelled the suspicion that some Igbo could have been working on a script to re-launch Biafra while goading the North and the West into a war. Third, the Igbo outlook ended up alienating many Yoruba who felt wounded by the annulment. What is more, this combination of factors probably played a role in denying Dr. Alex Ekwueme the presidency in 1999. The Igbo stand on June 12 was a gross miscalculation.

The miscalculation is today being compounded by the tone that the call for an Igbo president is now taking. Some firm statements need to be made in this regard: just as the stance on June 12 could not deliver any substantial gains for the Igbo, so an Igbo presidency cannot be erected upon the ashes of the Obasanjo presidency. The case for Igbo presidency cannot be made without the Yoruba man currently occupying the seat.

There is anxiety in some quarters over whether Obasanjo is now occupying the slot of the south or the southwest. There is the added anxiety that eight years of Obasanjo would effectively wipe out the presidential ambition of anyone in his generation from the southern part of Nigeria. These anxieties are understandable but unfounded. Not only does the constitution allow the

* *Vanguard*, Friday June 21, 2002

president to serve two terms, it does not prevent a southerner from succeeding Obasanjo in 2007. People who claim knowledge of a secret agreement to the contrary are yet to prove their case. Anyway, the man has said that he does not recognize any ethnic basis for his presidency. He does not even acknowledge June 12 as an event, talk less of its being a watershed.

Yet, Obasanjo's emergence as president was the political elites unique way of addressing the annulment crisis without appearing to have caved in to Yoruba pressure. But every one knows that Yoruba pressure did play a large role in the matter. In staking a claim to the presidency, the other power blocs in the south need to project themselves as desirous of being taken seriously. What was it that the Yoruba did that made the country settle for the unprecedented in 1999.

Another issue relates to the linkage that people often draw between the Civil War and the campaign for an Igbo presidency. Sometimes, it does sound as if what some people are saying is that the Igbo would not have been entitled to make a case for the presidency if they had not lost the war; or, that the presidency should be awarded to the Igbo as a prize for losing the war. My view is that people should stop asking for forgiveness as if the civil war was a crime. An Igbo presidency, when it becomes a reality, would not be much an act of charity or of post-war restitution but a phase in the logical sequencing of power shift. This is the critical connection that many Igbo people failed to make during the annulment crisis.

An Abiola presidency would have proved the point that anyone can emerge as president once he gets his sums right. By allowing the annulment to stand, the other power blocs in the south inadvertently put a conditionality to their own aspirations for the presidency. This point was to be rubbed in with the way Obasanjo's emergence in 1999 was staged. Ironically, the same Obasanjo presidency now presents the best opportunity for an Igbo presidency. But, some Igbo people appear to prefer to daily genuflect to Arewa lords to allow them succeed Obasanjo.

No one would hand over the number one position to another willingly, especially after the experience with Obasanjo. In the event, the most that the Igbo are likely to end up with would be number two, or, if care is not taken, number three as is now the case. And, it would be a shame indeed if after all the running in circles the Igbo end up with number two once again.

But, the scenario could be different if people are willing to bide their time and reflect. The rest of the country can only chuckle when a people who conduct their affairs in a certain manner now say they wish to produce the president to run the lives of all of us.

Things have now gotten so desperate that some spokesmen say the Igbo want one term in the presidency. They forget that such desperation can only make the rest of the country suspicious of just what exactly the Igbo want the presidency for. Meanwhile, the flip-flop of joining up with the south-south to produce a common front continues, with leaders speaking from both sides of their mouths

even as commentators fantasise on the return of the Eastern Region. But, this is a belated move – you do not build such a strategic alliance on the eve of an election.

Just as was the case with Obasanjo's emergence, an Igbo president has to be someone acceptable to all other Nigerians – not necessarily the person that the Igbo want. The prognosis that appears increasingly likely is that of a great deal of scramble to queue behind the incumbent. When that happens, Obasanjo will not be grateful to the Igbo for having tried to use his falling out with Arewa leaders to upstage his presidency. The northwest, whose assurance some Igbo leaders take as Holy Grail, will be isolated if it persists in equating its narrow interest with the wider interest of the entire north. But, by then it will not be standing on the same moral high ground that the southwest stood in its own days of isolation.

For Igbo political elite, the moral of the tale is three-fold: first, always look before you leap and always put your best foot forward. Second, never allow yourself to be used in fighting other people's proxy wars. And, third, no one is likely to be impressed with an adversary he cannot respect or an ally he cannot trust.

Ohanaeze and Igbo aspirations (1)

Ohanaeze Ndigbo, reputedly the leading socio-cultural and political platform of the Igbo people, could just be going the way of *The Patriots* in becoming a club of grey eminences that no one takes seriously. Interestingly, the trajectory of *Ohanaeze's* journey into irrelevance seems to bear a striking resemblance to that of *The Patriots*. Which should not be a surprise as key leadership and membership overlap in both groups.

The common denominator in this incipient loss of vitality is the fact that both groups appear to have lost touch with political reality, a malaise that they externalize in its worst form with their attitude to the Obasanjo presidency. Some leading members of both groups have in recent times allowed their personal animus and hostility to Obasanjo *the man* to colour their assessment of Obasanjo *the president*. In so doing, *Ohanaeze* and *The Patriots* have exhibited a marked want of strategic thinking vis-à-vis appreciating what the Obasanjo presidency means for the aspirations of the various nationalities and tendencies that had over the years felt estranged and excluded from the Nigerian state. Curiously, these nationalities and tendencies make up an overwhelming proportion of the followership of the two groups. And, perhaps, none more so than the Igbo.

We find that we keep returning to the theme of the Igbo and their politics for one crucial reason: a significant segment of the national community is about to politically self-destruct once again. And it is in the overall interest of the rest of the country that this should not happen.

Yet, the portents are neither comforting nor reassuring. Feelers emerging from *Ohanaeze* compel an urgent re-assessment of Igbo attitudes and aspirations in the context of unfolding political developments preparatory to the 2003 elections. A recent report, said to have been authored by a sub-committee of *Ohanaeze* on the issue of Igbo Presidency, appears to confirm the worst fears of

* *Vanguard*, Friday February 14, 2003

those who had always prayed that the Igbo would not shoot themselves in the foot once again.

Last week, we noted in this column that much of the desperation over Igbo presidency is being driven by generational anxieties of certain leaders in Igboland who fear they might have lost relevance by the time President Obasanjo's second term is over. Little did we realize then that what we suspected actually reflected an existing mindset, which the *Ohanaeze* sub-committee report has now confirmed. The sub-committee parades some of the best heads in Igboland with Professor Ben Obumelu as chairman. It must be considered a very sad development indeed if what has emerged into the public domain as the sub-committee's report actually reflects the best thinking that is on offer today on the political direction of *Ndigbo* vis-à-vis Nigeria.

First, let us summarize what the Obumelu Report says, as featured in a news item carried in last Sunday's edition of this newspaper:

- one of the crucial ways of achieving political emancipation for *Ndigbo* is through the election of one of their sons or daughters as President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria;
- the principle of rotation that "Nigeria has come to accept" enabled Shehu Shagari and Olusegun Obasanjo to emerge as President in 1979 and 1999 respectively;
- it is now the turn of the Igbo to produce a president via the 2003 elections;
- neither of the two leading political parties (PDP and ANPP) has nominated an Igbo presidential flag-bearer;
- four parties (APGA, NDP, PMP and UNPP) have nominated Igbo sons as presidential candidate i.e. Emeke Ojukwu, Ike Nwachukwu, Arthur Nwankwo and Jim Nwobodo;
- effort should be made to achieve a merger or alliance capable of making one of these four emerge as president in the April 19, 2003 election;
- however, in the event that this merger/alliance proves impossible, the remaining realistic option is to "seek a political accommodation that would guarantee the realization of the Igbo project in the shortest possible time";
- the Obasanjo/Atiku ticket of the PDP offers no hope whatsoever for the realization of Igbo aspirations and should therefore be rejected outright;
- the success of the Obasanjo/Atiku ticket means that the Igbo presidential project is unrealisable until 2028 (The report is silent on how the sub-committee arrived at this date);
- the "reality" of having to wait till 2028 to produce a president is frightening as the Igbo would have become economically and politically destroyed by the time.

- in the present circumstance, the ANPP that has nominated an Igbo son (Chuba Okadigbo) as its presidential running mate presents a more viable platform for the realization of an Igbo presidency in 2007, ...if the party accepts the principle of rotation and a single term presidency;
- the success of the Buhari/Okadigbo ticket "would give *Ndigbo* a presence and a role in the presidency as the position of the Vice Presidency is a very powerful one as the Constitution invests it with real powers";
- based on the foregoing considerations, the sub-committee recommends that *Ndigbo* should go into an alliance with ANPP on the basis of a negotiated package that would contain pet items on the Igbo political shopping list, such as "core ministries, Sharia and the secularity of the Nigerian state, infrastructural development of the South East, National Conference and restructuring, privatization and international airport."

One is hoping that this report is still being debated and has not been adopted yet as the official *Ohanaeze* position. We say this because the adoption of the report as it is could prove disastrous for Igbo political aspirations for many years to come. And, in the light of recent hiccups within *Ohanaeze* over the adoption of a common Igbo candidate/platform, taking the position that the sub-committee has canvassed, can only remove whatever is left of any political weight that *Ohanaeze* still carries both in Igboland and with the rest of the country.

Ohanaeze and Igbo aspirations (2)

Last week, we observed that *Ohanaeze Ndigbo*, the leading socio-cultural and political group of the Igbo people now finds itself in the throes of a crisis of relevance similar to that which *The Patriots* is currently undergoing in its bid to take leadership of the National Conference agenda. We noted that at the heart of this creeping de-legitimization of Ohanaeze's leadership claims is the shoddy implementation of its Igbo presidency project and its failure to appreciate the strategic utility of the Obasanjo presidency for pushing Igbo claims and aspirations in the context of One Nigeria. In this regard, we lamented Ohanaeze's zero-sum political mindset that seems to fuel its antipathy to the Obasanjo presidency and which appears to becloud its thinking on the 2003 presidential elections. We also called attention to sections of a recent report by a sub-committee of Ohanaeze, which canvasses a strategic alliance with the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) as the quickest route to the realization of an Igbo presidency in 2007.

Today, we take a closer, look at the case made by the sub-committee, which seeks to re-enact the "beggar-my-neighbour" approach to Nigerians politics that successive Igbo political elite have often adopted but which had consistently failed to deliver any lasting advantages for the Igbo.

The arguments made in the Ohanaeze sub-committee report are easily demolished. Essentially, these argument fall into five segments. First, that Igbo political emancipation is tied to the emergence of an Igbo president. Second, that it is now the turn of the Igbo to produce Nigeria's next president. Third, that in the event that a commonly acceptable Igbo candidate for the position does not emerge, as is now the case, the Igbo should "seek a political accommodation that would guarantee the realization of the Igbo presidency project in the shortest possible time." Fourth, that the success of the Obasanjo/Atiku ticket of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the April 19 elections consigns the

* *Vanguard*, Friday, February 21, 2003

Igbo to a political wilderness till 2028. Fifth, that the Buhari/Okadigbo ticket of the ANPP presents an attractive option with its offer of the Vice Presidency (which the sub-committee says is a powerful position) to the Igbo and its viability as a platform for the realization of Igbo presidency in 2007.

We need not belabour the first two issues raised. For one, it would be quite difficult to argue dispassionately when people seem to have decided that their political emancipation is conditional on the place of origin of an office holder. The most that can be said is that this is a reductionist reading of both political power and human freedom. As for the third point, anyone is free to stand in the market place or on a rooftop to proclaim an entitlement to the presidency of Nigeria for his or her ethnic group. What matters is whether the rest of the country takes such a claim seriously enough to want to accede to it through the constitutionally stipulated plurality of votes.

The fourth issue has to do with Ohanaeze's outlook to the Obasanjo/Atiku ticket. The claim is that supporting this ticket would mean deferring the emergence of an Igbo president till 2028. We are not told by what arithmetic this date was arrived at, and may be we should seek further enlightenment on the matter from Dr Chuba Okadigbo who has lately emerged as a master of what he calls "political arithmetic". But speaking seriously, I think what informs this anxiety about languishing in the wilderness is the lazy approach of the Igbo political elite to the issue of which part of the country should produce President Obasanjo's successor come 2007. Many people seem to have thrown in the towel even before the contest starts, accepting the inevitability of Vice President Atiku Abubakar's ascension in 2007. The man himself has been helping people along in this line of thinking, proclaiming himself at every opportunity as the one who made his boss's victory at the PDP primaries possible. Everyone seems to forget that the field remains wide open as only the Southwest can legitimately be precluded from contesting in 2007 and that the record of vice presidents succeeding their bosses is a very poor one indeed worldwide.

Now to the fifth argument: the Igbo are being called upon to back the Buhari/Okadigbo ticket because it offers them the vice presidency, which is said to be "a powerful position". Yet, the vice presidency is powerful only because Obasanjo has made it so and partly because Vice President Atiku came into the ticket with the PDM machinery behind him. With Buhari's record at the PTF (where he insisted on having the enabling decree changed to create an executive chairmanship as opposed to the initial executive secretary position) no one can seriously say that he would be in a frame of mind to humour his deputy with much relevance.

What, with his deep-seated hatred for anyone who does not speak his native language and practice his religious faith? Nor, would Okadigbo be going into the number two position with any formidable political machine. So, he would be no more than another Diya under a latter-day Abacha.

As for the vice presidency being a stepping-stone to the realization of Igbo presidency in 2007, I have a feeling that Buhari's handlers can only chuckle at the gullibility that informs such a tall hope. The Ohanaeze sub-committee itself seems to acknowledge this with its proviso that the 2007 dream becomes realizable only if the party accepts the principle of rotation and single-term presidency. The conduct of ANPP's primaries does not suggest the party or its flag bearer is in the mood to accept any such fanciful notions just so an Igbo man can become president.

To conclude, we need to ask some pointed questions: what strategic advantages have being number two ever delivered to the Igbo? What did Alex Ekwueme bring home from being number two to Shagari? And, what did the NCNC get for the Igbo from playing second fiddle to the NPC? The obvious answers to these questions should throw up yet another poser: Is Ohanaeze not increasingly de-linked from the genuine aspirations of the Igbo people? It is a very terrible thing indeed for a leadership to lose touch with its people or with their aspirations.

And so the quest for an Igbo president in 2003 has now thrown up a Fulani general. The tragic irony in this development should not be lost on Ohanaeze's leaders, who should bury their heads in shame. Unless, of course, if their game-plan is to use the cover of the confusion that a Buhari presidency will inevitably foist on the country to push some other yet un-advertised agenda.

The Yoruba agenda





Odi, O'Odua and other oddities*

It is fitting that we should begin on a note of heartfelt sympathies – for the relations of the twelve policemen felled in active service at Odi, Bayelsa State and for the people of Odi who have had to suffer so much for the misdeeds of so few.

However, beyond the largely understandable popular sentiments and the not-so-understandable official swashbuckling, a few home truths need to be told in this whole sordid matter. The first is that anywhere in the world, killing policemen for whatever reason is very serious business. Mainly because the policeman, to a large extent, personifies, in both symbolic and substantive terms, the well being of society and the integrity of the state.

From time immemorial, the policeman and the taxman have been the two most visible agents of governmental authority. Theirs are usually the first faces officialdom presents to the citizen. Granted that for a country like ours with our record of tax-dodging (including by government itself) the importance of the taxman can sometimes be overstated. Happily, no such crisis of relevance yet afflicts the police. Thus, to convey the impression, deliberately or inadvertently, that the policeman can be anyone's easy target is to raise very serious doubts about the capabilities of the state and the continuance of orderly society itself.

Having said this, the point also needs to be made that it is inexcusable to lay waste a whole town, that possibly includes retired policemen and families of serving officers, mainly to assuage official anger over the murder of a dozen policemen. It is perhaps trite to say that two wrongs do not make a right. The more important issue to raise here is with regard to what has been achieved by a siege in which an entire town is casually treated as "collateral damage".

The nearest indication of an official response to this poser came from that military spokesman who was reported to have rhapsodized that the Army had

* *Vanguard* December 10, 1999

"taught a lesson" to the people of Odi for, in his words, harbouring criminals and tolerating their attacks on security forces.

The quality of the lesson that has been taught remains dubious at best. For it is doubtful that any of the people involved in the killing of the twelve policemen suffered as much as a scratch from the military bombardment and torching of Odi. Which says a lot for the futility of it all.

In the end, it would appear that Government sanctioned the attack on Odi solely for the purpose of wanting to be seen to have done something about recent events in that town – all the better, if it was tough action. But is it not possible that the only "lesson" the attack has taught is to further reinforce in the people of that area their sense of distance from the Nigerian state?

Like the Ogoni judicial murder before it, the levelling of Odi can only further raise the stakes in an already testy terrain. As the people's sense of outrage flows over the momentarily numbing effect of the federal government's Pyrrhic victory, a sense of "damned if you do, damned if you don't" is bound to set in. People will ask themselves: why bother to be law abiding if at the end of the day you're going to be punished so viciously alongside the lawless anyway? Which is another way of saying that things can only get worse on that front in the days ahead.

It would have been nice to be able to say with the same level of certainty where the current muscle flexing of the O'dua People's Congress (OPC) is likely to lead. I think the consternation and confusion of many vis-à-vis the OPC challenge has to do with our being able to read with a fair amount of accuracy what it all means. Many instant experts have emerged from within Yorubaland and without, claiming to divine the game plan of the OPC. While some see it as a gathering of rabble, others see in it, something more serious, perhaps sinister. But could it be that what we see are the outlines of a veritable fighting arm, charged in the name of the Yoruba nation with the task of seeing off both lecherous outsiders and treacherous insiders?

After the photo-finish manner in which the Yoruba are said to have "won" the June 12 battle, every subsequent political move of theirs seems to have become the subject of much debate and speculation. The Yoruba agenda, to the extent that such a thing exists, appears to have become central to any respectable conspiracy theory as to where Nigeria might be headed in the near future. And for many, OPC is held to be central to that agenda. Yet, it remains an oddity. Or, for some, a lunatic gang.

Leo Tolstoy, the Russian writer tells the story of how he saw at a distance a man whose motions suggested that he was mad; coming closer, he realized that in fact the man was sharpening a knife.

Beyond rolling out the tanks and, issuing precipitate shoot-on-sight orders, we really do need our thinking caps on to make sense of all that we now see unfolding around us. Presidential spokesman Doyin Okupe did not sound like he

had any such cap on when he made those statements credited to him last weekend regarding "spent forces" which is lamentable but perhaps pardonable for someone only recently weaned from the sartorial oddity of wearing his *agbada* without a cap.

OPC and the Yoruba PDP.

The Yoruba wing of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) has registered its indignation over the deteriorating security situation in Lagos and parts of Western Nigeria. Righteous or otherwise, this indignation is not unfounded. Recent developments in this part of the country should be a source of concern to all, and Yoruba PDP chieftains should have no less a right to voice their anxiety in this matter than any other interested party.

For many of them, however, it would appear that the OPC bogey presents no more than another opportunity to play politics and taunt opponents. As politicians, it is their prerogative to play politics and – if they can get away with it – taunt their opponents. But it is both irresponsible and unwarranted to seek to score cheap political points by trivializing an issue that literally borders on life and death, and which has in fact claimed many lives already.

Yoruba members of the PDP stand at a very unique intersection in the unfolding drama of the Fourth Republic. A curious lot, they seek to redefine the political mainstream in their native land. And they are under pressure from all sides not least because many, both within and outside the party, think they are reaping where they did not sow. In the effort to cope with the challenges posed to their interests, they sometimes overdo things – at turns indulging in childish gloating (*awa n'ti* Federal), or playing the overprotective mother hen vis-à-vis the incumbency of President Olusegun Obasanjo, or generally trying to be more catholic than the Pope.

Such has been their outlook with regard to the OPC issue. In their effort to prove that they are such good Nigerians, Yoruba PDP leaders have proclaimed that all true Yoruba sons and daughters must condemn the OPC. Well, I do not know in what capacity they issued that proclamation considering that many of them are ministers and the like today by virtue of having failed woefully at the polls among their people. But let's just say that it is one thing to condemn

violence, which stands condemnable in all its ramifications. It is a different matter altogether to join in what is fast emerging as a choreographed demonization of the Yoruba people.

Yoruba PDP leaders must beware lest they merely end up echoing those who would love to see the Yoruba browbeaten and rubbished. What we should all be doing at this point in time is not issuing presumptuous condemnations but helping to unmask those, within and without, who stand to benefit from stigmatizing the Yoruba as bloodthirsty outlaws. Flowing from that, there would be a need to fashion an appropriate response to this deadly mischief making.

To seek to make political capital out of blaming *Afenifere* for the recent mayhem is both myopic and intellectually lazy as it smacks of single factor analysis. Worse still, it is likely to play straight into the hands of those for whom every Yorubaman who is able to raise his head in dignity remains an enemy.

There is one credit that cannot be easily taken away from the political tendency represented by *Afenifere*. This tendency understands Nigeria and its historic tensions a lot better than many of our new age unity-mongers. Those old men, whatever may be their other shortcomings, have a knack for being right when it comes to reading the state of hostilities in Nigerian politics and the instruments of battle to deploy in defending the interest of the Yoruba. I rather suspect that the man whose presidency the Yoruba PDP chieftains are now feeding from has also come to acknowledge this simple fact. After all, when push came to shove and Obasanjo found himself staring down the barrel of Abacha's gun, it was not to S. M. Afolabi that he turned for help. Nor was it to Dapo Sarumi. It was to Chief Michael Ajasin.

There is a need for strategic thinking in this matter so that we can engage the so-called OPC challenge in an intelligent manner. In this effort, one fact should stand out clearly. The whole essence of the Yoruba concern in Nigeria at the dawn of the Fourth Republic is not to have a Yoruba man occupying the Presidential Villa, important as that may be symbolically and substantively. It is not even to fill the Federal Secretariat in Abuja with characters strutting around in *abetiaja* caps. Rather, it is to ensure and to make assurance doubly sure, that the structures and balance of power in Nigeria never again become to skewed to anyone's disadvantage as to permit a re-occurrence of the insolence of the annulment or a repeat of the noisome pestilence that was Abacha's rule. Those Yoruba leaders whose only calculation is on the next appointment or the next contract may not be able to understand this, after all many of them did good business with Abacha. But they need to keep it in mind, nonetheless. And while we're at it, two quick points need to be made with regard to the search for solutions to the current security problems. Firstly, it seems quite a curious coincidence that Lagos is being made to appear ungovernable just as Abacha's henchman currently standing trial are arguing that Lagos is not a conducive venue for their trial by virtue of what they see as possible threats to their safety. Is this a case of a self-fulfilling prophecy? Secondly, I think Mr. President

should know, and should strive to educate his party men accordingly, that security is a key governance domain that lends itself to bipartisan initiatives. In designing containment mechanisms to confront threats to national security, no party should adopt a know-it-all attitude more so in fractious system such as ours. (Wasn't it only the other day that Mr. President thought Choba was in Bayelsa State?) Issuing presidential threats of a possible state of emergency while adopting a condescending attitude to an elected state chief executive can only generate so much heat without throwing any light on a possible way forward. Or, are there people already jockeying to become Minister of Lagos Affairs, a portfolio that, interestingly became prominent under the government of the Northern Peoples Congress?

Old and young in Yoruba politics*

Is it possible that the so-called generation divide in Yoruba politics may be no more than just another plank in the unending squabble over the sharing of the spoils of the June 12 struggle. I sincerely hope not, for that would introduce a rather depressing and cynical aslant into the issue. Still, Yoruba politics has not been without its dose of cynicism. Consider this:

One of the more memorable melodramas at the Constituent Assembly of 1977-78 was a move to bar anyone above the age of 70 from contesting elections under the Constitution of the Second Republic then being fashioned by the Assembly. Of course, one did not have to be a genius or a soothsayer to guess the target of that clause. Chief Obafemi Awolowo was going to turn 70 just before the elections and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was then well past that threshold. However, considering that the Great Zik had up to that point rebuffed moves to drag him into partisan politics, the prime target was obviously Chief Awolowo, who had never disguised his interest in running for the nation's highest office. What was not so obvious at the time was that behind the visible faces seen to be sponsoring the motion were invisible hands, including some of Chief Awolowo's so-called loyal disciples who thought the old man was standing in their way. The head of state at the time knew some of these people who shouted Awo! in daytime and lobbied against their leader at night. Which is why even now his regard for many of them continues to hover somewhere below zero-level. Today, some of those "disciples" are themselves old men at the receiving end of the petulance and manoeuvrings of younger elements. Naturally, they dread the possibility that they could be paid back in their own coin.

Beyond the advertised positions on both sides of the old versus young controversy, there is need for a deeper look that could throw up some rather interesting discoveries. Some of the drivel coming from the younger generation

* *Vanguard*, October 13, 2000

really give cause for concern. You hear things like "Oh, those old men have been around for too long". Says who? What is the acceptable number of years that a man should spend in public life? Would the people making this allegation say the same thing if the old man involved were to be their father! On other side, the old men's favourite counterpoint is nothing if not self-serving. The claim that anyone raising questions about the reigning cabal in Yoruba land at a material time must be a traitor is nothing but sheer blackmail. Leadership cannot be solely about incantations or holding the prerogative for labelling people as "Demo" and setting them up for a lynch mob. The Yoruba man who is now president is an arch-demo, but see those who are calling him traitor. The line dividing the loyalist and the traitor grows faint by the day. And greater sophistication is needed to properly position the Yoruba in the unfolding drama of Nigerians politics.

The Yoruba hold a special place in modern Nigeria. For good or for ill they largely define both the core and contours of the country's politics. Theirs have been the most resounding voice in the fight against oppressors – local or foreign. Recall the anti-colonial struggle and the battle for June 12. Unfortunately, theirs have often also been a most decisive factor in titling the scale in favour of retrogression at critical points. Witness the Western Region crisis of 1962-66, the twelve two-third's controversy of 1979 and the ill-starred Shonekan interregnum of 1993.

Today, the Yoruba stand at a very critical intersection in the evolution of their local politics and the national milieu in which that politics is played out. Chief Awolowo once proffered an elegant elaboration of the notion of the led-leadership, propounded by Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung. Awo admonished that the easiest way to lead the Yoruba was to take time to find out where they want to go and then to lead them there. In which direction do the Yoruba wish to be led today! To a large extent, their preferences and desires have really not changed much from Awo's time.

It is the desire of every Yoruba to be led by people who ensure that all children can go to good schools, that people can live in safe neighbourhoods and that all the things that make for "life more abundant" are within easy reach. It is not the desire of the Yoruba to be led willy-nilly into an unconditional unity with the rest of Nigeria, if that means trading off these desirables.

And this is where I think some of the older folk, whatever their excesses, have a clearer understanding of the imperatives. Many Yoruba of my generation suffer from a syndrome that for want a better description we may call FGC patriotism. It is the starry-eyed patriotism that people are fed with at the Federal Government Colleges where the fiction is perpetrated that all Nigerians are one. Of course those concocting such a falsehood know it to be lie, but their hapless victims would have so swallowed the line that it had to take a tragic jolt like the annulment to cure some of us. Even now, the hangover of the indoctrination is still evident, beclouding the judgment of otherwise sensible folk. Which old men

are not allowing us to reach out? Can any of those saying this reach out more than Abiola did? What became of him? Has any of them reached out more than Obasanjo has? See what his "friends" are doing to him.

Just as some of the old men often try to stigmatize people with the Demo label, it appears some of the younger elements now want to tar others by calling them "tribalists" and war-mongers. But taking a determined pro-Yoruba stance on national issue does not mean that you hate others. It is just that the memory of the annulment is still too fresh for the luxury of giving their enemies a benefit of the doubt. We live in an era of "reciprocal paranoia". Denying that fact or wishing that it wasn't so will not make the underlying issues go away. Therefore, any tendency that seeks, deliberately or inadvertently, to fracture the solidarity of the Yoruba under the guise of some generational shift invites measure of suspicion and resistance.

Rather than dissipate energies, what the Yoruba need at this time is to deepen their collective approach by blending old and young into a formidable common front. This front then serves as the platform for engaging other parts of the country towards forging alliances that ensure the isolation of elements still nursing the agenda of humiliating and decimating the Yoruba.

What do the Yoruba want? (1)

"Why is it that any time there is a crisis in Nigeria you people promptly break into three camps?"

The poser came virtually out of the blues, leaving the respondent slightly disoriented at first until she was able to gather her wits about her to enter a retort. "And who are the 'you people'?"

"You Yoruba people of course," the accuser answered back.

"I'm interested in knowing about these three camps. Which are they?" she asked the accuser.

"You mean you don't know," countered the accuser as he volunteered the following analysis: "One camp says we are with you; another says we are against you; and the third tells you 'don't mind both camps', we're not bothered either way."

I've tried to recapitulate as best I could a conversation that took place during one of those great controversies that routinely erupted in the heat of the Abdulsalami Transition when it did indeed appear that the world – or at least the part of it that Nigeria occupies – might just come to an end. The interlocutors were two older friends – one from Ogun State, the other from Katsina. The discussion took place, I think, just after the death of MKO Abiola when there was so much speculation and furore over whether the Yoruba mainstream should (or would) chose to boycott the transition to civil rule programme of General Abdulsalami Abubakar. The million-dollar question that the Katsina man posed still rings in my ears each time I have cause to appraise the state of inter-ethnic power bloc politics in Nigeria.

Divining the Yoruba intention vis-à-vis Nigeria remains a subject of much speculation and myth-making. And divining really is the word, for it is an exercise that is likely to task the resourcefulness of even the most adept *Ifa* priest. The question of where the Yoruba might be headed (or not be headed) on an issue is arguably one of the most passionately debated topics in national

discourse. Second perhaps only to the acres of verbiage and not inconsiderable energy often expended on unravelling the so-called machinations of a putative Hausa-Fulani oligarchy.

Debate on the "Yoruba agenda" came up once again during a rather provocative but educative encounter that I had with my friend Fafaa Dan Princewill penultimate Sunday. The occasion was a meeting of the Progressive Action Movement (PAM) hosted by Akin Osuntokun at which Nobel Laureate Professor Wole Soyinka addressed the group. Unbeknownst to me, my encounter with Fafaa, himself an illustrious son of the Niger Delta, was to prepare me for a more robust parley with some young elements from that area during my visit to Port Harcourt last week.

"You guys are sending out confusing signals", was the first shot that someone fired as I found myself in the midst of a mixed bunch of young academics and even younger oil company executives. And so it was that I was on the hot seat on an evening I had looked forward to nothing more intellectually demanding than a quiet drink. Another fellow was to put things less charitably: "You Yoruba people have confused yourselves and are now confusing others."

What was the basis of these rather serious allegations, I asked. To which a litany of so-called Yoruba wrongdoings was reeled out. How the Yoruba perambulated from the PDP to APP before finally landing in AD. How they are now repeating the same merry-go-round with Bola Ige, Olu Falae, and Bolaji Akinyemi pulling AD/Afenifere in all manner of directions. How the Afenifere leader's daughter is "eating" from a government that her father claims to be opposed to. How the Afenifere's deputy leader is championing a lawsuit that seeks to deny offshore revenues to people whom the Yoruba claim to be their friends. How it was under a Yoruba president that Odi town was levelled. How the Yoruba now have the Presidency and yet carry on as though they were in opposition. And how the same Yoruba then threaten fire and brimstone should anything untoward happen to a President they claim they do not want.

"What exactly do you people want," was the exasperated query that came on the heels of the litany. It is not an idle question. And the charges listed above may not be totally lacking in merit.

In many parts of the country, there are people who see the Yoruba as the natural leaders of Nigeria because of a combination of largely fortuitous factors. The fact is that there are large segments of the country that look up to the Yoruba for leadership on many issues and on the general direction of the country as a whole. But what quality of leadership are the Yoruba offering? It is hard to beat one's chest on the issue while keeping a straight face.

Some say that the crisis of the annulment was resolved in favour of the Yoruba. That is debatable. But we'll leave the debate for now. Granted that the Yoruba won what have they done with this "victory"? How well have they

responded to growing divisions in the ranks of their opponents? What are they doing to further isolate their enemies?

The charitable view is this: to ask what the Yoruba want is the wrong question. And that the right question to ask is: what do the Yoruba not want? This could be a paradoxical game of affirmation by negatives, tasking the ingenuity of logicians. So what do the Yoruba not want?

What do the Yoruba want? (2)

To recapitulate: Last week we called attention to some anecdotes on how the Yoruba are viewed in the context of inter-ethnic bloc power politics in Nigeria. We alluded to continuing concerns, within and without, on the inconsistencies that seem to characterize the Yoruba outlook and response to issues. We argued that these inconsistencies could be construed as insincerity and/or lack of seriousness, unwittingly suggesting that the Yoruba are either unwilling or unable to live up to the leadership role expected of them, a role for which they seem eminently qualified. We held that the flip-flops that seem to define present day political conduct of the Yoruba could stand in the way of efforts to consolidate the gains of the pro-democracy struggle, in which the Yoruba played a leading role and made heavy sacrifices. This could in turn impact negatively on alliance building with critical segments of the national community, particularly in the Niger Delta and the Middle Belt. We held also that, now as in 1998-99, the Yoruba people's capacity for balanced political judgment and action is being limited by the conflicting personal agenda of various strands of the mainstream leadership. This has resulted in what some see as a frittering away of the gains of "power shift" especially the Yoruba's inability to fully exploit the disarray wrought in the camps of their rivals by the Obasanjo presidency. We then concluded by entering a caveat – that an inquiry into Yoruba preferences vis-à-vis Nigerian politics raises a question that is perhaps best posed in the negative i.e. rather than ask what the Yoruba want we should seek instead to find out what the Yoruba do not want.

First, to set the context: The Obasanjo presidency has triggered many unintended consequences that continue to reverberate in the innermost chambers of Nigeria politics. In Yorubaland as elsewhere, this has set off a crisis of both strategy and tactics in fashioning a methodology for engaging the politics of the Fourth Republic. Underlying this crisis are issues of mindset and worldviews.

The first thing is that for the Yoruba, being in Nigeria under the present arrangement is neither a first option nor a *fait accompli*. They ask to be

convinced that it makes sense to be in Nigeria under sub-optimal circumstances. And, let us face it, Nigeria is doing a very poor job of convincing its doubters. Many Yoruba look back with justifiable pride and nostalgia to the days when they ran their shop as seemed best to them in the Western Region and wish that that era could return, in lieu of an outright bail-out from Nigeria. The Yoruba are reluctant Nigerians.

It is equally clear that the Yoruba do not want to be told how to run their affairs. Nor do they want leaders chosen for them by others just because such leaders happen to be good Nigerians – whatever that means. In the mainstream Yoruba mindset, to be called a good Nigerian could actually carry a pejorative connotation – such is the disdain and derision with which the Yoruba often view what they consider to be a most pernicious unity of the lowest common denominator foisted on them in present-day Nigeria.

Thirdly, the Yoruba do not desire to build an empire and would not stand for being incorporated willy-nilly into someone else's empire. In a sense, this could be the source of their eternal friction with the Fulani who often betray an inclination for being compulsive empire-builders.

The Yoruba do not mind taking inconvenient positions in the short run in pursuit of a larger strategic goal. This includes forgoing the titular headship of Nigeria as they did under Shonekan. The Yoruba do not desire to have their own as President of Nigeria at all cost, if this means denying themselves the opportunity for welfare, self-expression and self-actualization.

In adopting the stance elaborated above, the Yoruba have often been helped by a most fortuitous, almost uncanny, streak of ultimately getting their enemies to train their guns on themselves, decimating one another in a hail of "friendly fire". This assessment is not fanciful. It has happened twice: First in 1966 when the Igbo and the north turned on each other after the collapse of an Independence alliance that was meant to isolate the Yoruba. And second in 1998 when the alliance forged between Sani Abacha and the northern elite to bury June 12 collapsed and the north itself felt compelled to do away with Abacha whose war on the Yoruba had by then snowballed into a war on the entire country, threatening to consume the north itself.

The Yoruba do not mind not winning every battle. As a people much given to drama, motion is almost as important as movement; and the process is as equally coveted as the outcome. Which is probably why they make such great lawyers and human rights activists, fighting all manner of causes. But in all of this, it pays to know that the Yoruba do not start a war they cannot win.

What does this translate to in terms of meeting present challenges? First, to declare that I think there is hope for the Yoruba in Nigeria, regardless of seeming evidence to the contrary. And the reasons actually go beyond Nigeria. Of all the people of Nigeria the Yoruba are the most connected to the international system. The Yoruba were blessed early enough with a political leadership that enunciated an educational policy that prepared the people for

international competitiveness. Today, they have a critical mass of professional elite able to engage the world. Globalization seems tailor-made for them and Nigeria presents large enough a playing field from which to operate. Using a re-configured Nigeria as pedestal, they can take on the world.

But in this task of reconfiguration, there must be appropriate vehicles and the tracks need to be well set out. No option should be ruled in and none should be ruled out. A two track approach to politics has become imperative. The Yoruba must now come to one inescapable realization: The skills and attributes required to successfully play politics at home in Yorubaland are vastly different from those required for successfully engaging the rest of the country at the Federal level. Curiously, Sir Ahmadu Bello seemed to have been the earliest exponent of this two-track approach, with his decision not to venture beyond being Premier of Northern Nigeria, his temperament and preferences having rendered the Federal Prime Ministerial office unappealing. Both those pushing for a PDP victory in the southwest and those angling to redefine the current Yoruba presence at the centre would do well to keep this in mind.

The former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson was once asked about his general attitude to life. He chose to answer the question by making allusion to the weather. Before venturing out each day, he said, he takes a look at the skies to see the cloud formation. On a day when he is not too sure what the clouds are saying, he carries his umbrella nonetheless. "You see, I am generally an optimist" he told the interviewer, "but an optimist who carries his umbrella". I think there's a message here for all Yoruba. And it is a message they should heed, lest someone accuse them that the only Yoruba people who seem to know what they want are in the OPC.

The Yoruba vote*

Once again, the Yoruba are staging one of their famous political shows that ultimately entertain and infuriate the other parts of the country. The ruckus this time around is about the National Assembly functions of last Saturday, which has caused considerable disquiet as to what the emerging future from the political rally in the southwest could be for the presidential and governorship elections holding tomorrow. Listening to some of the gladiators, you could get the impression that the world is about to come to an end. No such thing is likely to happen. But while we ruminate the ways and wheretofores of the elections, let us revisit a piece of folklore that we used in an earlier appraisal of the Yoruba response to the Obasanjo presidency.

People who went to school in the old Western Nigeria would remember the popular *Alawiye* series that was part of the Yoruba Language curriculum in the elementary classes in those days. Interestingly, the author of the series was Chief J. F. Odunjo, an illustrious Yoruba son and one of the early leaders of the Western Region, who was a minister in the cabinet of Chief Obafemi Awolowo in the 1950s. Coincidentally too, Chief Odunjo happened to have been father-in-law to Mallam Adamu Ciroma, the present Minister of Finance who also doubles as Chairman of the Obasanjo Campaign Organization.

The *Alawiye* story in question is the one about a debt that the tortoise owed the tiger. The story is told of how the tortoise had borrowed some money from the tiger only to refuse to pay back on the appointed date.

Rather than pay the debt, the tortoise preferred instead to badmouth his creditor all over town. Not only this, he freely boasted about how his cunning would always put him ahead of the tiger and how, if caught, he would put up a good fight.

One day, after his usual run of mischief and badmouthing, the tortoise was cornered by the tiger. It was at a crossroads and there was no escape. Having

* *Vanguard*, Friday, April 18, 2003

gotten his prey where he wanted him, the tiger asked the tortoise to say his last prayer as that was to be his final day on earth. The tortoise meekly agreed. But rather than pray, the tortoise started to flail around, scattering dried leaves and foliage and branches all over the place and leaving scratch marks on the ground. Puzzled, the tiger warned the tortoise that he won't get far with any of his usual tricks and asked him what he was up to anyway. The tortoise replied that he knew he was going to be killed but that he wanted it to be said by anyone who saw his dead body at the scene that: "It is true that the tortoise was worsted, but looking at the scene of the battle, no one can deny that he put up a good fight!"

What is the moral of this tale? It is this: A lot of bluffing is now going on as people who have spent down their political goodwill strive to put up an appearance of strength and relevance.

In describing what happened in the Southwest last Saturday, the word that most commentators seem to have settled on for now is "upset." It has been alleged that something has happened that totally goes against the run of play. Some say that victory has been procured through underhand means. The election tribunals should be able to unravel this. But there are those who would argue that what happened last Saturday in the Southwest is an upset only to those that it has upset i.e. those who have always claimed to know how the Yoruba will vote at any and every election.

Last Monday, *Afenifere*, the pan-Yoruba group, held an emergency meeting with governors of the six Southwest states to review the performance of the Alliance for Democracy (AD) in the National Assembly elections. The meeting rose with a loud condemnation of the results, which showed AD doing rather badly compared with the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP).

Emotions are obviously running very high on the results. But to hear the *Afenifere* spokesman after the meeting, one would think that AD has just lost the Southwest to the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP). The spokesman warns of the readiness of the Yoruba to resist enslavement, and which tallies with the sentiments of all true Yoruba sons and daughters. But many wonder if given its special relationship with AD in the Southwest *Afenifere* should not have first resisted the brazen enslavement of the party by the governors. What enslavement can be more pernicious than the one the AD governors have foisted on the party and on their states, to the extent that they have now constituted themselves into warlords answerable only to themselves?

So much is being said about a re-enactment of 1983. This analogy is a very poor one indeed. PDP is no NPN. The president today is Yoruba not Fulani. And the people of the Southwest are not as beholden to AD anymore as some *Afenifere* leaders may fancy that they are. AD today does not carry the weight or legitimacy that Chief Awolowo's UPN carried in 1983.

Indeed, if what many Yoruba people acknowledge in whispers were to be verbalized in public, the widespread feeling is that AD has ceased to be a viable

vehicle for the pursuit of the Yoruba agenda or for the actualization of core Yoruba interests.

A key component of this core interest is the return of President Obaanjo to office for a second term. Many in the Southwest will probably mourn the defeat of an upright man like Osun Governor Chief Adebisi Akande and be hurt by the ascension of a character like Iyiola Omisore to the Senate. But to put it plainly, Yoruba people are not likely to consider the loss of some governorship seats by AD as such a terrible price to pay to secure Obasanjo's second term.

As we once had cause to note here, the Obasanjo Presidency has redefined both the mainstream and the fringe in Yoruba and national politics. We must admit that some things have changed. Obasanjo may not be Abiola or Awolowo, but there is a lot of merit in the argument that his Presidency has altered, if not shattered, many pet assumptions and orthodoxies about our politics. Both the so-called Yoruba mainstream in *Afenifere* and their rivals need to fashion a credible and mature response to the paradigm shift that is now afoot. Neither side is likely to succeed merely by singing the same old tunes. This puts the onus on AD to show a qualitatively superior performance in governance if it is to check a massive defection to the party of a President that many people now identify with. Clearly, AD has not done this. Or, who can say that AD stands head above shoulders in comparison with the other parties in terms of performance?

Myths cannot survive where leaders have offered themselves up for self-demystification. Sad as it may sound, what emerged from the National Assembly elections could be sustained at tomorrow's elections. And night will not turn into day or vice versa just because Chief Segun Osoba or Otunba Niyi Adebayo or Chief Ade Adefarati fails to return as governor. We need to be very clear about this and keep a measured response as events unfold.

Afenifere's choice

In his landmark work on the late Soviet dictator Josef Stalin (*Stalin: The Man and his Era*, Allen Lane, 1973) Harvard University Professor Adam Ulam instructs on the nature and sequence of great political changes. According to Ulam revolutions do not just occur. An old order would over a period of time have been de-legitimized in the hearts and minds of the people before the *coup de grace* of electoral defeat or revolutionary overthrow takes place to finish the regime off.

Ulam notes that, "a society cannot be controlled fully by political and economic (means)...if its spiritual and intellectual nourishment is neglected." With specific reference to Russia, he posits that, "the edifice of Tsarist absolutism was undermined long before 1917, not by the revolution, not even by military defeats, but by the works of a handful of writers, philosophers, and satirists," foremost amongst whom was Leo Tolstoy. Their testimony to the "brutality, inefficiency, and preposterousness" of the regime, he wrote, "took hold in the intelligentsia and then seeped down to the masses." Ulam further urges that it was only when belief in the regime had crumbled, "that a new faith in the communist revolution could take root."

Nothing kills off the old order faster than the loss of moral legitimacy with the masses and of intellectual defensibility amongst the enlightened classes. Once the hearts of the people and the minds of the elite turn against a regime, that regime's days are numbered. To quote Ulam again: "The imperial regime collapsed because there was nobody...ready and willing to defend it."

How does a regime get to a point where there is "nobody ready and willing to defend it? "This is a question that we must ponder as the full picture from the election emerges in the southwest. For what has happened is nothing short of the overthrow of the regime of *Afenifere* in the region.

Leadership is in many significant respects a priestly function. The leader stands in relation to his followers in a symbiosis of credibility and loyalty characteristic of the relationship between the priest and his congregation. Where credibility is lost, loyalty cannot be guaranteed. Over the past fortnight, many must have wondered at the ease with which the PDP victory in the southwest has happened and why opposition to the victory has been tepid at best. Why have the people not protested? *Afenifere* would probably argue that it is because the whole place has been garrisoned. The truth, though, is that disaffection amongst the populace has attained a critical mass, thus providing an intellectually respectable rationale for a contentious victory at the polls.

Afenifere and the AD southwest have been de-legitimized to such an extent that no one is willing to fight in the streets just so some people can continue to play God in their respective fiefdoms. The people are not convinced that the governors have done enough to warrant the kind of loyalty that impels Yoruba people to kill or get killed over electoral contests the way they did in 1965 and 1983. The progressive deterioration of governance has destroyed the will of our people to resist. The AD governors and their patrons have rubbished the progressive pedigree and reduced their affiliation with Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the pro-June 12 struggle variously into a meal ticket, a nest-egg and a launch-pad for promoting largely incompetent scions.

There is a paradox of Nigerian politics that was established by the gubernatorial elections of 1983 during the Second Republic. The paradox is that you cannot sustain a contentious electoral victory in a place where you do not have support. This paradox was to play itself out in the divergent fortunes of the then National Party of Nigeria (NPN) in the old Oyo and Ondo States. The NPN was able to sustain its declared victory in Oyo State, leading to the replacement of Chief Bola Ige with Dr. Omololu Olunloyo. But the party could not pull off the same stunt in the old Ondo State where Chief Akin Omoboriowo battled to unseat incumbent Chief Adekunle Ajasin. Such was the violence and uproar in Ondo State that the only place that was safe enough for Omoboriowo to answer to the title of governor-elect was the studios of the NTA in Lagos!

Why was NPN able to get away with Oyo State but not Ondo State? Simple. Its declared victory in Oyo, while contentious, was not outrageous. Virtually every election victory in Nigeria is seen by the opposition to have come from fiddling with the ballot. Sometimes, this could be a self-fulfilling prophecy as every party prepares to rig and electoral contests are seen to have been won by the party that "out-rigged" the other(s). My friend, Akin Osuntokun, who is media and publicity director of the Obasanjo campaign organisation, says that many Nigerian politicians suffer from what he calls a mental inability to contemplate any other elections result aside from their own victory. Given the way things have now turned out, some people might argue that Akin cannot be expected to say otherwise.

Still, what has happened in the southwest is not so much acceptance of PDP as a rejection of AD. It is a rejection of the leaders but not necessarily a repudiation of the principles that had for decades underpinned the Yoruba outlook and response to Nigeria politics. Those who rejoice about having successfully dragged the Yoruba into the mainstream of national politics as if that were some kind of capture had better beware of the perils of premature applause. The newly elected governors and representatives are after all Yoruba people, who would have to answer to needs and interests of the Yoruba at the end of the day.

In *The Red Book*, a collection of political jokes, the Queen of England was said to have been worried about the harsh tone of the campaigns for the 1979 British general elections, which she considered to have been quite un-British and rather worrisome. One day, she was said to have called the Prime Minister, Mr. Jim Callaghan, whose Labour Party was then running against Mrs. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party, to express her concern. In particular, the Queen said she wished to be educated further on the difference between a disaster and a tragedy, since according to her, these appeared to be the two words most frequently used in the campaign. The joke's punch line says that the prime minister cleared his throat and responded: "Your majesty, if Mrs. Thatcher were to fall into the River Thames, that would be a disaster. But if someone were to rescue her, then that would be a tragedy!"

The election results no doubt presents *Afenifere* with a disaster. But what could turn the disaster into tragedy is if those concerned fail to learn the appropriate lessons and re-connect with the people accordingly. They could spend their time in self-delusion and recrimination over who stole what election. Or they can accept their chastening as an opportunity to weed out all dead wood, rethink their strategy and re-position the Yoruba for some very interesting battles that still lie ahead.

PDP in Yorubaland.

The controversy over the pulling down of the statue of Chief Obafemi Awolowo in Ibadan once again focuses attention on the meaning and ramification of the regime change ushered in by the April/May elections in the Southwest. The statue was erected by the Alliance for Democracy (AD) administration of Lam Adesina who has since been voted out and replaced with Rasheed Ladoja of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) given the emergent scenario in the Southwest. The toppling of the statue was a clear political incendiary. But leading members of the PDP have exhibited tremendous political savvy in the rather delicate matter. As the party that has just taken power in most of the Southwest, the PDP has condemned the act, which was clearly going to put it in an embarrassing position.

President Obasanjo has spoken forcefully against the pulling down of the statue. On his own part, Otunba Gbenga Daniel, Governor of Chief Awolowo's home state, Ogun; has asked that the full weight of the law be visited on the culprits. The Governor of Oyo State, the state most directly affected by the controversy, however, introduced a novel angle into the matter when he was reported to have attributed the act to "unknown soldiers". Anyone familiar with the history of "unknown soldiers" in Nigeria would be quick to spot the irony in Governor Ladoja's claim, which was said to have been made at a meeting of the southwest PDP governors with President Obasanjo.

Still, it is a nice thing the PDP leaders have been quick and unambiguous in speaking out against an issue that touches a new nerve in Yorubaland. Many Yoruba people consider an attack on the person of Chief Awolowo or any symbolic representation thereof as an act of sacrilege. And it would appear that whoever toppled the Awo statue was well aware of the flammable sensitivities involved. For now, though, the PDP seems to have managed to wriggle out of a very deadly trap.

* *Vanguard*, June 20, 2003.

But the hidden meanings in the statue palaver should not be lost on us. Clearly, there are people who are eager to interpret the PDP's take-over of the southwest as the end of the Awolowo era. The toppling of the Awo statue was probably meant to provide a very eloquent symbolism in this regard. Yet the legacy of Chief Obafemi Awolowo goes beyond the symbolism of statues.

Two schools of thought are in contention as people seek to understand the import of AD's loss of all the states of the Southwest except Lagos to PDP. For some, the PDP take-over is a happy development. In their view, the perennially recalcitrant Yoruba have now been finally humbled and conscripted into the national mainstream. It is, for this school of thought, a historic conquest.

This reading is flawed because it substitutes common sense with wishful thinking. Other than their support for a "son-of-the-soil" that was under threat from his one-time sponsors, the Yoruba have not told anyone why they voted the way they did at the last elections. It could therefore be very misleading to jump to conclusions on what they have done or not done. Just as I think it should worry any serious analyst that the Yoruba bloc vote remains intact, regardless of the switchover. It would be interesting to find out which mainstream the Yoruba have now joined: the one controlled by their enemies or a new mainstream forged by Obasanjo's second term bid.

The other school of thought claims that the PDP's win in the Southwest has been procured through sheer daylight robbery. According to this reading, what the PDP's victory has done is to hand Yoruba over to those that the Yoruba derisively call "demo" elements, i.e. loyalists of the Akintola tendency. As far as this school of thought is concerned, Yorubaland has now been seized by barbarians and quislings who are going to finish off the job that Akintola started.

This reading is also flawed essentially because it freezes the history of Yoruba politics at the stage of the Second Republic when the NPN held sway at the Federal level. The truth is that much has happened since then to re-define Yoruba outlook in the Fourth Republic. For one, the northern supremacists who defined the soul of the NPN have since shot themselves in the foot with the annulment and their role in the Abacha regime. Today, they are mostly in ANPP and not in PDP and those that made the party's victory at the polls possible in the Southwest are largely from the progressive stable. PDP is not NPN. And many people in the Southwest acknowledge that Obasanjo has in fact done more to boost Yoruba political confidence in recent times than any other Yorubaman apart from Awolowo.

What has happened now is that the Yoruba have entered the national mainstream on their own terms and on the basis of broad national coalition. What they intend to do with this grand entry should be a source of interest to observers and concern in their rivals. Rather than the on-going triumphalism in some quarters, it is good to pause and ponder on who has captured whom. As for the PDP elements in the Southwest there is a need to realise that the Awolowo-Akintola face-off has not suddenly been resolved in favour of Akintola. The

face-off was about contending approaches to bringing the Yoruba into the national mainstream. While some believed that it could only be done on the terms of so-called northern power brokers, others felt the Yoruba should be able to run their lives and their entry into national politics on respectable terms. Chief Awolowo belonged to the latter school of thought and he was nothing if not a federalist. The disadvantage his opponent has was that their eagerness to join the mainstream on whatever terms made many Yoruba people wonder if they had any interest in power other than to pillage.

The Southwest PDP must now decide which tendency it agrees with. When people shout "PDP Power!" they should remember that the correct rendering of the slogan is "Power to the people." It is not power to pilfer or to engage in sundry acts of brigandage that the Yoruba still remember from the last time "demo" elements took power in these parts. The mandate they have is not to join a feeding frenzy but to avail the rest of the country of those standards and values that the Yoruba have always boasted about as being the hallmark of the old Western Region.

It was the inability to keep faith with those standards and values that cost AD the elections. Yoruba people may have voted out Awo's errant followers. But they have not turned their backs on his progressive politics and governance ideals. The AD failed because placed besides its governors and representatives, President Obasanjo appeared like the one promoting the ideas of the Action Group. The onus is now on the PDP governors and representatives in Yorubaland to prove that the Yoruba have made the right choice. And in so doing, they should remember that four years down the line, they will not have the benefit of an Obasanjo re-election bid to see them through. As the Yoruba say, the whip that was used on the senior wife is still in safe-keeping in case it is also needed to whip the junior wife into line someday.

Afenifere and the “reluctant” suitor*

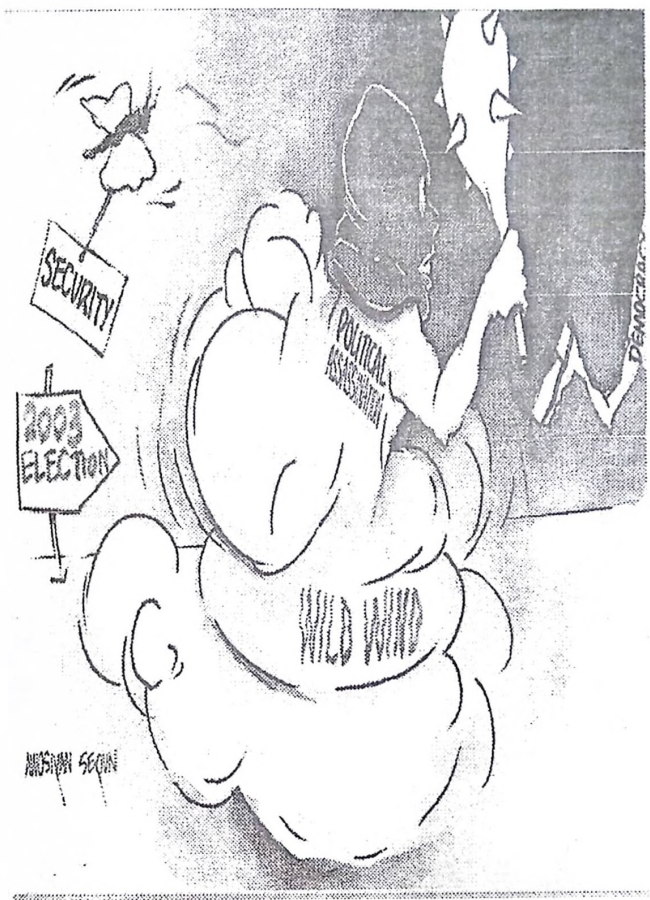
The story is told of a not-so-young spinster who had been dating her suitor for a very long time. For no reason that the lady could fathom, the fellow in question was taking quite a while proposing marriage to her. He just never seemed eager or able or willing to get round to the M word, thus keeping the lady on tenterhooks. Days turned into weeks and into months and then into years. And the unpalatable prospect of lifetime spinsterhood stared our lady in the face.

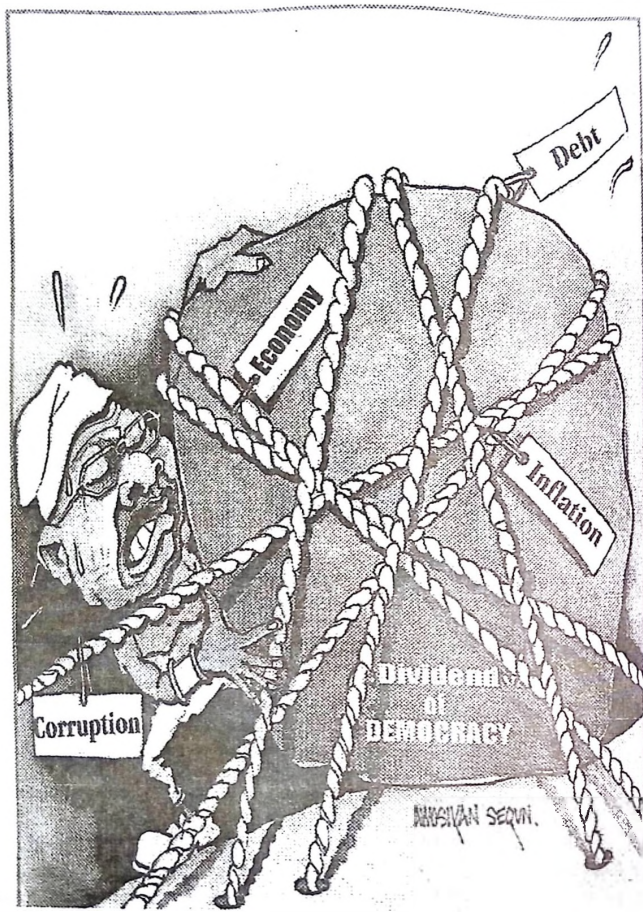
As would be expected, the gentlemen's inexplicable tardiness caused considerable disquiet not just for the hapless lady but also for her expectant family and her circle of eager friends. Concerned that she was not getting any younger, and seeing that the fellow seemed content to generally take his time in spite of all subtle – and not so subtle – pressure and nudges in the desired direction, the lady decided one day to take her fate in her hands. However, as becomes a well-brought up woman, she was not going to pop the word just like that, in a frontal manner. Rather, after some wary consultations, she lighted upon an ingenious subterfuge that she was sure would end her woes.

And so she set the stage. One day she invited the fellow to a rather romantic dinner at her parent's home. After the dinner, which had been laid out with all the effects in place and with her parents conveniently out of sight, the lady decided it was the perfect time to put her plan to work. Out of the blues, she suddenly asked the fellow: “What do you think my answer would be if you were to ask me to marry you?” Puzzled, the fellow was at first short of words but then soon gathered his wits together, answering in smug self-assurance: “Of course, I know you'd say yes.” And then the lady posed her punch line: “So, why are you so scared to hear me say Yes, I thought it was No that guys were supposed to be scared of hearing?” The fellow did not have an answer to that one. The rest, as they say, is history.

* *Vanguard*, August 29, 2003











Politics and welfare*

How much of the preoccupations of the so-called Nigeria Politician really touch the lives of up to one percent of his fellow countrymen? Or put another way, how much of what really matters to ninety-nine percent of our compatriots readily feature in our list of concerns and priorities? Okay, may be these percentages are a bit exaggerated but I had to ask myself these questions as I pondered the pathetic but by no means isolated case of the young man whose plight provides the backdrop to today's article.

Kunle is his name and he is in his early-20s. I heard the story of his misfortune last week purely by chance, and only because the story was making the rounds in the neighbourhood as people of goodwill rallied to save the young man's means of livelihood. Because Kunle's workplace also doubles as his place of abode, the threat of a job lost mean much more than just lost income. For him, not having this job could also make all the difference between having a roof over his head and becoming a vagrant, with the attendant unsavoury consequences in a city like Lagos.

Kunle works (or used to work, we're not certain which now) as a gateman at a private nursery and primary school across the street from my mother-in-law's house near the Lagos State NYSC Orientation Camp. As the story goes, he had lost his father at a very tender age and a few years back, his mother who had been the family's sole breadwinner also passed on. With very little to fall back on the loss of parental support meant abrupt stoppage of schooling. But the boy was determined to keep alive his dream of returning to school someday, so he decided to get a job that would enable him attend evening classes.

As is often the case in a town where people build their fortunes on the misfortunes of others, Kunle's peregrinations soon led him to an employment agency. Like their cousins in the estate agencies, employment agents are fast emerging as the dread of many a young man in search of a proper in life in the

* *Vanguard*, March 30, 2001

city. Anyway, Kunle was able to secure a job through the agency as a gateman in the school for the primary sum of ₦1,000 a month, plus the offer of a room to live in within the school premise. At first, this latter bit seemed to jell with his back-to-school plans. But ₦1,000 is not the kind of money anyone should live on for a month, plus or minus accommodation. So the young man was soon on the lookout for something better.

His search turned up some rather interesting discoveries, one of which was that the agency was being paid ₦4,000 for his services. So the agent was paying him only a quarter of what the school paid while pocketing ₦3,000 every month. Naturally, the man was very unhappy to discover that he was being fleeced. He grumbled to the school authorities. And his grumbling got to the agency's hearing. What the agency did was to post another gateman, a much older fellow, to the school while informing Kunle that his services were no longer required. He was also told that he had two days to seek alternative accommodation, to make room for the new hire. The poor boy is now so dejected and confused, with no clue whatsoever what to do other than to cry out to whoever cared to listen.

The truth, of course, is that anyone who has lived in these parts over the past twenty years knows that there is nothing unique about Kunle's case. And that's what really makes it a problem for you and I. What kind of a country is it where such misfortune and misery have become so unremarkable and so commonplace? Some people would probably say that youthful brashness was the boy's undoing. But does anyone in a correct frame of mind have a right to expect his fellow man to subsist on ₦1,000 a month in Lagos?

One does not have to be Mother Theresa to know that there is something terribly wrong with a country that permits this level of wretchedness for a good majority of its people. Even if only from a standpoint of enlightened self-interest, it just does not make sense. And it is not safe.

What kind of people would sleep easy knowing that their kinds have been put in the care of someone who is paid ₦1,000 a month as salary? Were the young man to get it into his head to team up with kidnappers or ritual killers, who can imagine the kind of havoc he can wreak. Even now, as yet another able-bodied young man becomes jobless and homeless, a potential digit is added to the already worrisome crime statistics. Who can say what this young man's threshold of resistance would be to tempting offers from a robbery gang?

Some people love to sermonise on those things from the safe confines of well-appointed homes, claiming that people need to persevere and that whoever would become a criminal would so be. Yet truth is that the system is already overheating from the Kunles. And no country has a right to continue to expect good behaviour from its people while it consistently tempts them into criminality.

So while we, as incumbents and contestants, threaten fire and brimstone over 2003 and "no vacancy" and even as we jaw and war on deregulation and

privatization and such other elite concerns, it is wise to remember that the most sensible kind of politics is the politics that advance the people's welfare. After all, promoting "the greatest good of the greatest number" is supposed to be one of the pillars of governance. Or isn't it any longer?

State police or police state?

The current debate over the creation of state police says two things about the Nigerian factor. First, it further confirms that we have a rather short memory, especially of our very recent history. Second, it shows that many of us are only fair-weather federalists who merely mouth federalism when it suits them.

Concerning the latter, it would appear that lurking just beneath the surface in many Nigerians is a closet unitarist who considers the rigours of true federalism a terrible bother. We find the continual negotiations that define federalism as collective sovereignty rather tedious if not downright offensive. Expectedly, it is the same mind set that characterizes our attitude to democracy and its slow, sometimes messy processes.

It seems to me quite amazing that anyone who lived through the past decade in Nigeria should fail to see the merit in the proposal for creating state-controlled police, or of any other proposal for that matter that seeks to roll back the rampaging unitarism that continues to afflict the land. From the final years of the Babangida era through the entire duration of the Abacha regime, Nigeria witnessed the triumph of the centralized state. To that extent, the proposal for state police represents a welcome attempt to restore some of the key planks of decentralization without which any federal system properly so-called can neither survive nor thrive.

The revelations that continue to assail us daily from the dark recesses of our recent past make it increasingly clear how the centralized power of the Babangida and Abacha eras was used or misused. These revelations further tell us that the divine intervention of June 8 1998 did more than just save us from another civil war. It also helped to rescue us from becoming victims of a full blown police state. If anyone is still in doubt about this let them just try to imagine what it would have taken for Abacha to rule as a civilian president. Certainly nothing less than a centralized apparatus with a big brother holed up in

Abuja, all-seeing, ever-present, never-sleeping. A police state would have been one of the key components of such an apparatus.

This was the kind of apparatus that Adewusi tried to set up in the early 1980s to prepare the ground for securing Shehu Shagari's second coming via a moonslide. It was the kind of apparatus that Akilu tried to set up for Babangida, and which made the annulment of the votes of 14 million Nigerians by a dozen (probably less) Hausa-speaking officers possible. It was the same apparatus that Gwarzo and Al-Mustapha almost succeeded in setting up for Abacha to secure his vision of ruling Nigeria till the year 2010 and possibly, beyond.

The common denominator of every police state is a centralized apparatus of terror often masquerading as the machinery of law and order. The nemesis of the police state is, therefore, a system in which control over the machinery and instruments of public security is diffused and decentralized. To the extent that the call for state police seeks to promote the emergence of a system of countervailing forces, I think it is the duty of every patriot to support it.

It was not an accident that some of the vilest authoritarian regimes in history emerged through an elaborate process of undermining and destroying local autonomy, especially in matters of public security. Examples abound from Robbespierre's Committee of Public Safety that coordinated the reign of terror during the French revolution through the emergence of Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany. Ours is a country with deep historical and cultural differences overlaid by very present fears of marginalization. Any attempt to further discountenance local autonomy in the organization of public security can only result in permanent tension.

It is said that law is both a product and a reflection of a people's way of life. By that token, the maintenance of law and order should also reflect the culture, needs and aspirations of the people. A unilinear approach of policing poses a problem in a country as diverse as Nigeria.

So many arguments have been canvassed on both sides of the state police debate. Two issues, however, provide broad categories under which those arguments may be subsumed. One has to do with desirability, the other with feasibility of state police. Some have tried to confuse the two components of the issue, treating them interchangeably and muddling up the argument in the process. This is not helpful to the debate.

The desirability of state police is not in doubt as we have sought to establish in the foregoing. However, the issue of its feasibility merits careful examination. Most prominent amongst the points canvassed to argue the non-feasibility of state police are finance and national cohesion.

It is glibly argued that if states were to be allowed to establish their own police they would not be in a position to pay. Those who make this argument conveniently omit the two key reasons why most states are insolvent. For some states, the reason is that resources that rightly belong to the states have been pilfered by the centre over several years of fiscal unitarism and brigandage. For

others, the reason is that the initiative to explore growth opportunities and expand their narrow resource base has over the years been killed by the certainty of receiving subventions from the loot captured by the centre. Both strands have in the last fifteen years of military rule become mutually reinforcing.

Concerning the claim that state police could pose a threat to national cohesion, I rather think it is an argument that is, at best, unfounded. If the truth be told, state police, just like regional military commands, pose a threat only to those who would rather hold their compatriots to ransom by being the only ones in exclusive control of legitimate instruments of violence. Their fears of the call for state police is rooted in the knowledge that certain kinds of political rascalities become impermissible once every component of the federation – state or region – is in a position to organize for its own security and the integrity of its way of life.

One question: at which time was Nigeria closer to disintegration – under the decentralized federalism of Balewa or under the centralized despotism of Abacha?

In all, the debate over creation of state police represents yet another crucial plank in the larger debate for restructuring Nigeria on the basis of equity. Restructuring is an idea whose time has come. We must embrace it; for only by restructuring can we so secure the foundations of our nascent democracy.

My mother's people

We buried Mma Adaure the other day. All said, I suppose that it was for her what people around here would call a glorious exit. What with all the noise and fuss that would ordinarily accompany the rites of passage of someone who lived long enough to be a great-grand-mother. What made the ceremonies even more remarkable was the fact that ours is a family that likes to pride itself as being quiet and reserved, thoroughly businesslike and with no time for frills. We're not terribly given to disturbing the neighbourhood with loud celebrations either.

Yet, I must confess that we all permitted ourselves quite a few unbelievable vanities for Mma Adaure's burial. As the Americans would say, we pulled out all the stops. The mortician's bills ran for upwards of four months while the clan, home and abroad, gathered to finalise the burial arrangements. Endless rounds of quite expensive entertainment were laid out for unending streams of local notables, age grades and other visitors who came to condole the family on the passing of their matriarch. Intermittent rounds of musket were expended all through the week of the burial. Not to talk of several cows that were dispatched over the period for no sin of theirs.

The day of the burial, the last Saturday in November, presented more than its own fair share of spectacle – a specially built indoor tomb, a white-and-blue casket in the shape of a limousine. Concerning the latter, I was convinced my mother was actually joking when she told me that she and her siblings had agreed to bury their mother in a coffin that would be the talk of the town for a long time to come. I still thought it was a joke until the casket arrived, all the way from Ghana, the work of that country's famed woodcarvers. And it was, indeed, quite a sight to behold.

At a point during the celebrations, we were sufficiently distracted for some characters from a neighbouring village to gain entry who claimed they could hold the heavens and prevent the rain from falling while the occasion lasted.

Peddling their trade with gusto, the rain-makers, or rain-catchers as the case may be, were to be responsible for putting away a sizeable chunk of fried meat and a rather immodest volume of liquor while they ostensibly appeased the "gods". They were to soon contrive a hasty exit as the clouds gathered and the heavens opened up just before the commencement of the wake keeping! Talk about making hay while the sun shone.

In all, it was a huge carnival, befitting the final obsequies of the life of an *eze*, an old lady who had lived to the ripe old age of 90 and had done so well for so many. And whose children had also done quite well in life. For the family, the entire panoply that was laid out for Mma Adaure's burial was but a fraction of what the grand dame deserved, especially as it was barely a year ago that her husband passed on. For me personally, it was an admixture of fond memories and rueful rumination on the demise of the first mother figure I came to know.

Mma Adaure is our pet name for Victoria Adaku Abakporo, my maternal grandmother in whose homestead I grew up in the early 1960s at Okwu-Uratta in Owerri. It was a very happy five years that my brother and I spent with her in the compound of *Eze* Raphael Obinna Abakporo, her consort. Five years filled with all the pampering that the children of absent parents could get from their indulgent grandparents.

The occasion of the burial presented yet another opportunity to reconnect with that aspect of one's heritage that is located east of the Niger. In spite of the merry-making that occasioned this particular visit, going to my mother's people still served the cathartic purpose of helping to concentrate one's mind. As with one's Yoruba heritage, my Igbo linkage is one of which I remain quite happy and proud. This is in spite of the increasing difficulties of managing multiple affiliations in the cauldron of ethnic intolerance that Nigeria is fast becoming.

The unifying possibilities of mixed marriages can sometimes be overstated. Still, as a product of one such marriage, I find it quite disheartening how much distance we're now putting between ourselves as peoples from different nationalities in the entity called Nigeria. I rather enjoy the fact that I do have uncles and aunts and cousins who do not speak a word of Yoruba and with whom I get along very well. And I rather suspect that I would feel thoroughly diminished if we were to arrive at that sorry pass where every association would be assessed and denominated in ethnic terms. Sadly, we seem to be moving very fast towards that terrible terminus.

As I sat under a tree outside the family compound with one of my cousins, doing a post-mortem of the burial, it was perhaps inescapable that Nigeria should be on our minds. Can our staying together ever work, he asked, against the background of recent happenings across the country. I told him our being together would only work as much as God decrees and as long as we want it to. I also told him that I have a very personal benchmark for measuring the country's survival chances.

Forty-two years ago, my parents met and took what must have then been a most unusual decision to be man and wife despite their coming from two polar ends of the country. I know of a lot of other people who did the same thing in their generation. A few compounds away from ours at Okwu-Urratta are the Amadi kids, of my generation and with a Yoruba mother and Igbo father. Yet I cannot but wonder how many of us will in today's Nigeria go into a mixed marriage with our eyes wide open.

Asking a question like this is to raise very fundamental questions about whether our huge investment in nation building has been well worth it. Sad to say, it does appear that Nigeria was in fact more united forty years ago than it is today. Could a time come when I might require a visa to visit my mother's people? And is that an eventuality that is as forbidding as some might be led to portray it?

Abuja's crime wave*

The rushed movement to Abuja from the early 1990s onwards was predicated solely on the need to make a regional statement. Those hegemonists who considered it imperative to make that statement wanted to achieve two principal purposes. One to take the seat of government away from "hostile" territory and call the bluff of the troublesome ethnic group that owns Lagos. Two: to show that they too can build their own Lagos, preferably overnight. Viewed from a purely geographical perspective, the first purpose has been achieved. As for the second purpose... well, life is full of surprises. Abuja will still take a very long while to approximate the good sides of Lagos. But it appears to be doing just fine as far as catching up with the bad sides of the former Federal Capital is concerned. With less than one-fifth of the population of Lagos, Abuja is fast becoming another Lagos – for all the crooked reasons.

Abuja used to be such a delightful place to live in. Or maybe I thought so because for the two years I worked in Abuja, I lived in some of the town's most agreeable neighbourhoods. But I'm told that these days, there's no part of town that is so pleasant or secure that armed marauders will not assail. Asokoro, where the seat of government is located has become the hunting ground of robbers, assassins and such other deadly types. The other day a director in the NYSC was shot dead in his Asokoro home as he dressed up for church.

That particular assassination, we hear, only made news because it was high profile and because it took place in what used to be the most secure part of town. In the heydays of Major Hamza Al-Mustapha's Strike Force, Asokoro was perhaps the most over-policed district in the whole federation. Hideous looking GMC trucks that were the favourites of the Strike Force "boys" cruised about almost at the rate of two every five minutes. So, criminals gave the Asokoro axis a wide berth, preferring to ply their trade at such locations as "Obalende" and the satellite towns.

* *Vanguard* January 28, 2000

Barely three years ago, perhaps the most menacing miscreant around Asokoro was a fellow who went by the rather intriguing alias of *positivically*. A bent fellow if ever there was one, he had set up shop somewhere around the ECOWAS Secretariat on the way to Sani Abacha Barracks. There was always something disreputable about the surroundings of that abode, with a permanent whiff of something that definitely was not cigarette smoke in the air and ghastly looking creatures forever hovering in the wings. However, other than accosting the hapless to beg money for the next fix or giving folks with young daughters a mighty fright, no one can recall that *Positivically* and his crowd ever threatened the neighbourhood in any intolerable way. That is, if you overlook the occasional mugging and the strumming of guitars at odd hours when everyone with their heads properly screwed on should have been in bed. Anyway, *Positivically* and his crowd were soon dislodged and their den reduced to rubble by fellows from the Villa. Their real crime, we later learnt, was trying to set up a pub that went by the rather provocative business name of "*First Lady*".

Last week I was on the phone to a friend in Asokoro who assured me that compared with what they now face in the hands of hoodlums, *Positivically* and his crowd were about as harmful as a troop of Boy Scouts.

One can still recall the excitement and sensation that overtook the Zone 3 Neighbourhood Centre in Wuse sometime in 1995 as the news broke that a car thief was caught trying to remove a vehicle around the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. What was the world coming to we all wondered. Car thieves in Abuja! It sounded so unreal.

What is going on these days in that town also sounds unreal – for worse. Ministerial quarters under siege with a minister of the Federal Republic bounced and brutalized in his own home by armed robbers who operated unhindered for hours. Gangsters speaking impeccable Queen's English, flash their university degrees before baring their guns to show you they mean business. Early evening stake-outs and stick-ups by mean-looking fellows asking for dollars and jewellery. People are actually preparing to relocate from Abuja because things are fast becoming unbearable. And, policemen pleading the return of democracy to explain their helplessness in the face of what has become a siege on the nation's capital.

All of these sound like the stuff of some hallucination. It should be a source of concern to all. For amongst the key indices on which the success or otherwise of the Fourth Republic would be measured, two stand out – what it does about poverty and what it does about public security. In the case of Abuja, both are intertwined. But matters are made worse by the fact that here is a town that really has no communal anchor, no pristine networks and no traditional resources to call up as coping mechanisms in the face of heightening incidence of deviancy. There are too many dispossessed folk in Abuja – both indigenous and settler. Five star hotels with their glassy garishness sit beside unspeakable poverty in neighbourhoods that start decaying even as they are being built.

Abuja is an *Arabian night* playground in a country that boasts of less than one-twentieth the per capita income of Kuwait. That is a sure combination for social tension of which crime is now the most visible manifestation.

The crime wave in Abuja has become emblematic of both the failure of policing and a failure of vision. Mr. President must now ask himself: Was this the capital territory we set out to build in 1976? Since he was, as it were, "present at the creation", it is for him and his designated lieutenants to do something fast about the embarrassment of a country of this size not being able to effectively police a capital city of less than a million inhabitants. Meanwhile, we will continue calling on foreign investors to come to Nigeria and just hope that they do not read the dailies. Or, maybe we will threaten the Federal Capital Territory minister with a state of emergency?

Adesina Sambo: a tribute*

Dr Adesina Sambo the University of Lagos teacher who died last Saturday, aged 48, was a political scientist of uncommon insight, a devoted family man who doted on his children and a true believer who cared very much about his standing with his maker. He was also a role model, a man of disarming humility who had very little to be humble about. He was a mentor to many including this writer.

Sina Sambo's defining interest was in continually exploring the interface of scholarship and policy in the conviction that both would be further enriched thereby.

Fortunately for him, he was able to actualize this interest at the level of lived experience, a fact amply attested to by his constructive engagement with the Nigeria state and his constant forays into the corridors of power. He returned to teach after each encounter with power and this helped to elevate the quality of his instruction and research, often making students and colleagues alike hold him in awe for the masterful way in which he blended theory with real life situations and theorized his experiences.

Teaching was his first and major passion. And that was how I first met him.

My first encounter with Sina Sambo was in November 1979 at the University of Lagos where he took my first year political science class in the basic course, Elements of Government. One could not have wished for a more solid foundation in any academic discipline. Twenty-one years hence, it would be appropriate to say that the relationship has indeed come of age. Last month, both of us, alongside Mr. Tunji Oseni co-edited a volume that was fittingly titled, *Nigeria: Path to Sustainable Democracy*, the proceedings of the 8th Obafemi Awolowo Foundation Dialogue. I say fittingly because the title of this book captures, to a large extent, the essence of his life work.

* *Vanguard*, April 14, 2000

Sina Sambo's intellectual and public service history spanned several crucial phases in the search for democracy and reform in Nigeria. That journey commenced in earnest, rather fortuitously it appears, in 1983, that was when he finally returned to Nigeria, armed with a PhD from the State University of New York at Buffalo where he did a dissertation on peasant revolts with emphasis on the Agbekoya movement in Western Nigeria. The sun was then just about to set on the Second Republic and Nigeria was gearing up to enter what has turned out to be a long night in the wilderness of authoritarian rule.

Between 1983 and his death, Sambo was quite active in conceptualizing and implementing effective strategies for the restoration of democratic rule in Nigeria. But, it was not a visibility seeking activism of flamboyance and hectoring. He belonged in that rare breed that preferred to deploy trained intellect, often in a back-room context, in apprehending and actualizing the democratic imperative in Nigeria. This approach was to find its defining milieu in the Transition to Civil Rule programme of the Babagida era.

Sambo believed that democracy was not just a system of government but, also, more importantly, a way of life. For him democracy was not an event but a process such that democratization itself becomes a learning process, lending itself to structured tutelage. He always argued that it was more appropriate to speak of democratization rather than democracy, which he saw as an ideal-type. It was this understanding of democracy as an orientation and an attitude of mind that was at the root of his conviction that political life lent itself to instruction towards achieving desired outcomes. It was the basis of his work at the defunct Centre for Democratic Studies where he played a key role under the leadership of his intellectual mentor, Professor Omo Omoruyi.

Central to his interest in democratization was his concern for the institutional basis of regimes. He held that the Nigeria civil service as presently structured could be subversive of democracy because of its preference for operating in an authoritarian mould. This point was to form the basis of some for the more robust exchange between him and several civil service mandarins at various points, especially when we both served in the Presidency.

It is, of course, unlikely that one would be able to do justice to the sheer breadth of Sina Sambo's intellectual and public service life in so short a tribute. All that we can say for now is that he will be sadly missed and to pray for the peaceful repose of his gentle soul.

One day in jungle city

It so happened that as President Olusegun Obasanjo met with Lagos State Governor Bola Tinubu penultimate Thursday to discuss the worsening security situation in Lagos, a drama unfolded near my office in the Ikeja GRA. Despite the highbrow paraphernalia often associated with GRAs, this particular drama had all the trappings of an incident in a real jungle city – to use Mr. President's recent description of Lagos which is still being hotly debated, but it is not our intention to join the fray here. Suffice it to say that the man should know a jungle when he sees one, considering that it was the jungle law of military rule that helped him become Head of State that first time around, in this same city.

But back to our story! A heavy storm had wreaked a not inconsiderable havoc the night before and many Lagosians woke up that Thursday to its rather unpleasant aftermath. On Works Road, the stretch that links GRA with Agege Motor Road at the old PWD area, the storm had felled a tree right across the road. On a normal day, even without a tree lying in transverse section across the road, this stretch could sometimes be a tricky one for traffic. On a few occasions, a retired General living on an adjoining street has had to do traffic warden duty to untangle a situation that had become so chaotic as to threaten the peace in the otherwise sedate neighbourhood.

Anyway, on this particular day, the jungle really did come to town. And not just with fallen trees; but also with a horde of menacing able-bodied young men in various stages of undress. The road on which the tree had fallen is a favourite of motorists plotting their escape from the traffic tangles of Airport Road, Maryland or Ikeja Bus Stop. On penultimate Thursday, this escape route led many of them straight into the hands of this horde of local urchins, who set up a most lucrative extortion business at the site of the obstruction.

We live in a country where the response time of the law often lags far behind the needs of the law abiding and light years behind the wiles of the outlaw. Ordinarily, the tree that fell across the road should have been removed before

the rush hour traffic build-up. More so as a Public Works yard filled with all manner of heavy-duty vehicles was only about five hundred metres away, while a police check point with a patrol car to the bargain was located at the railway crossing less than a hundred metres away. But no such thing happened and the tree just lay there.

So what happened? The gang of local youth, said to have mobilized from across the rail line near the Air Force Base, saw a window of opportunity and promptly moved in for the kill. Wielding cutlass and axes, they set about the task of cutting through the tree with great dedication and then heaving the bigger trunks away from the main road.

The story would have had a happy ending if they stopped there. But then it would not have qualified to be called a drama. Having rolled the big trunks away and with no chance that the responsible authorities would show appreciation, the gang then used the smaller moveable branches to set up an emergency tollgate – in the true spirit of self-help. Any motorist seeking a passage had to part with twenty naira to have a space just enough to take his vehicle created for him. For commercial motorbikes, popularly called *Okada*, the fee was a modest ten naira.

As would be expected, not everyone was able or willing to “cooperate”, to use a favourite expression of both policemen and hoodlums in Lagos. So traffic soon built up and things got chaotic. All the while, the police check point down the road was also in business. In fact, right across the Golf Course and a shouting distance from the hot spot was the Lagos State Police Headquarters. Yet this drama continued for the better part of the day. At least the toll gate was still in place as I drove back to the office from lunch, sometime after 4 o’clock. What saved my twenty naira was my ability to flow with the lingo, plus the fact that coming from a nearby street, I was told I qualified for the privileges due an “*omo onile*” (landowner). I do not know how business fared during the evening rush hour that day, but the tree was still blocking a good part of the road over the weekend.

So what has all of this got to do with the security situation in Lagos, or with the jungle city labels? Simple. Lagos is such a jungle city because the law is often snugly in bed with the outlaw. And the law is often in bed with the outlaw because law enforcers feel no sense of attachment to the areas they have been asked to police or the people they are meant to protect. The alien army of occupation mentality still runs through the entire apparatus. Or why else would people, whose duty it is to enforce the law watch such a drama as above play out for so long, while they stood checking vehicle “particulars” just a hundred metres away?

It is a good thing that the Lagos State Government is thinking of integrating the *Neighbourhood Watch* into its security system. But I do hope that Governor Tinubu has been able to impress it on President Obasanjo that the resurgence in

violent crime in Lagos is largely traceable to the Federal Government's politically motivated war against the O'dua People's Congress (OPC).

Before the ill-advised banning of OPC, a natural and most effective division of labour seemed to have emerged in crime fighting in Lagos – the police did quite well taking care of the streets and highways while OPC used its intimate local knowledge to watch over the neighbourhoods and fish out hoodlums. Regardless of the orchestrated campaign of calumny against the organization, law abiding Lagosians generally feel that they slept a lot easier when the OPC was roaming the neighbourhoods. And that their city was at that time much less of a jungle.

Still, a jungle country

Federal officers on delicate national assignments seem to have become practice targets for people who operate by the laws of the jungle – with a lot of help from their employers. The pathetic story of Lawal Aliyu, Area Commander of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) in Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State readily comes to mind here. As reported in the national dailies on May Day, Aliyu was shot and killed last week in his office, which also doubles as his abode. The place was one of those political party offices built around the country during the Babangida transition. We all know how those decrepit party offices have gone to the dogs, making many of them haunts of hoodlums. Why anyone should make a man doing such potentially dangerous work live in such a place is hard to fathom. For Aliyu's death not to be totally in vain, this incident must ginger the responsible authorities into providing all similarly circumstanced officials on delicate assignments with decent and safe accommodation forthwith.

The police and the people*

The death of a young person is always a cause for grief and sadness anywhere. When such a death takes place through the agency of murder in tragic and avoidable circumstances it becomes even more saddening. But where three young persons of promise are murdered in cold blood within a space of a few days by their supposed protectors and in situations of brazen abuse of power, then something really worrisome is going on. The way our streets and highways are being turned into killing fields by people paid from our tax money must concern and frighten all of us.

Which is why the unprecedented public outrage over the multiple police killings in Lagos last week is both understandable and justified. I wish to join my voice to the chorus of condolences that has been flowing to the families of the slain youngsters – Oluwatosin Adelugba, Nnamdi Ekwuyasi and Morakinyo Akerele – since the sad incidents. May their souls rest in peace. May we also continue to hope against hope that these latest killings would indeed mark the beginning of our nation's genuine turn-around from the long reign of police brutality in our land.

The careless shooting to death of people at police check points on flimsy grounds has for long been a feature of law enforcement in Nigeria. The latest upsurge resulting in the serial killings signposts a return to trigger-happy policing that is not acceptable in a country just recovering from its recent traumas. We must all rise as one to resist the casual taking of lives by the police.

That the Nigeria police continue to kill defenceless people while still providing no clue to the murder over six months ago of the nation's chief law officer, Chief Bola Ige, the late Attorney-General, says a lot about the seriousness and sincerity of the fight against crime which is the ostensible reason for the deployment of the trigger-happy goons now tormenting us. It would appear that despite official protestations to the contrary, the purpose and

* *Vanguard*, June 28, 2002

philosophy of policing in Nigeria still do not accommodate such niceties as the sanctity of life or the security of the property of ordinary citizens. Annihilation awaits anyone who cannot pay his way through.

Extortionist intentions on the part of the police are always a part of the storyline in these tragic incidents. This further confirms the resilience of police corruption, which is often the midwife of police brutality. As things now stand, the ordinary citizen is just about as likely to be shot dead by an armed robber as by a policeman. It is not comforting to know that both the law and the outlaw are now engaged in a race to dispossess you of your valuables, including your life. But at least in the case of the armed robber, you know they are really after something substantial. How do you start to make sense of people who shoot you for refusing to part with twenty naira?

My friend Ayo Olayinka had an encounter with this breed last Tuesday. He had been accosted at Allen Roundabout in Ikeja by policemen who alleged that he beat the traffic light. Convinced that he did no such thing, Ayo had asked to be taken to the traffic court to prove his case. The policemen on their own part asked him to "cooperate" and "settle" with two thousand naira as the fine at the tribunal was seven thousand naira. Unimpressed by their generosity, Ayo insisted he would still prefer to go to the court where he may not have to pay anything anyway if he was not found guilty.

And so off they went, first to the police traffic post at Anifowoshe near the Ikeja local government office where he was to be "booked" for onward transfer to the tribunal at Alausa. On the way, the policemen asked Ayo why he was being so difficult. He told them he considered bribery to be a sin and that he did not wish to sin. One of the policemen then called him a pastor and reminded him what Jesus Christ said in Matthew 5:25 about agreeing with your adversary quickly while on the way lest he deliver you to the officer who would put you in prison. As the matter had by then gone biblical, Ayo who was on familiar ground lectured the policemen on the context in which Christ made the statement, pointing out that it had nothing to do with giving bribe to the police. They then tried another line, asking him to "just bring anything" while referring him to the oft-cited Bible verse also in the book of Matthew about rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's. Again Ayo told them that the Caesar whom Christ was referring to was the taxman and that he was not sure that policemen were tax collectors. By this time they had arrived the station where Ayo met a crowd of similarly circumstanced motorists whom he promptly started preaching to about the evils of paying bribe. Sensing that they might have a "trouble-maker" on their hands who could ruin the day's "business" the policemen let him go.

It is not always that the story has such a happy ending, as the cases of the three murdered youngsters show. The police hierarchy has demonstrated prompt and commendable contriteness over the murders. But that does not restore the lives snuffed out. Police brutality continues to blight the work of those fine gentlemen and ladies in the force who labour day and night to protect the law

abiding. It also puts a big question mark on the much-awaited democracy dividend. People who perpetrate it must be treated not only as enemies of the state but also as enemies of the people. For police brutality is nothing short of a war on the people.

For Frank Enemuó

As you read this, the final obsequies for Dr. Francis Chigbo Enemuó are being observed. Frank, as he was known to many of us, died the day after his forty-first birthday in the ill-fated Kenya Airline Flight KQ 4321, which crashed off the coast of Abidjan. There really isn't much that one can find to say on a day like this for a fellow who has departed all too soon. All that is left are fond memories, especially of our work when together at the Centre Project – of a time when, on young shoulders, we tried to carry such huge responsibilities for a country in which we still dared to believe so much. Our consolation is that Frank lived out his life devoting himself to nurturing a fulfilling career and died believing in a much higher cause – faith in Christ Jesus. May his gentle soul rest in perfect peace. Amen

Poverty in a season of goodwill

Whatever became of "Do they know it's Christmas", that nice feature that newspapers used to carry during this period? It all seems so far back in time now that it was a regular feature. But, jog your memory a bit and you might just recall that it was a feature that sought to focus the reader's attention on the condition of the less privileged, the afflicted, the oppressed and the otherwise disadvantaged at Christmastime. These are folks whom fate or the system had dealt a bad hand such that they are precluded from knowing (talk less of appreciating) the difference between this season of goodwill and other times of the year.

I wish to hazard a guess as to why that feature is no longer as popular as it used to be. In the days gone by, poverty was, to a large extent, an aberration, a condition affecting only a marginal segment of the populace. At that time, it was both newsworthy and faddish for the press to invite public attention to the plight of the poor in a season of widespread merriment. These days, poverty has moved from the fringes to the mainstream as a defining condition of the majority. As such, it no longer makes news that some people are poor at Christmas time, or at any other time for that matter. How can something that is so widespread be news?

There is a related explanation. Agonizing over the condition of the poor is usually a pastime of the middle class, the social bracket to which many journalists ordinarily belong. Historically, the upper classes have often taken it as a given that there should be a large army of poor people, anyway.

For many, being rich makes sense only if there is a multitude of poor people. And harsh though it may sound, the archetypal mindset of the rich was the one popularized by Queen Marie Antoinette who was executed alongside her husband, Louis XVI, during the 1789 French Revolution. On being told that the peasants were hungry because they could not afford to buy bread, the queen was said to have wondered why they could not eat cakes instead of bread!

Which is to say that the bleeding heart often resides in the middle class. But in our country, that class was all but wiped out over the past two decades. Little wonder then that there are very few left to agonise over whether or not the poor are dying or living at Christmas. Who cares?

President Olusegun Obasanjo would have us believe that he does. That is, going by the advertised intention of his Year 2000 Budget, which regime propagandists have promptly tagged the budget of "poverty alleviation".

Each time I come across that expression, "poverty alleviation" I am struck by its self-limiting definition, its *a priori* acceptance that very little can be done by way of wiping out poverty. Why is it that poverty can only be alleviated and not eradicated? Occasionally, when those who came up with the coinage feel that poverty alleviation has become trite and over-used, they humour the rest of us by going a step further to talk of poverty reduction. Very much in the same way that you speak of reducing a leakage you have given up all hope of ever blocking. Yet, no one talks of "alleviating" crime. You always hear of efforts to curb crime, to control it or to stamp it out. Why not the same robustness in tackling poverty which, let us face it, is for the afflicted the worst crime? Could it be because crime touches the rich while poverty only affects, well, the poor?

At one of those interminable seminars on poverty alleviation organised by a multilateral agency, someone wondered why we were all so worried about poverty, asking if we had not read what Jesus Christ said in Mathew 26:11 to the effect that the poor we will always have with us? Now, Christ definitely did not mean by that admonition that we should do nothing about poverty. Yet, one must admit that there has been too much glib and condescending talks about the poor and what to do to uplift them from their sorry condition.

Fittingly for this season of goodwill, I think that the Church has a role to play. Beyond official rhetoric and the pastoral wringing of hands on the plight of the poor, there are practical steps that can be taken. One such step is to devise ways by which churches can take a greater responsibility for the fight against poverty by developing workable programmes that address the needs of poor members of their congregation and their catchment communities.

It is fast becoming a scandal that outside of government and crime, churches, especially of the Pentecostal variant, now hold perhaps the most robust cash hoards in the country!

A trap called PRSP*

Increasingly, one feels a sense of *deja vu* about the Obasanjo administration's approach to macro-economic policy. So much so that it all reminds you of those heady days of the IMF debate in the early to mid-1980s. Indeed, the entire cast seems to have re-assembled once again: arm-twisting "creditors" and their financial institutions, condescending government officials, a mish-mash of ill-digested acronyms and terminologies, plus a local line-up of spin doctors and eager chorus boys lapping it all up and dishing it out to the rest of us.

There are only two differences between then and now. Twenty years ago, the Nigerian people and their vanguard movements still had the vitality and presence of mind to suspect and protest a looming snare. Today, the people lie prostrate, poverty-stricken and literally *sapped* of the will or energy to fight. The chattering classes and the intelligentsia, who should articulate the people's apprehensions, have been decimated by the assault on the middle class. On its part, the political elite is distracted by the riotous politicking of an election year that people fail to see the larger and more pernicious politics now being played with all our lives by the federal government working in tandem with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The second difference between then and now is that a new terminology has been added on to the list of seductive jargons. It is called globalization. In the name of globalization, the same international financial institutions and government machineries that have been implicated in the pauperization of our country now say they are working to reduce poverty in Nigeria. Their curious thesis is that you can only become less poor by becoming more indebted. But, they do not put it so plainly. Their spin on indebtedness is to rephrase it as creditworthiness. So, now they are working to make those they call HIPCs (Heavily indebted poor countries) more credit-worthy. The magic wand is something called PRSP – no, not one of the newly registered political parties, rather the acronym for Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper.

* *Vanguard*, July 12, 2002

The rigmarole around this enigmatic paper would remind you of how we were lured into giving up our right to live a decent life under the guise of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). It must still ring in our ears all those nice things that we were told SAP would do for us – free markets, “realistic” exchange rate, economic liberalization, deregulation, removal of official inefficiencies, and, of course, the big prize of privatization that is the cure-all for every possible ailment. By the time SAP was full-blown, the burgeoning Nigerian middle-class had been wiped out. Who knows who is in line for wiping out this time around under the proposed PRSP regime!

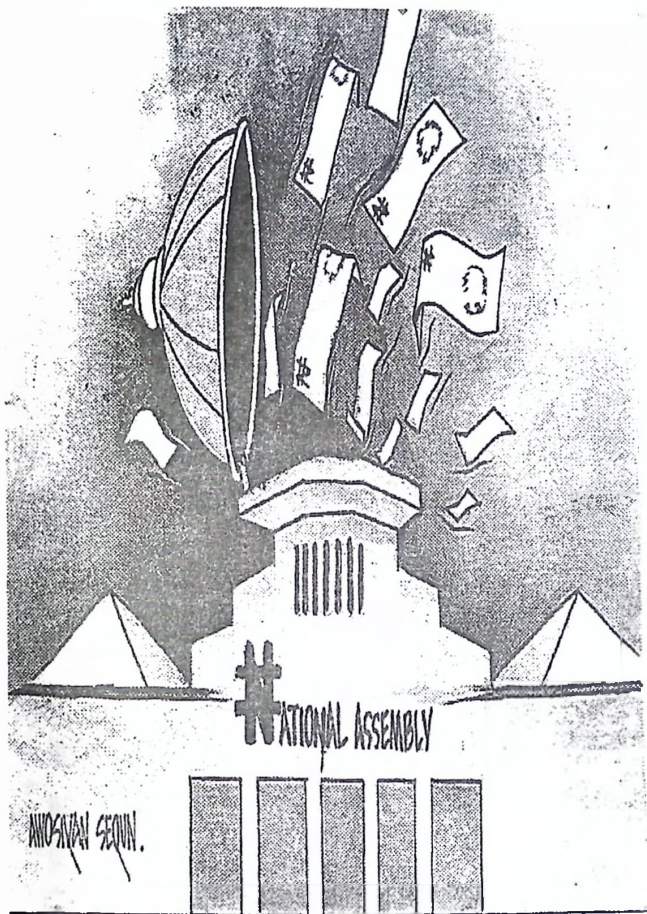
But what is this thing called PRSP? In their annual general meetings in September 1999, the World Bank and the IMF announced that their future concessional assistance under the Debt Initiative for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries would be tied to the preparation of an appropriate PRSP by individual recipient countries. The advertised objective of the PRSP is to align debt reduction with poverty reduction by ensuring that official policies and resources coming from debt relief are geared towards poverty reduction as a priority policy objective. Its unstated aim is to lure the unwary debtor nation further into peonage by creating conditions that make debt servicing relatively easy while making the repayment of the principal quite impossible.

A deadline of June 2002 was set for the countries concerned to submit their full PRSPs to the executive boards of the World Bank and IMF. A new deadline of September 2002 has since been set, which the federal government seems overly anxious to meet. So anxious, indeed, that it may not be averse to abridging the process of full consultations by which PRSPs are produced. I was in Kaduna last week to attend a workshop that was meant to educate civil society groups on the ways and wheretofores of PRSP. It struck me that the government was a reluctant party to the process as its mind seems all but made up on the matter. It was quite heartening that a majority of the participants saw the government’s tokenism for what it was and robustly resisted all attempts to stampede them into rubber-stamping the official position. The consensus was that before we take the plunge, as the government seems bent on doing with its fast-track approach, we should ask: what is the hurry?

There is a suspicious haste to the whole PRSP project that should make us wonder if we are hearing the full story. The government in Nigeria does not have a history of moving with speed on matters that would benefit the populace. And, if the IMF and World Bank are really so eager to do something about poverty in Nigeria, where were they when this government used the first round of its poverty alleviation funds to pay off party loyalists? And, what steps have they taken to help the country recover looted monies stashed away in western banks? Of course, there is the standard response that it is Nigeria’s business if its own people insist on stealing their country blind. But, every society, including hopefully, international society, recognizes the criminal liability of the receiver of stolen goods.



**THE NIGER
DELTA**





What to do in the Niger Delta*

The twists and turns of the Niger-Delta Bill as it winds its way through parliament exemplify the dilemmas of binding a wound that has been left to fester for too long. In spite of its gingerly progress, however, the fact that the bill was proposed at all shows that Nigeria has finally come round to the wisdom and inevitability of paying some form of reparation to this much-abused area. But, there is need for caution especially given the high controversy quotient in the Delta, a traumatized region that probably boasts of more "leaders of thought" and professional busy-bodies per square metre than any other area of comparable size in the whole world.

Knowledge should form the basis of action. And, a deep knowledge pool, replenished admirably by the insights of thinkers such as Professors Andrew Onokerhoraye and E. J. Alagoa and Chief Harold Dappa-Biriye, amongst others, exists on virtually every aspect of the Delta problem.

The key features of the area are fairly determinate, covers about 70,000 sq. km; home to over seven million Nigerians drawn from various ethno-cultural groups. A majority of these groups were said to have moved into the area within the last two millennia. The relative lack of habitable lands has often given rise to the phenomenon of ethnically mixed populations staking rival claims to ancestral lands often with serious implications for communal peace. One of the major constraints to infrastructure development in the Niger Delta is the prevalence of small and isolated communities. Future planning for the provision of infrastructure and facilities must, therefore, take into consideration the need to encourage the emergence of settlement groupings of reasonable size while being mindful of historical realities and cultural sensitivities.

The Niger Delta is home to Nigeria's oil industry, with all that this implies – rapidly deteriorating economic conditions, social tension and political turbulence, as well as historical divisions and animosities exacerbated by the

* *Vanguard*, August 27 1999

arrival of oil companies. In earlier trading eras, the delta communities negotiated terms directly with the supercargoes dealing in local commodities, especially palm oil. This has not been the case in the era of crude oil exploitation when host communities have lost statutory control over their resource-rich lands, effectively becoming on-lookers in the shaping (and ruining) of their destinies. The loss of local autonomy over land and its resources represents one key level of the delta problem that the bill has not fully addressed.

Another level has to do with relational dynamics. The restiveness in the delta may be understood in the context of a number of constantly evolving relationships. These include relations between coast and hinterland; between the communities and successive Nigerian governments at various levels; between the communities and the oil companies; between segments within communities; between communities; and lately between communities and the international community.

In recent times, the focus of public attention *vis-à-vis* the delta has concentrated on only one or two of these relations – between the communities and government, and between the communities and the oil companies. This fixation may be understandable, but it has also presented a problem for both analysis and policy.

Generally, the root of present high levels of violence can be located in two key issues. First, is local frustration arising from socio-economic and environmental degradation. Second, is the communities' increasing sense of alienation and powerlessness within the Nigerian political system. Over the years, as the implications of the Land Use Decree became clearer, relational dynamics in the oil communities have become more conflict-prone. Significantly, intra- and inter-communal conflicts have been fuelled, not just by the impact of oil operations but also by the alleged "divide-and-rule" methods adopted by oil firms and government.

In seeking to grapple with the multi-faceted developmental problems of the Niger-Delta, so much resources have been expended on conducting needs assessment surveys. Many of such efforts, often implemented through third-party agencies such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), have been long on reports but short on follow-up action. However, the surveys throw up some interesting and sometimes depressing data. For example, over 80 per cent of the communities in the Niger Delta do not have access to basic infrastructure and social amenities. Less than 20 per cent of rural communities and only 45 per cent of urban communities in the Niger Delta have access to safe drinking water, with serious implications for the people's health status. Access to efficient postal and telecommunication systems is restricted to less than 30 per cent of the communities in the Niger Delta, which also has one of the lowest road densities in the whole country. The total motorable road network in Bayelsa State is put at just 56 km. Some would argue that much of this area is under water. But, so is much of Lagos with its crisscrossing fly-overs and kilometres-long bridges.

Much of the state is not connected to the national grid and has been without power supply since February. Yenagoa, I am told, only got its second fuel station last Christmas.

Graphic as these data are, the challenge of developing the delta is even more formidable than the mere procurement of infrastructure, important as that is. The challenge is one of sustainable livelihood for the people. This is more so against the background of continuing loss of such traditional occupations as fishing and farming to water pollution and gas flaring. Thus, proposed development intervention in the Niger Delta must focus on creating the opportunities for alternative livelihoods with a high training component. Also, rent-seeking activities sometimes associated with oil exploration have a negative impact on the development of the enterprises ethic. This raises a challenge of massive attitudinal re-orientation, especially of local youth towards a more positive outlook to the professions and to occupations that may not yield instant gratification.

Focused development intervention in the Niger Delta should seek also to position government to mediate the various levels of relations identified above as the key development agent. The problem here is that government has itself often been implicated in the manipulation of these relations in ways that frustrate development. But, the situation is not entirely hopeless given the benefit of novelty that the administration proposing the bill still seems to enjoy.

The steps that need to be taken in the Niger Delta become fairly straightforward once the historical wrong has been acknowledged and a sincerity to correct it is exhibited. All that remains is to beware of the benefit-captors who position themselves between the resources and the people they are meant for. We would also need to rein in all those who had threatened to "spill blood" if and when the Niger Delta is given its due. I have a sneaky feeling though that as a test-run for restructuring, the outcome of the Niger Delta bill may end up confounding both its proponents and antagonists. Rather like Obasanjo's candidacy a short while ago, you'd say.

Fuel and the squabbling Senators*

On the day the executive, acting through NNPC, sneaked a fuel price hike on the populace, what were the elected representatives of the people doing? Squabbling as usual, this time over whether the Senate should be sitting or going on recess. Which, let us give them some credit, is perhaps an improvement on their more regular fare of fisticuffs and fripperies and such other foolishness.

The profile of the principal gladiators on either side of the controversy is quite revealing. On one side is the Senate President, a Shagari man, who in his increasingly (rare?) lucid moments could be a brilliant thinker. On the other side is his deputy, an Abacha boy, who once held our fuel pumps to ransom and who in saner climes would by now be a guest of the state in a much less exalted capacity. The emergence of these two as leading officers of the Upper House speak volumes about the quality of Nigeria's new democracy and its institutions. It also should tell us why the executive, itself not a paragon of value, would not take the present crop of lawmakers seriously or into confidence on a matter as potentially combustible as the fuel price issue.

As if to further underscore the Senate's emerging reputation as a circus, the mace, the symbol of legislative authority, was said to have found its way into a private home hundreds of kilometres away from where the law says it should be. This brazen appropriation of an insignia of state is, at best, a childish act that is a throwback to the "Government-money-in-Government-House" anecdote of the late Barkin-Zuwo. It would have been just as hilarious but for the fact that these are more precarious times when such conduct no longer provides comic relief. The saga of the travelling mace is at once emblematic of the Senate's poverty of leadership and symptomatic of the National Assembly's curious preoccupations.

We have to ask ourselves: Is democracy's cause served by a self-pampering legislature whose leadership is so obviously unconcerned about the well being of the electorate?

* *Vanguard* June 9, 2000

At the time the fuel price hike was announced, it was obvious that the legislature was not considered important enough by the executive to be in the know. That much is evident from the reactions so far from both the Senate and the House of Representatives. If the leadership of the National Assembly was not deemed relevant enough to have had prior knowledge of such a key policy pronouncement, then something must really be amiss. One would have thought that this was a serious affront that should worry our legislators a lot more than squabbling over recess and resumption dates.

Can the NNPC, working in cahoots with so-called marketers and at the prompting of a government eager to please international debt collectors, unilaterally impose a punitive petroleum tax on the populace? What is the new NNPC tax for? Has the corporation told us the full story on what is actually going on in the sector? Or, are we just impressed by Mr. Jackson Gaius-Obaseki's recent statement because it is the first time in ages that the lords at NNPC would deign to even offer us any information at all? Each time we resort to the expediency of importing fuel, what becomes of the crude meant for domestic allocation? Do the figures add up?

These are some of the critical questions that any responsible legislature should be asking the appropriate agency of the executive arm at a time like this. But what do we find? Just so much fluff and zilch.

The hike in fuel prices provides yet another basis for viewing the state of hostilities between the presidency and the National Assembly, especially the PDP majority. The President barely disguises his contempt for the platform on which he rode into office. Which is, perhaps, just as well considering the antecedents of his emergence. The man is carrying on as he damned well pleases. Lately, he has even started behaving like he knows he may not be seeking re-election on the same platform. Which is why it appears as if his preferred option for resolving intra-mural crises is to subdue all rallying points of opposition to executive power, be it within the party or in the legislature. A test-run took place at the PDP convention: it was a walkover for him. A running battle continues in the legislature. It looks like another walkover in the making – with a lot of help coming from those who should be stopping him.

The PDP in the National Assembly behaves as if it can be both government and opposition. The AD and APP that should have adequately played that role with vigour are just coasting along. What we have now is the Latin American-style civilian despotism, lately popularized by President Alberto Fujimori of Peru with all other centres of constitutional power emasculated and all factions subdued or suborned. It is only in such a system that regime of precipitous jumps in prices of strategic goods can be legislated by bureaucratic mandarins acting under executive fiat and without party input or legislative oversight.

Such a system is a danger to democracy, for it bears a striking resemblance to what we might have had if Abacha had survived. But, what are we to do in the face of ineffective parties and a self-flagellating legislature? Perhaps, return

to the era of mass action where unacceptable imposition from the wielders of executive power would be contested not at party caucuses or parliamentary chambers but in the streets. We have seen a bit of that this week, culminating in the direct negotiations between organized labour and Mr. President. Is this the shape of things to come?

Give Niger Delta its oil

Returning from a visit to Escravos, it would be hard to avoid reflecting on the level of neglect that assaults both the eyes and the spirit in the Niger Delta. But, one must admit that an added impetus for addressing this topic at this time is the fact that the visit coincided with the resolution passed by leaders of the south-south zone calling for full control of oil revenues by oil-producing states. Needless to say, this resolution has once again called painful attention to the dismal truth of how Nigeria has been killing the goose that lays its golden eggs. Fearing the worst, the goose now seems poised to take its destiny in its hands. About time too, you'd say.

So many views have been canvassed as to why this resource-rich underbelly of Nigeria continues to be home to some of the country's hungriest and angriest people. Depending on who is saying what, many of the sentiments expressed on the matter have often bordered on the apologetic, exculpatory or downright insensitive and idiotic. We would refrain from repeating any of these here as no useful purpose is likely to be served by further annoying already aggrieved people.

Suffice it to say, however, that a recurring decimal in the problems of the Niger Delta is the phenomenon of the absent state. The area harbours some of the country's most wretched neighbourhoods. Often, and perhaps with some justification, the oil companies are condemned for their role in the making of the Niger Delta tragedy. Yet, the case can be made that oil firms are responsible for much of the amenity and infrastructure that bring communities in this area even remotely close to civilized humanity. The long and short of this is that as with most parts of Nigeria, the state has failed in the Niger Delta.

Still, the age-long malign neglect is not what now makes the case for local control of oil revenue more compelling than ever. The resolution of the south-south leaders has struck the right chords with their peoples because there is a

general feeling that insult has been added to injury. There is a feeling that just because the insult has been borne with equanimity for so many years, its peddlers have chosen to carry their effrontery further. But, what made it possible to bear the insult in the first place is the same fact that now makes it impossible to bear the injury.

Hitherto, many felt that some sacrifice was needed from all in the effort to build a united Nigeria out of the bewildering amalgam of peoples that inhabit this country. This informed the decision of some parts of the country to accommodate themselves to conditions that neither made sense nor could be ordinarily justified. A prime example being the piping of crude oil from the Niger Delta all the way to Kaduna to be refined and sold at extra cost to the people in the area. But, what has consistently emerged from this accommodationist posture is that those who contribute the least to the common pool are the ones who have historically claimed the most therefrom.

Now, not content with merely claiming more than their due, they have moved on to making even more impossible demand that border on the integrity of their compatriots. No one, save perhaps the self-hating, is likely to oblige them any further.

It cannot be repeated often enough that there is a price that is too high to pay for national unity: the price of self-respect. No longer should it be the sole responsibility of one part of the country to sound conciliatory on national issues while the other part claims the prerogative for bellicosity while reserving the right to all manner of brazenness.

What the south-south is now telling the rest of the country is that incorporation within the entity called Nigeria under the present terms has become dysfunctional for the survival and well-being of their peoples. This is true not just for the resource-bearing states of Niger Delta but also for all parts of Nigeria that contribute anything more than a mass of parasites to the common purse.

As a development project, Nigeria as currently structured does not make sense. What sustains it is the fact that politics and prestige feature more prominently in the thinking of many of us than sound economics. We love to be called the Giant of Africa. We enjoy telling whoever cares to listen (and even some that do not) that one in every four black person on earth is a Nigeria. We rejoice in the fallacy of being a "medium power". And some of us love to engage in the scare-mongering that any attempt to re-order the current arrangement is likely to lead to a loss of all these "gains" and a break-up of the country. But, has it not been said that a country's greatness should not be measured by the expanse of its perimeters but the well-being of its people?

It would be a very tragic country indeed that can only be glued together by the plunder of resources from its weaker sections. Let everyone take only as much from the common pool as they put into it. Let the Niger Delta have its oil. This may not be a panacea for all of the area's complex problems, but it is likely

to reduce the complications imposed on the search for solution by predatory elements who can only be Nigerians if they are presiding over the looting of other people's resources. And who knows, may be when we all learn to earn our keep we would somehow regain our progressive vision and come out the better for it.

Fuel scarcity and resource control

One of the grandest idiocies I have listened to in my adult life came to my hearing the other day as I returned to Lagos from an official trip to Enugu.

By the way, throughout my stay in that eastern state, petrol sold for fifty naira per litre at the pump-head each time I was fortunate enough to buy fuel at a regular gas station, which I considered quite abnormal and sad. But S.M. Afolabi, a minister of the Federal Republic, riding cars fuelled at public expense, would like to use this highly abnormal situation to justify a further hike in fuel price. We will refrain from dwelling on ministerial cant for now and address the related issue of the day.

As I arrived Ikeja Airport on this day, I saw Akintola, a friend whose office is a few streets from mine. He had come to the airport to drop one of his directors off and I thought it was a good opportunity to ride in pleasant company back to office. The prospect of being crowded and harassed by harried airport cab drivers was the last thing I looked forward to at that point – as had been the case ever since the more spacious domestic airport was burnt down. So Akintola's coming was indeed a heaven-sent.

As we hit the road and lamented the tough luck of having to spend half of Valentine's Day in transit, we passed the AP station near the airport. It was not an encouraging sight. The fuel queue snaked all the way along the interchange and was almost tailing off into Agege Motor Road, soon to merge with the queue at the National gas station near Ikeja Bus Stop. Akintola promptly assured me that things had gotten quite worse since I left Lagos less than a week earlier when the fuel situation appeared to be building up, a revelation that did not do much to cheer me up.

But, worse awaited me at the office. Checking through my messages, I found that another friend had in my absence called repeatedly from upcountry with instruction that I must return his call as soon as I got back. I did, and it turned out to be a mistake. As we spoke, he said he thought I did not sound my usual

* *Vanguard*, February 23, 2001

self. To which I replied that I just felt weighed down with the chaotic fuel situation I found on my return to Lagos. His next statement really got me upset. "You Lagos people," he sneered, "after just one week of no fuel all the newspapers are full of pictures. What about people like us who have been suffering the scarcity all these years?"

He almost sounded as if he was proud to have, as he put it, been "suffering" the fuel scarcity for so long and I had to tell him in very plain language that if people like him saw nothing wrong with that, that was their funeral. But no one should expect others to put up with such silly endurance tests. He then said something to the effect that people in my part of the country really do think the world of themselves. I thanked him for the compliment. Not done, he further wondered why "you people think you must always be treated specially". And, I asked him what special treatment there was in ensuring that people get fuel to buy in a city that is home to over half of the nation's economy. The conversation did not progress much beyond that point because he persisted in what I considered to be a most tedious line of argument and I was in no mood to be further aggravated.

It was not first time that one has had to listen to such nonsense talk. I recall that sometime during the crisis that heralded the first anniversary of the June 12 elections, someone had confronted me with a similar line of argument. He could not understand, he said, why the people of the southwest had to carry on as though they were the only ones affected by the annulment. Not convinced that he deserved more than a rude answer, I however repeated to him the parable of the robbers and the five sons. It runs thus: Some hoodlums invaded a man's home and carted away valuable property. Two of the man's five sons decided to give the thieves a chase to retrieve the family's stolen property. The other three sons thought it was not worth their while going after the robbers, preferring instead to let bygone be bygone. Does that make the children interested in finding the family's property guilty of overreacting? Or, does it make the other uninterested children guilty of complicity? I did not get any tangible response from the fellow.

We need to ponder the moral of this parable each time we consider the varying attitudes that we often adopt in this country to issues that should uniformly and generally give offence. It does appear that we have so accommodated ourselves to deprivation that demanding even basic things from our government is construed as "undue radicalism". Perhaps, that is part of the reality warp that living in a forced unity of negatives demands of us. Which is probably why the perennial fuel scarcity that used to be localized to some parts of the country has now spread across the land!

What business of mine is it that fuel has been scarce in Katsina or Cross River for donkey years? May be the people in those places like it that way. But should I also have to like it if fuel inexplicably becomes scarce in Lagos? Why must our common denominator always be those things that foster mediocrity.

that foist a culture in which people cannot ask their government simple questions without being branded? Questions such as why is there no fuel to buy in the world's sixth largest oil exporter?

I think that it is an instructive coincidence that fuel scarcity should be returning just as the battle for resource control is stepping up. My view is that the federal government's continuing inefficiency in the management of fuel supply speaks eloquently to the inevitability of resource control. If what it takes for us to have regular supply of fuel is to hand over the production and distribution of petroleum products to the states that own the oil, then so be it. That is the deregulation that I think makes sense. And I do not think too many people should terribly mind having to negotiate favourable terms of purchase from the owners of the oil, including paying for the maintenance and security of the pipelines that convey the products.

We need to answer some basic questions in this matter. We quite appreciate the fact that oil is a strategic resource. But is the fuel derived from it a social good or a commodity? If the federal government continues to treat it as a social good, then it must supply it in regular and sufficient quantities as an imperative of public welfare. If it is a commodity, then let it be sold as such – unencumbered by a thieving bureaucratic behemoth exercising monopoly powers under the guise of a so-called national interest. Why must fuel sell at the same price in Gusau or Lagos as it does in Port Harcourt or Warri, anyway?

The South-South and 2007

A carefully orchestrated battle of wits is now unfolding with regard to the unending race for the Nigerian presidency. Somehow, our people's thinking is being conditioned to accept the inevitability of a northern successor to President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2007. The public space, and our clarity of thought with it, is being filled with northern contenders in a manner that seeks to present the nation with a *fait accompli*. We are being stampeded into believing that the whole country has agreed that only northern candidates can or should be fielded for the post of president at the next elections. It is a thesis that still has to be tested. But, while we are at it, we need to make it clear even this early in the day that nothing makes it inevitable that a northerner must succeed Obasanjo in 2007.

Part of the thinking that informs this idea that it is again the turn of the north to ascend the presidency is the general feeling of entitlement that many of our northern brothers feel they have vis-à-vis the presidency. According to this line of thinking, the north is the natural provider of presidents and is only now on a forced holiday from power. By this creed, each time a non-northerner assumes power, he does so only in the manner of an interregnum and only because the northerners need time to gather themselves together.

It was the thinking that informed the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, with disastrous consequences. It was the thinking that provided a rationale for the Abacha misadventure, again with horrendous consequences. It was also the thinking that informed the view that the ascension of Obasanjo in 1999 only came about as a result of some northern magnanimity that made people, to use their own words, "concede" the presidency to the south-west. The grand battle to secure a second term for Obasanjo in 2003 was meant to put a check on this proprietary mindset. But, obviously, the message is yet to fully sink in. The thinking that the north has a proprietary entitlement to

* *Vanguard*, August 22, 2003

power needs to be dislodged for good. And, not just amongst northerners but perhaps, more critically, amongst those southerners that are still captive to it and who continue to promote the silly idea of the south as a place that is only good for hunting for vice presidents.

The people who are best qualified to counter this notion need to start speaking up now. This is why it was really nice to read the intervention that the former Deputy Governor of Edo State, Peter Obadan, made in this matter last Sunday concerning the right of the old Mid-west Region and the larger south-south zone to produce the next president of Nigeria. It is an argument that needs to be further explored for the political health of our country.

So far, the presidency of Nigeria has been awarded to just about everyone except those who provide the sustenance of the land. Some parts of the country have historically anchored their claim to the presidency on suspect population figures. Others have done so on the basis of some past injury that needed to be assuaged. Yet the biggest injury so far is the scandal that continues to be perpetrated with the pilferage of the resources of the south-south while the people of the area are reduced to bystanders in the power games played over those resources.

The claim that the south-south has to produce the next president of Nigeria is both moral and strategic. It is also unimpeachable. And let no one tell us that resource endowment cannot be a basis for staking a claim to the presidency. Less tenable grounds have been used in the past and are still being used to gain undue advantage in the Nigerian power equation.

Moreover, there are even other cogent grounds that the south-south has. A critical factor in the defeat of Biafra and the salvaging of Nigeria during the civil war was the denial of sea access to the rebel territory, thereby reducing it to a landlocked enclave. Regardless of the continuing revisionism in official accounts of that war, the truth is that the south-south, at great cost, was critical in providing that sea access that also kept the prized oil wells in federal hands. People from the South-South must soberly ask themselves what they have gained from that sacrifice.

Let the south-south not make the mistake that the south-east made for so long by pegging its ambitious at the number two position. The problem with this approach is that when people have gotten used to seeing you as a perennial contender for number two, they start wondering if you are really serious when you now say you want to be number one. Worse, they then offer you number three and often feel free to play funny games with even that, as is now happening with the Senate Presidency that is ostensibly zoned to the south-east.

The matter really is quite clear. Power shift will have meaning only when power has indeed shifted to every part of Nigeria. And, there can be no better claim to the presidency at this point in time than one that is anchored on the provider principle. The south-south provides the sustenance of the land and is well positioned to be the prime beneficiary of this principle.

We need to really start to explode some myths about the geopolitics of Nigeria in the current dispensation. As far as the politics of these times go, the operative zoning arrangement is the one anchored on the six zones as enunciated by the Constitutional Conference in 1995. Under this arrangement, the only zone that can be legitimately excluded from contesting the presidency in 2007 is the south-west. If some people now feel compelled to benefit from a power shift ideology that they only subscribe to reluctantly, they should be ready for a contest with people from other zones, who may have an interest and indeed have superior claims.



**GLOBAL
SCENE**

When will it be Nigeria's turn?*

The arrest and extradition of former President Slobodan Milosevic opens a most interesting chapter in the struggle for human rights and humanitarian law. Across the globe in far-flung lands, dictators who dealt harshly with their people are themselves now facing very harsh times. As, indeed, they should. Perhaps, no television image has gladdened the hearts of many people worldwide in recent times as much as in the picture of the ex-dictator of ex-Yugoslavia being led by his captors into the prison of the United Nations War Crimes Tribunal at The Hague.

From Lima to Manila, Belgrade to Santiago the story is the same and the message is uniformly clear: it may be later than sooner, but a ruler's bad ways will catch up with him in the end. This is a significant morale booster for all lovers of freedom and human decency worldwide, a unique testament to our species ability to assert the superiority of right over wrong, and a wonderful way to restore mankind's wavering confidence in the eventual triumph of good over evil.

This bad season of the strongmen opened fittingly just before the Christmas of 1998 with the arrest of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in London. Remarkably, Pinochet's arrest coincided with the anniversary of the execution the Romanian dictator, Nicolae Ceascescu, and his tempestuous wife Elena, an event that signalled the irreversibility of the momentous changes that were then afoot in the communist fiefdom of Eastern Europe. The brutal Chilean General was to spend the next eighteen months under house arrest, only escaping prosecution in European courts by the skin of his teeth as he literally lie through his teeth that he was unfit to stand trial. The man was to have been extradited to Spain to face charges of gross human rights abuses, including the murder of a Spanish citizen. The old wily fox that he is, Pinochet then arrived in Santiago to the warm embrace of his henchmen bearing his usual sprightly self,

* *Vanguard*, July 6, 2001

a far cry from the man of ill health that he affected while in custody in London. He is now in the no less warm embrace of the law in his country and there is no let up for him. Daily the families of the thousands he killed and the tens of thousands whom he made to "disappear" during his seventeen-year rule set countless traps to catch him as old age further dulls his wily ways. The situation report is that Pinochet has now been stripped of his seat in the Chilean Senate, a position that would have granted him immunity from prosecution for life. The Senate seat, which a browbeaten successor was made to concede to the Pinochet forces, was the General's last bastion. He has now been laid wide open for the taking as his enemies move for the kill.

An open season has also been declared on other bad rulers who used their days in office to traumatize their countries. Lately, there has been no respite for the bad guys. Eric Estrada, the film actor who once ruled the Philippines, is now facing charges of graft and gross abuse of office. Obviously, unable to draw the line between playing the tough guy in action movies and running a country, Estrada had launched some rather incredible scams that set a record in larceny in a land with an already colourful history of official thievery under Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos.

Estrada finds able company for both the crime and the nemesis in Alberto Fujimori, the son of Japanese immigrants who became President of Peru. Fujimori it was who introduced a most unusual phrase to the lexicon of democratic governance when he abolished the Peruvian parliament and barricaded the Supreme Court as he sought to push through his legislative agenda. He called the model "direct rule". Leaders who enter upon such delicate schemes invariably require the help of disreputable types to sew together an authoritarian system that of necessity relies heavily on underhand deals. Fujimori's Man-Friday was a fellow called Vladimiro Montesinos, his secret service chief, who ran a deadly racket that juggled corruption, embezzlement and murder as instruments of statecraft while Fujimori played the statesman.

It took a while for things to fall apart but a determined opposition worked hard to remove the veil of secrecy in which the actual goings-on in Peru were shrouded. The opposition struck a right chord with the people who had laboured through nearly a decade of Fujimori's strong-arm tactics. As matters came to a head in the run-up to elections, Fujimori sought to cover his tracks by turning on his Man-Friday. The sordid affair reached a ridiculous level at a point when Fujimori personally led armed gangs in the search for Montesinos who had then wisely gone underground. He soon fled the country and Fujimori was to follow suit in short order as the wrath of the people and the long arm of Peruvian law threatened to catch up with him. He is now in Japan fighting against extradition. Meanwhile, Montesinos has since been arrested and prosecutors hope his testimony would be explosive enough to make the Japanese government have a rethink on whether or not to hand Fujimori over to the Peruvian authorities.

Ghanaian President and Ghana-must-go*

One had thought that the matter of whether or not Ghanaian President Jerry Rawlings was given a 55 million naira image-laundering bribe by the late General Sani Abacha had been rested. Obviously, there is no let up yet on the matter. Two recent interventions indicate a re-opening of hostilities on that front. The first was the salvo fired by Professor Wole Soyinka at the Ajasin Memorial Lecture, challenging President Obasanjo to spread his anti-corruption crusade to the repatriation of "the money given to President Rawlings". Fast on the heels of that challenge came a rejoinder from Etubom Bassey Ekpo Bassey, national vice chairman of the Alliance for Democracy for the south-south zone accusing Soyinka of impugning Rawlings' character and credentials.

In the interest of our long-standing fraternal relations, I think the federal government needs to rest this matter once and for all. Did the Ghanaian leader collect any money from Abacha? If yes, in what capacity and for what purpose? While we are still sorting out the whys and wheretofores of this sticky matter, let me say that even if cash changed hands, I rather doubt that Abacha had such a keen sense of humour as to have given it in Ghana-must-go bags. Or, what do you think?

* *Vanguard* December 31st 1999

Managing transition: South African notes*

Two of the world's most ambitious transitions are today on course in Africa. One is taking place in Nigeria, the continent's hub and largest country, the other is unfolding in South Africa, arguably the nearest thing to a modern industrial society in Africa. Individually, both attempts offer lessons, challenges and opportunities that should interest us all. Taken together, the dynamic evolution and interfaces of the two transitions have a direct bearing on Africa's fortunes at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Simply put, what becomes of Africa largely depends on what happens in and between Nigeria and South Africa in the next few years.

Sometime in 1997, I had picked Bertus, a white South African friend, from the Victoria Garden City to catch his flight back home. As we had some time to kill before the flight, I asked him what part of Lagos he would like to see. His answer was quick: "I'd love to see where your rich people live." Fortunately, we were then just approaching Mobil House at Maroko, so I took him through some of the smartest neighbourhoods on Victoria Island as well as the colonial era eastern precinct of Ikoyi where, as Lagos lingo would put it, "*Owo oyinbo o 'ti kuro lara e*" (i.e., the white man's touch was still evident).

Obviously, Bertus was not impressed with what he saw, for as we got onto the Third Mainland Bridge through the Osborne stretch, he still repeated the same question: "where do your rich people live?"

Determined still to show him, I turned off at the Military Cantonment in Maryland and took him through the Ikeja GRA. It was all in vain. At the end of our peregrination, my friend's verdict had not changed. "I still cannot see where your rich people live," he insisted.

* Vanguard May 19, 2000

At that time, I felt quite offended and not a little irritated at what seemed to me a needless putdown, especially coming from a descendant of the Boers, the white supremacists who had championed apartheid in South Africa. I felt it would not be beyond Bertus, being Afrikaans, to refuse to be impressed by anything he saw of Africa's largest nation, especially a country that was so active in seeing to the end of the empire that his forebears sought to build.

I have since had cause to revise my position and to re-direct my annoyance. Really, coming from South Africa, it would be quite hard for anyone to see where the truly rich could live in Nigeria. Recently I took a study tour of various parts of that country, a visit that took me not just to the cities and townships but also to native lands in the Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Kwazulu-Natal provinces as well as metropolitan Johannesburg.

Six years after the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as South Africa's first popularly elected leader, that country remains miles ahead of Nigeria in all the indices and trappings of modern existence. Public infrastructure is excellent, even in the remotest parts of the country the utilities work. There was not a single policeman carrying a gun in the streets. Even by first world standards, South Africa is still an affluent society. Johannesburg has five Ferrari car dealerships all to itself. London has only one. The manufacture date of South Africa's *tokumbo* cars is from 1995 upwards. There are not many neighbourhoods in Europe that boast of the wealth you would find in Sandton, Johannesburg. Cape Town is still rated one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

Yet, appearances can be deceptive. For violent crime and drugs. I'd rather live in Lagos than in Johannesburg any day. And that is saying a lot, considering the rampant lawlessness of Lagos. It is said that there is one case of rape every twenty minutes in South Africa, a statistic that one mischievous local that I ran into in Richards Bay, Kwazulu-Natal, claimed was alarming only because "you guys don't keep records in Nigeria."

But, it is in the area of managing on-going transitions that experiences are quite similar, with useful lessons to be learnt both ways. Nigeria and South Africa are grappling with very difficult transitions that could still go terribly wrong. For one, the democracy dividend in both countries has not manifested fast enough for enough people. Which probably explains why the 1999 elections that saw Thabo Mbeki succeed Nelson Mandela also saw the creeping re-racialization of South African politics, very much in the same manner that re-tribalization is now all too evident in the post-independence politics of Nigeria.

Two trends that seem to have energized this development mirror contemporary experience in Nigeria. The first is the centralization of power in Pretoria and the concomitant diminution of political authority in the provinces.

The second is what some see as personalization of state authority by Mbeki, a development said to have resulted in the relegation of structured processes, as the context for decision-making, and a preference for person-to-person rather

than the networks nurtured in the days of the struggle. The debate continues as to whether these trends are necessarily positive or negative for development.

Superimposed on these are two responsibilities that are also common to the two countries. The first has to do with domestic expectations, especially in unemployment and reducing poverty related to crime. The other relates to the expectations and burden of regional leadership role. Managing tension arising from these simultaneously remains one of the key challenges of the transition in this country.

In meeting these challenges, South Africa offers the example of rather unlikely convergences, for example in the transformation of Cyril Ramaphosa. Various hailed and denounced as a likely successor to Mandela and the scourge of many a white and the former head of the Congress of African Unions (COSATU) has emerged a capitalist icon.

Ramaphosa's emergence as a restraining influence on black excesses and rally point of the business community provides a very powerful lesson: those who have earned their stripes in the struggle can now show the way in moderation without being branded as sell-outs.

The way of nations*

On Saturday 12 August the Kursk, a Russian nuclear-powered submarine, was involved in an accident that ran it aground on the ocean bed of the Barents Sea in the Arctic. One hundred and eighteen sailors were said to be on board at the time of the accident. The revelations that have come to light as to the whys and wheretofores of that fatal mishap all point in the direction of a terrible mishandling of a matter that involved, literally, life and death.

First, it took the Russian government four days to acknowledge that the incident had even taken place at all. Then, it took it another four days to accept that there was a need to seek external help for the distressed submarine and its trapped sailors. While all this precious time was passing, Russian divers struggled furiously for upwards of one week to open an escape hatch through which the trapped sailors might have been rescued. It was all fruitless exertion. For, either their equipment was either lacking in the required sophistication or even non-existent or inappropriate for the task at hand. This was to be borne out by the fact that Norwegian divers, who were brought in to have a go at the job, concluded the task of opening the hatch after less than twenty-four hours. But, this was all of eight days after the accident, by which time all 118 sailors in the sunken submarine were confirmed dead. The focus at the scene of the accident has since shifted from rescuing survivors to recovering the bodies and salvaging the wreckage.

Another key area of concern has to do with the monumental environmental hazard posed by the likelihood of nuclear radiation from the wrecked submarine as it now lies on the seabed.

Since the gory events, the mood in Russia and, indeed, across the world has been understandably sombre, the reactions angry to say the least. One Moscow newspaper captured it succinctly in a headline that proclaimed that "the reputation of the Russian leadership is lying on the bottom of the Barents Sea."

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Why is the tragedy of the Kursk of interest and concern to us here today? For a simple reason: the behaviour of the Russian authorities in the matter only falls into an age-long universal pattern of how nations behave. Often, prestige and pride are placed before any other consideration in the definition of what constitutes the national interest.

The facts that are now emerging point to an unforgivable pigheadedness on the part of the Russian authorities. First, was the reluctance to acknowledge that the accident had taken place, as though such an acknowledgement was going to reduce Russia's standing in the world. And, then, the tardiness exhibited in calling for outside help in mounting a rescue operation long after it had become obvious that Russian resources had proven grossly inadequate. The delay gave the impression that it was more acceptable from the point of view of Russia's national pride to have the trapped sailors die than to admit that Mother Russia was unable to carry out a rescue operation all on its own.

Why do nations place prestige and pride above all else? Diplomatic studies instruct that there are three key elements that make a nation's power. First is its security. Second is the welfare of its people. Third is the pride or prestige that comes with sovereign control of a territorial space. The first is, to a large extent, military, the second mostly economical while the third is purely psychological. And the three are inextricably tied together. However, historical and contemporary experience had been that in setting priorities as to what matters most to the national interest, leaders have been driven more by their own ego than by any other consideration. Hence, the primacy given to the psychological factor of prestige.

However, prestige can only carry a nation so far. It does not put food on the table for the populace. It does not save lives; more often than not, it is likely to lead to a loss of lives as the Kursk incident amply demonstrates. And, at the end of the day, a preoccupation with prestige to the exclusion of all else could actually end up costing you very much of the selfsame prestige, again as the presence predicament of the Russian leadership shows. This was the point that the influential *Izvestia* Russian newspaper sought to make when it intoned that those who allowed the Kursk tragedy to happen were those who "pretended to be superpower". The paper warned that "they will not be excused."

The upshot of all of this is that nations must come to terms with the limits of prestige and euphoria. And, no time can be more appropriate for getting this message across than now as we welcome United States President Bill Clinton who is in our country on a working visit. Let us cut out all the frills and seek to make the most out of the visit in terms of things that are likely to be of lasting and substantive value to our people.

After the visit...

The Clinton visit has finally come and gone. And what a visit it was. Quite unlike many of such over-hyped events, this one truly lived up to its billing. And, both sides came out the better for it. This verdict, I am sure, would ruffle a few feathers, not least of those pretentious super-patriots who claim that our country was diminished by arrangements for the visit. We hear that some people have been burning effigies. Each of us is entitled to receive Clinton in his own way, no?

Not since the famous OAU summit that Nigeria hosted nearly a decade ago has the new federal capital seen itself projected in such positive light by the visit of a foreign dignitary. In retrospect, that summit probably marked the last opportunity our country had to look good to the world before the foolishness of the annulment marked Abuja out as a city of strange happenings and threw the whole country into a cataclysm from which we are yet to fully recover.

Professor Omo Omoruyi, a close confidant of former President Ibrahim Babangida, used to issue a lament as the stature of Nigeria's friends continued to diminish during those bad old days that started with the tail-end of his friend's reign. Each time those cretins disguised as visiting leaders came calling and Babangida or Shonekan or Abacha strained to show them off to the world, the good Professor would sigh and shake his head and say to anyone within earshot, "see the kind of company our country is now keeping."

Mercifully, the quality of the company we keep has gone up a notch since May 29, 1999, and the Clinton visit is only a further attestation to this happy development. Which is why one was a bit amused at reports that Abuja residents have been grumbling about what they saw as the rather suffocating American security presence for the Clinton visit. To be charitable, one would say that the people of Abuja were merely trying to act coy with their complaining. They should be grateful for what was so obviously a compliment. After so many years

of playing host to bandits and renegades that passed for heads of state, it must have been a refreshing difference to be receiving a proper president for a change. And, surely, the reported brashness of the Americans could not have been anything compared with the malevolence of al-Mustapha's Strike Force.

For Nigeria as a country, it must be a welcome relief to be hosting a head of state who was not coming to Abuja to beg for money with which to fight his next election or to put down a rebellion that he instigated in his own backyard. There have been many such visitors, especially in the Abacha days. One of our textile companies is still wondering what to do with unclaimed acres of printed wax ordered for the campaign of the ruler of a neighbouring country and paid for by his Nigerian kindred spirit, who also had a self-succession plan of his own. Of course, our neighbour's scheme, like ours, did not see the light of day – a sad loss it was for the textile firm and Nigerian taxpayers.

Anyway, to move on to less depressing matters, the visit was certainly a good one. On the economic side, it would open a lot of widows that can be creatively explored and throw up opportunities that should be imaginatively exploited.

However, the milieu in which all the gains from the visit can be realized must be right. And that is why I consider President Clinton's address to the joint session of the National Assembly as the high point of the visit. That is, of course, without prejudice to the puerile petulance of Ghali Umar Na'abba. By the way, I hope the Speaker has not misled himself into thinking that all it takes to escape answering to the grave allegations against him is to deliver a rabble-rousing speech before a visiting dignitary.

Like every sensible watcher of the unfolding drama of Nigeria, President Clinton knows that all the nice things his visit was meant to achieve on the economic, cultural and technical fronts could easily come to naught in the absence of the right political environment. So, he dwelt extensively on the issue of national unity and our common humanity.

In spite of our euphoria on the return to civil rule, this is still a time of profound pessimism about the viability of Nigeria. President Clinton reads this mood correctly. He wonders if a country of "countless traditions and many faiths" can be "enriched by its diversity and not enfeebled by it." And, he answers that question in the affirmative. But, as he was later to indicate, this is a conditional affirmative. He says we must learn "not only to tolerate our difference but actually to celebrate our differences." This speaks directly to the futility of trying to build a nation by denying or subduing the fact that we are different peoples; an approach that was until very recently President Obasanjo's preferred paradigm. We hope he and his fellow travellers have been fully cured of it by the country's recent travails and their own personal ordeals.

Which then brings us to one of the little details of the run-up to the Clinton visit that we nearly missed. A few days to the arrival of the American President, Professor Ali Mazrui, the Kenyan-born scholar was in Kano to deliver a lecture.

One of the things the man was reported to have said in his lecture was that the north (whatever that is) committed a strategic blunder by supporting the power shift arrangement that led to the emergence of President Obasanjo. He was said to have been applauded by his audience for that piece of retrospective insight. I suspect that Mazrui's brief was to start a sensitization process that can only further heat up the country's political temperature. But, I also suspect that people are not going to just sit idly by and watch that sinister agenda unfold.

President Clinton's sentiments and sense of optimism about Nigeria are all well and welcome. But, can we speak of national unity or a common humanity with people who feel they can only relate to their compatriots in a master-slave context?

America's drama*

An international fellowship on governance and development issues that had been in the pipeline for a while suddenly came through and there was really no time to do the proper farewell courtesies. Mercifully, it appears that Nigeria's slowly but steadily improving standing in the eyes of the world reflected positively on my travel plans, making it possible to conclude arrangements in a matter of days.

Anyway, on the eve of my departure, a last-minute compromise was cobbled together with my handlers here at *Vanguard*, to ensure the continuity of my weekly contributions. The thinking was that being in the United States during this period offered a golden opportunity to see the up-coming elections first-hand. Hopefully, one would be able to send in some interesting eyewitness stuff on the polls and the hustle and bustle that often surrounds an American transition.

This turned out to be a tall hope, essentially for two reasons. First, the pace of work at the fellowship was so hectic as to preclude any alternative commitment of time or energy throughout the entire duration. Before you knew it, the day was over! Second, the election itself has been attended with so much high drama as to leave all mouths agape. Writers and pundits have been perplexed and confounded as America's contentious presidential election threw up one big screamer after the other. Trying to keep up with the news soon became akin to courting a life-threatening onset of high blood pressure; attempting any kind of analysis, a huge joke.

A popular Washington DC daily had five different editions come out in no particular sequence between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. the morning after Election Day, that is Wednesday 8 November. As I was leaving the US capital last Tuesday, the news was that one of the editions with the most dramatic goof had become a collector's item, with some smart alocs doing brisk business selling it for a

* *Vanguard*, December 1, 2000

premium at the busy DuPont Circle area. Not to be outdone, the newspaper is said to be trying to mop up the remainder of the stray copies of that particular edition. May be one day in the not-too-distant future this edition would become an antique deserving of the auctioneer's gavel at either Sotheby's or Christie's, a tribute to journalistic blunder. With some luck too, the election furore should be over by the time you read this. But do not bet on it. The Americans themselves are at sea on all of this, but they are doing their best to bear up in good cheer what appears like a long-drawn saga. When I arrived Washington DC on 5th November, Highcliffe, a men's shop down the road from my hotel near the Peace Corps office, had a sign announcing a special Election Day sale. Two weeks after Election Day, the sign was still hanging outside the shop, but with a rider that said, "the saga continues, so does the sale!"

And, so the world's greatest nation continues to display some rather extraordinary contortions in the otherwise ordinary matter of electing its 43rd President. Expectedly, there have been quite a few cheeky remarks about the giant with feet of clay. The situation really does call up a few epic ironies. The nation of the Silicon Valley and supercomputers is now reduced to deciding who leads it by a manual vote count. A country that glibly pronounces on elections worldwide and invites itself to supervise other people's polls has now made such a mess of its own elections. The taxi driver who took me to Alexandria, Virginia, the other day had an interesting proposal, which might be considered either bizarre or creative depending on your state of mind. Having asked where I came from, he said that Americans should seek assistance from Nigeria for their next elections. I offered no comment.

Some say that the US was always going to come to grief one day with its somewhat convoluted system of electing its head of state. Way back in the late 1960s, the writer, James Michener, had warned that the system that throws up the American president was a monumental gamble that could come unstuck. Michener aptly titled his essay "Presidential Lottery". As the pundits continue to inquire into the wisdom or otherwise of the Electoral College system, I think we should focus on the lessons and enjoy the entertainment while it lasts.

The first lesson has to do with the limits of human perfection. It was a rather interesting slant that a business analyst put on the election controversy last week on television in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. The inconclusive elections, he said, have generally not hurt business although the stocks of technology companies had dropped. This, in his view, suggests a reduced public confidence in machines brought on by the hi-tech fiasco of the Florida vote count. If this is true, it is a good thing for America, a society that has nearly erected machines into gods. Hopefully, the election debacle would start a long overdue process of re-humanizing American society, away from the worship of gadgets. Nothing created by man can be perfect, as the Titanic story teaches us. The former US Senate leader, George Mitchell, said it all: "These times call for a little humility in our ability to predict the future."

The second lesson is that systems have to be self-renewing. The insights that informed the adoption of the Electoral College by America's founding fathers were probably impeccable given the imperatives of the time. But some changes have become inevitable, especially in the winner-takes-all approach to "carrying" a state's electoral votes. Such is the confusion in this system that a British nobleman reportedly told his American host at a party: "Please show me the way to this college." It is certainly the kind of confusion that the British would hope they had invented.

But, all said and done, is there a crisis in America? I do not think so and I did not get that sense throughout my visits across five of the states. A crisis occurs only when a situation develops that cannot be contained within the context of established norms and accepted processes. It is comforting that as part of the high drama now being played out, the most visible institutions are the courts and the press, two of the greatest bastions of democracy. If the thing drags beyond the courts, it would probably be left to Congress to decide who will be the next US President. It is all a fairly straightforward and predictable process. Which cannot be said for many countries, including ours. As someone rightly observed on CNN the other day, "instead of troops in the capital, you have lawyers in the courts." Surely, there must be a lesson here?

Doing business with Mr Bush

The inauguration of Mr. George W. Bush as the 43rd President of the United States probably marks the end of an era in the most profound sense of that hackneyed expression. Whether it also signals the dawn of a new era remains to be seen. Last Saturday, the man tried, with admirable success, to exude dignity and majesty in his Inaugural Address. Still, in many ways, the condition of America today recalls that famous line of the English poet, Mathew Arnold, who lamented that: "One age is dying, the other is still too powerless to be born."

The difficult birth pangs of the post-Clinton era come from its dubious conception. The Bush presidency is one hobbled by a moral baggage and the crisis of legitimacy surrounding the circumstances of its ascension. For America, and for the world, the Clinton presidency defined more than just a man and his foibles. Which was why the great scandals of that presidency could not get the man out of office. Juxtaposed with Clinton's momentous tenure, it is tempting to want to conclude that the Bush presidency is not likely to be anything but a bird of passage with no enduring legacies. The reasons for entertaining the thought are not far-fetched.

For the first time in many years, an American presidential inauguration was held under the shadow of a public demonstration that raised serious questions about the electoral victory of the incoming head of state. "Hail to the thief" proclaimed one of the more memorable placards at the venue, a pointed parody of the presidential anthem and an unveiled reference to continuing allegations of ballot pilfering. It is a very disturbing way to usher in the first leader that the world's most powerful nation would elect in the twenty-first century.

An Egyptian friend observed the other day that whenever an empire is about to unravel, sharp divisions emerge within the ruling class. Perhaps, making such an allusion vis-à-vis the present circumstances of the United States would be carrying things a bit too far. But the truth is that the world's sole superpower is

today a deeply divided nation, a reality mirrored rather frightfully in the balance of forces in its upper legislative house, the Senate, where the partisan tally is, both figuratively and literally, fifty-fifty. A razor-thin five-four plurality was all the US Supreme Court could muster to decide the closest presidential race in US history. It is all so very spooky. And it almost recalls the great divisions brought on by the escalation of the Vietnam War.

Yet, we have to be discerning and selective in deciding what really concerns us with the crisis of legitimacy of the Bush presidency. To hear some Nigerians moralise on the "stolen presidency" and "rigged elections" you would think that we were natives of Florida. We are not. And, the reality is that the man is president, whatever we may think of how he got there. The truth also is that the man emerged president through the institutions that Americans have mandated to pronounce on such matters – the Supreme Court, the Electoral College and Congress. It is just too bad that he did not win the popular vote, but the Constitution did not say he must. People around the world can shout till they are blue in the face, but it is the business of Americans and their designated institutions to decide who should be president of the United States.

Our concern, then, should be more instrumentalist than prescriptive. Once the electoral process has been concluded, it is not our business to judge how Americans vote or do not vote, or how they count their votes or do not count their votes. Our business is to see how the outcome of the process can be turned to good account – for us.

So, what is in all of this for us? Can we do business with Mr. Bush? I think yes. How? I think the place to start is to first do away with the long-standing silliness that our interests can only be served when Democrats win. Or, that black Americans like Colin Powell, who is now Secretary of State, owe us a sympathetic hearing on everything from peacekeeping to treasury-looting.

A friend sent me a digest of the briefing on African affairs given by the State Department to General Powell just before the man went for his Senate confirmation. At the top of the first page was a comment, which read: "Thought you would find this particularly interesting. May be, he will make up for his clear disinterest in Africa." Of course, no one needs to be told that Africa interests Mr. Bush about as much as religion interests an atheist, if not less. And many people are looking up to Powell to remedy this unapologetic disdain. Nigeria being the "Giant of Africa" merited all of one paragraph in the two-page digest. I was naturally curious to know what the briefing had to say about my country.

Here it is:

... Nigeria supplies 9% of our imported oil and it is highly prized for its low sulphur and low paraffin content. It is one of the highest quality oils available, so its importance is qualitative as well as quantitative. A broad range of issues was discussed in

detail, from ethnic conflict exacerbated by Sharia law to the strength of President Obasanjo's backing to the transition to civilian control of the military.

Aside from one further comment about something called a BNC with Nigeria, that was about all that was said of our country at that briefing. And, it is really instructive. What comes out clearly is that for America, the utility of Nigeria is interest-based: values and sentiments matter only to the extent that they find congruence with vital interests centred on oil. And, it really does not matter whether the administration in power is Republican or Democrat. In the heat of the Nigerian crisis, when it was obvious to all right-thinking people that the only thing that the junta in Nigeria dreaded was the possibility of an oil embargo by western nations, it was a member of President Clinton's National Security Council who said that an oil embargo was ruled out. In his words, "the American government is not going to risk adding one cent to the pump-head price of gas in the United States just so that some one hundred million blacks can vote." It was a comment that was received with considerable glee by Abacha and his cohort.

The upshot of all this is that we must seek to engage Mr. Bush and the new men in Washington from an interest-based standpoint. Rather than whining and agonizing about how Mr. Powell has refused to identify with fellow Africans, we need a clearheaded approach rooted in realism. And, while we are at it, perhaps the National Assembly may wish to take some time off its squabbles with the executive to pay attention to the things Senator Jesse Helms has been saying lately on the issue of foreign aid. Senator Helms is the arch-conservative Republican who would soon be returning to chair the powerful Foreign Relations Committee of the US Senate. His recent speech at the American Enterprise Institute should be a wake up call to all concerned on what lies ahead.

Ghana in transition*

And so another incumbent Vice President bit the dust in the bid to succeed his boss through the ballot box. But, that is about as far as similarities go between Al Gore and Atta Mills, or between the November 7 elections in the United States and the December 7 elections in Ghana. Although the contest in Ghana was only decided after a run-off poll and scattered incidents of malfeasance, when compared with both the preceding American farce and the long-standing African experience in electioneering this poll was a study in rectitude. The much-predicted turmoil has, happily, failed to happen. Losers have been gracious in defeat and winners have been tempered in their triumph. Everyone has been saying all the right things. Everyone, that is, including the incumbent president whose controversial legacy was the major issue in the elections. Investor confidence in Ghana remains high.

Yet, the presidential elections and their largely successful outcome could be the easiest part of the Ghanaian transition that was flagged off with the swearing-in of John Agyekum Kufuor as president. For, in spite of all the niceness and civility, there is a cauldron seething just beneath the surface in Ghana, waiting to boil over. What could tilt the scales is how Ghanaians come to terms with their political history, especially that aspect of the past defined by Jerry John Rawlings, the Air Force Lieutenant, who took power in June 1979.

In case anyone has forgotten Rawlings, it was he who spearheaded a bloody purge of his country's political leadership, including the dramatic and unprecedented execution of four past heads of state in 1979. He, then, organized a successful transition that saw him returning power to elected civilians only to take it back on New Year Eve in 1981. For twenty years thereafter, he ran the country, restoring it to international respectability (detractors would say servility). During this period, he unleashed a variant of market reforms that

* *Vanguard*, Friday 19, 2001

made him a darling of the IMF and devalued the *cedi* (and some claim the quality of life in Ghana) beyond anyone's imagination.

As he left office, his record remained mixed, a fact borne out by the outcome of the elections. Rawlings is a national hero, yet his party has been voted out of power; he is a populist who championed unpopular policies. How the newly elected government addresses the subsisting and largely contentious issues of the Rawlings legacy would be the defining moment not only of its political sagacity but also of the durability of the relative calm that has attended the change of guards thus far.

Twenty-one years later, feelings still run very deep about the stormy chapter that Rawlings inaugurated in Ghanaian history in 1979. There are homes in Ghana where it is still strictly forbidden to mention the name of "that boy" (a pejorative upper class reference to Rawlings) in the house, not to talk of mentioning it in a positive light or saying anything good about his tenure. This often presents some difficulty for Nigerians with Ghanaian friends, especially where these friends were family members of those who were caught on the wrong side of the Rawlings hurricane.

Without seeking to romanticize the loss of lives, the truth is that for a sizeable number of Nigerians, there is an enduring fascination, if not wistfulness, about the Rawlings revolution. Many Nigerians secretly, and sometimes not so secretly, wish that a similar thing had happened or should happen in Nigeria. Ghanaians of the pedigreed classes would quickly let you know that the reason many Nigerians entertain such "foolish" thought is because what happened in Ghana did not happen to their families. It is, indeed, true that the loss of loved ones under any circumstances could be traumatic and what happened in Ghana was particularly tragic.

How emotive these things could be was displayed sometime last year, during the run-up to the elections, as a Nigerian sat with some old Ghanaian classmates in our Accra offices to reflect on the Rawlings years and project on the coming elections. Many of the Ghanaians were scions of the elite that Rawlings displaced, so it was understandable that they were not particularly enamoured of the man. Ironically, many of them had also prospered stupendously under Rawlings, using their connections and western education to exploit huge opportunities opened up by his regime's ambitions privatization and liberalization programmes. The Nigerian called their attention to this fact and suggested that the best thing that could happen to Ghana would be a vote for the consolidation of the Rawlings legacy. The Ghanaians said they would have none of that and in the shouting match that ensued, one of them let slip their actual grouse with Rawlings: "it is true that we are doing well now," he said, "but we have to work hard to do well. In the old days, we did well without having to work at all." The fellow who made this statement is reputed to be pushing for a settling of scores with the Rawlings regime. His is the kind of mindset that gets people worried about post-Rawlings Ghana.

Is the outcome of the elections a repudiation of the Rawlings legacy? Has the country voted for revenge? On both questions I think the answer is no. The Rawlings phenomenon was about revolutionary heroism not electoral arithmetic. And, it is a highly personalized heroism with its own inscrutable dynamic. Nations have a curious relationship with their heroes that often borders on love-hate. Winston Churchill won the Second World War for Britain and was promptly voted out of office in the very first post-war elections. Ditto for Charles de Gaulle in France. The elder George Bush went from an approval rating of 91 per cent at the end of the Gulf War in 1991 to lose the American presidency barely a year later. To reach further back into history, Julius Caesar saved Rome and was then murdered by Romans. Mahatma Gandhi led India into freedom and was assassinated on the eve of independence. It is truly a curious chemistry that people have with their heroes.

Rawlings has done his work. His appointed task was that of a hammer knocking down the house of iniquity and laying a new foundation. His successors, like the French Bourbons, labour in vain to rebuild the old house. It would be wise that they do not even try to do so under the guise of some harebrained or woolly-headed scheme of revenge, for there is still enormous work to be done. The Rawlings revolution in its economic aspect gave power to the privileged and the expatriate. Not many ordinary Ghanaian can afford the oodies that reforms are said to have brought. I think that democratizing the gains of reforms is the task that the electorate has set for the new government. I also think that it is a tall order. It is heartening that the new man says he is looking for some assistance. But, ultimately, the joke could still be on the winners.

Robert and robbers in Zimbabwe

Two contending hypocrisies are at play in the current face-off between international do-gooders from the West and the southern African state of Zimbabwe, where elections hold this weekend.

On one side of the divide is Britain, the ex-colonial power, which is leading a group that includes the other three "white" nations in the Commonwealth (Canada, Australia and New Zealand) as well as the European Union and many western nations. This group has adorned its case against Robert Mugabe, the embattled President of Zimbabwe, with the banner of democracy.

They claim to be interested in ensuring free and fair elections in Zimbabwe and accuse Mugabe of trying to subvert the electoral process through vote robbery which, on the face of it, sounds noble enough as far as advertised intentions go. But, it is hard to divorce their present stance from an elaborate and convenient cover-up for the earlier robberies and historic injustices that the ex-colonial power perpetrated in the former Rhodesia.

On the other side of the argument is President Mugabe with his ZANU-PF party and the liberation struggle veterans. Mugabe and company seem to have found a ready alibi for nasty behaviour in the subsisting injustices of colonial rule. Confronted with dwindling popularity for having largely failed to deliver on the promises of independence, he has resorted to playing the land card. The need to restore land rights to blacks has always had a compelling resonance amongst the dispossessed black majority. Now, that need has suddenly become a handy excuse to be used in justifying behaviour that sometimes affronts democratic sensibilities and constricts the democratic space in Zimbabwe. The dramatic and tension-soaked run-up to this weekend's elections has seen some of the most curious vote manipulation on the part of an incumbent - even by African standards.

Mugabe, still smarting from the loss of a watershed referendum on constitutional reforms last year, has gone for broke in dealing with his opponents. His foes have suddenly become prone to armed attacks, with the women amongst them now said to be the favourites of rapists. A fortnight ago, Mugabe got parliament to pass a treason law that appears tailor-made to ensnare the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by Morgan Tsvangirai.

In spite of all these enormities, however, it is sad to admit that the moral argument still weighs somewhat in favour of Mugabe. This is so essentially because the situation in Zimbabwe calls painful attention to the tenacity of the unresolved dilemmas of late colonialism.

This may be the point that the Third World group in the Commonwealth sought to make last weekend during the heated debates on the Zimbabwe question at the organization's summit in Australia. It may not be far-fetched, though, that many of the leaders who backed Zimbabwe at the summit probably saw in Mugabe a kindred spirit whose approach to dealing with the opposition perfectly tallies with their own nastiness back home.

The argument in Zimbabwe is really between democracy and justice. There are deep-seated injustices in Zimbabwe that the present glib talk of democracy does not and cannot resolve. What makes it so difficult to dismiss and condemn Mugabe outright as a vicious vote-grabber is the fact that those accusing him are themselves land-grabbers.

And, land does have a lot to do with the vote in a country with a history like Zimbabwe's. Mugabe's misfortune is probably the fact that his own misbehaviour is being recorded and reported blow-by-blow by the international media, which is largely controlled by his accusers.

There was no CNN when those now calling Mugabe a "bad boy" perpetrated their own crimes. And, the world did not hear so much talk of democracy from Britain when Ian Smith was in power running a minority white government. In fact, Britain had to be dragged, literally, yelling and cursing to the Lancaster House talks, where the details of Zimbabwe's independence were finalized. A key aspect of the talks was an agreement on Britain's responsibility to provide the resources with which to compensate white farmers for the lands they were bound to lose to blacks in the inevitable redistribution scheme.

Britain has consistently failed to deliver on this crucial detail, and, has, in the process, handed Mugabe a perfect excuse for encouraging the war veterans to resort to self-help while doing the kinds of things he is now accused of doing to the opposition.

It is possible to accuse Mugabe of being manipulative on the land issue. But there is no statute of limitation on the crime of land robbery that Cecil Rhodes and his descendants' committed with the imprimatur of a Royal Charter. For as long as the land issue remains unresolved, Britain's vaunted interest in promoting democracy in Zimbabwe cannot but be seen as hypocritical and self-

serving. The energies now being expended on painting Mugabe black are likely to be more profitably utilized in finding creative ways to pay up the compensations.

It may well be the case that the opposition MDC would win tomorrow's elections. But whoever wins would still have to answer the yearnings of the black majority in Zimbabwe for access to lands expropriated from them by those who now invoke the sophistry of free elections to cover up historic injustices of colonialism.

A world away*

Arriving in Perth, Australia just a few days after last Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the impression I got was that President Olusegun Obasanjo did register his presence fairly well. People I met had quite a bit to say about how they saw "your President" as "a man of stature". Having been forewarned of the Australian penchant for what someone called "left-handed compliment" I feared that the reference could be to the man's physical frame. My fear was, however, to be mellowed by the testimony of no less a personage than The Right Reverend Dr. Peter Hollingsworth, Governor-General of Australia.

I had found myself in that far-away country attending a week-long conference that focused on development co-operation in a global context. The attendance reflected the multi-national scope of the meeting with people drawn from varied backgrounds trying to compare experience and lessons from over thirty countries spread across all the regions of the world, spanning the north-south, rich-poor divide. Although largely understated, it was obvious that the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 provided a significant backdrop to the meeting. The lead speaker, former United States Ambassador to South Africa, James Joseph alluded to this much by the title of his paper, "Philanthropy in a Divided World: Thinking Globally, Collaborating Regionally."

What is emerging from gatherings of this nature is that after the shock of the terrorist attacks, people now seek to come to grips with what went wrong and, more importantly, to see how the underlying causes can be addressed. For many, anger is fast giving way to soul-searching, just as rage is being replaced with a strenuous groping for comprehension. While not condoning or excusing acts of terrorism, thinking people the world over have come to accept that the inequities that feed the kind of hate that erupted on September 11 must be redressed urgently.

* *Vanguard*, March 29, 2002

nd, so it was that the Governor-General hosted my group to a reception at Admiralty House in Sydney's Kirribilli area. After the usual courtesies, with imperial anachronisms, Dr. Hollingsworth had joined us on a lawn gave a magnificent view of the Harbour Bridge and the famous Sydney Opera House. As I was introduced to him, the old man recalled an encounter he had with Obasanjo just a few days earlier when he was seeing the Nigerian leader off to his plane after CHOGM. As they got on to the red carpet, he said, Obasanjo reached out, held his hand and then walked on. He had wondered if anything was the matter, only to be informed by one of his aides that this was only a gesture of affection and protection. The aide told him that being an African chief, Obasanjo probably felt the need to offer the old man some protection.

Protection is, indeed, what the Governor-General needs at this time as he continues to labour under the scandal of what he did or did not do as Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane years ago. It is either that Australia is a land of many scandals, or that I just happened to have been around during the naughty season. Anyway, the story is that during his tenure as Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane Dr. Hollingsworth had failed to adequately look into charges of child sex abuse levelled against some of the clergymen in his diocese. The cases are now coming back to haunt him. The Brisbane Archdiocese which he headed runs the risk of bankruptcy after a court ordered it to pay \$834,000 to the first of twenty girls who alleged that they were sexually abused by their former house-master, who committed suicide on the day he was to appear in court. The opposition is having a field day with this scandal, causing the government maximum stress.

But, obviously the government side had not been asleep. On the Tuesday of the week I arrived, they repaid the favour as another scandal broke, this time involving a highly respected judge sympathetic to the opposition. Speaking under parliamentary immunity, Senator Bill Heffernan, one of Prime Minister John Howard's closest allies, accused High Court Judge Michael Kirby of using government cars to pick male prostitutes from the notorious Darlinghurst Wall in Sydney. Judge Kirby is a self-confessed homosexual, but knowing how touchy the homosexual issue is for Australians, Kirby's accuser was careful not to attack him for his sexual preferences - only for using government property to further his dalliances. As at the time I left, the scandal had yet to run its course but it is certain to end the career of one man - the senator or the judge.

The Kirby scandal ran alongside another one involving the former health minister, Dr. Michael Woodridge, who was said to have diverted \$5 million from a children's asthma fund to donate to the organization that later employed him after he stepped down as minister. Tongues, of course, wagged as to whether the donation was a payment in anticipation of the employment. People put two and two together, and then put the government under so much pressure that it had no choice but to retrieve the "donation" from the dubious beneficiaries.

Not that Australia is all about scandals, only that it does seem to me that politics – and politicians – are virtually the same everywhere. I thoroughly enjoyed my stay over there, even though some of the exchanges at the conference suggest that things may not be quite as nice as they seem. The Aborigine issue continues to loom large and may yet explode. But in all, I think that country is holding up well in confronting both its terrible history – and its numerous scandals.

Nigeria and Mr Bush's war*

In its lead editorial comment for the penultimate week, *The Economist* magazine presented its case in support of the US-led war against Iraq. In stating its case, just a few days to the outbreak of hostilities, the British magazine alluded to the legend of the arrogant king, Ozymandias, as recorded in one of the works of the writer, Percy Bysshe Shelley. It is a legend that is often quoted to stress the moral in the popular saying that "pride goes before a fall."

Shelley records that the proud king one day went to the top of his castle to survey the sheer expanse of his kingdom. Smug with self-satisfaction at what he saw, the king was said to have been gripped by a fit of hubris as he boasted: "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings, look on my works, ye mighty, and despair." A popular rendition of the boast is even more poignant for the vivid image that it conveys. Literature teachers tell of how Ozymandias declared at the peak of his glory, "Behold my works!"

The Economist reminds readers that Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, is said to love poetry. It then surmised that the Iraqi leader should now be so pleased with himself that he would recite Shelley's lines in contemplating the confusion that his actions have wrought on the solidarity of the world's leading powers in the run-up to what has now come to be known as Gulf War II.

However, taking a dispassionate look at the unfolding war on Iraq, it does seem that if anyone stands guilty of the hubris of Ozymandias, it is Mr. Hussein's arch adversary in Washington, who is now leading a so-called "coalition of the willing" to defy world opinion by declaring a war by fiat. By this act of defiance, the Washington warmongers have shown themselves up as an even greater threat to the international peace and security that they continually mouth as their remit.

From the onset of the latest round of the weapons inspection controversy, US President, George W. Bush never hid his preference for a military showdown, obviously assured of the invincibility of his war machine. In this quest,

* *Vanguard*, April 4, 2003

American unilateralism reared its head in its ugliest form as friends and foes alike were threatened to either fall in line or else... One of the more revealing phrases that emerged from the long-winding road to war says that on the Iraq issue, America has in its relations with its traditional allies transmuted from "a buddy into a bully."

The London *Mirror*, in its edition of March 19, writes of the Bush administration's increasing tendency to abuse the world's sympathy for the US over the terrorist attacks of September 2001. The paper accuses the administration of using the attacks as an excuse to hold the world to ransom on every issue that catches its fancy. The world is now hostage to American mood swings and dollarized warmongering as Mr. Bush arrogates to himself exclusive right to determine who is on the side of world peace and who is not. In so doing, the US appears to have swallowed its own post-Cold War propaganda, forgetting that the international system is always multi-polar in one form or the other – regardless of what the missile count might suggest.

Last week, American bullying reached Nigeria as the Bush administration announced the withdrawal of US military assistance to Nigeria. The advertised excuse for this decision is the action of Nigerian soldiers in suppressing civil disturbances in parts of the Middle Belt and the Niger Delta over two years ago. Not many are impressed with this excuse. It would strike anyone who can put two and two together that the US decision came on the heels of the joint position of Nigeria and South Africa arguing against war on Iraq. The Nigerian authorities have already drawn this connection, which the Americans expectedly, strenuously deny.

The withdrawal of American military assistance at this stage of Nigeria's democratic transition must be taken as an act of extreme hostility against Nigeria. It is a most unkind cut for a regime that had gone out of its way to incur domestic disaffection for what many perceive as its acute pro-US stance.

Many explanations have been making the rounds on the American action. Some claim that it is to punish President Obasanjo for defying American opposition to undertake his recent state visit to Iran, which the Bush administration counts alongside Iraq and North Korea in its so-called "axis of evil."

Others suggest that the animus is more business-related, that US companies have lately not been doing too well in winning lucrative energy contracts in Nigeria and that the Americans hold Obasanjo responsible for this. Some even more shadowy and sinister explanations that have been proffered preclude recounting here. But whatever be the excuse or explanation, one fact needs to be made very clear: the international community, which the US now claims to be leading, bears a special responsibility for Nigeria's young and increasingly fragile democracy. Terminating American military assistance to Nigeria at this point in time sends the wrong signals. Significantly, it suggests that the US no

longer has an interest in re-professionalizing the Nigerian military as a vital plank in efforts to sustain Nigeria's fledgling democracy.

This signal can only be music in the ears of anti-democratic forces now engaged in all manner of permutations and subterfuge towards scuttling the forthcoming civilian-to-civilian transition. It is our hope that Mr. Bush's America, which claims to be waging a war to enthrone democracy in Iraq, does not intend to be counted amongst the enemies of democracy in Nigeria.

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As commentaries on events and trends in our nation's evolution, **Political Transition in Nigeria: 1993-2003** provides varied perspectives of what can at best be described as an unstable past. There are certainly lessons to be learnt from the events and developments that the book has focused on... Writings of this nature help in the task of ensuring that we never forget the past and that we do not experience a re-occurrence of some of the lapses of the past.

- His Excellency, Otunba Gbenga Daniel
Governor of Ogun State



..There is a price that is too high to pay for peace. It is the price of self-respect. For too long in Nigeria we have sought to buy peace and unity at the price of continually debasing ourselves by generally kow-towing to the whims and fancies of our more brazen fellow countrymen. This tendency has brought neither peace nor unity. Rather, what it has done is to further encourage our local slave masters in their brazenness. The time has come to put an end to a policy of appeasement that has obviously not worked and that will never work...

..The clear message is that we stand at the edge of a massive transformation that could see a further blurring of traditional divisions in contemporary Nigerian politics. No one is likely to get away any longer with being hailed as a progressive just by proclaiming himself as one. Visible work to further the agenda of progress would be the litmus test of one's earnestness as a man of positive change. This is why Nigerians must ensure that the people who emerge from the coming elections local, state, national are the true heralds of a new epoch, not just the accomplished masters of the usual window-dressing. To do this, we need to measure the utterances and performance of all contestants...

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