

## **Realizing the Emancipatory Potential of the Nigerian Character**

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Is there something about the Nigerian character that has an inherent emancipatory potential? Are there some hidden energies in our land, within the Nigerian personality that can bring light to a nation long adrift in the scary night of darkness? Looking at the kind of campaigns being run by various parties and the evident confusion about who is qualified and unqualified to run for election, one begins to wonder whether we are not going back to the dark days of IBB. IBB, the so called Maradona, randomly disqualified or cleared his real and imagined enemies or rivals without due process. He was the accuser as well as the judge. IBB heated the political climate because his transition program was a charade conceived from the beginning to hit the rock, just to create grounds for the perpetuation of his shameful and wasteful ways and wiles.

The present government is following in IBB's footsteps. Already there is real and evident uncertainty about the possibility of staging successful elections in the next two months. But these are all situations deliberately created and continued by the president since his third term bid failed. There have been claims and counter claims against some politicians, who have been deemed unworthy of seeking political office by agents of the government. While many people admit that most of our politicians are self-serving fortune-diggers, most of whom are rotten to the very marrow with corruption and greed, the rule of law, however, should be followed in establishing the criminality or otherwise of any political aspirants. The attempt to disqualify politicians as unsuitable for political positions because of unproven criminal cases, duly established through the courts or their equivalent, leaves many of us with a lurking apprehension that *trouble dey for Naija!* Do we face a bleak political future this year with the shenanigans and political head-hunting campaign of the Obasanjo regime? Are we all to sink because of the ambition or inanities of one man or one group of men and women? This is the question I intend to answer indirectly in this piece.

Nigeria's image has taken a turn for the worse by the uncertainty in the Niger Delta, the negative news coverage in the Western media, exemplified recently by the special focus on the Niger Delta by CNN. Any American or Canadian who reads what the State Department has on its website on Nigeria ([http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/tw/tw\\_928.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_928.html)) will never consider traveling to Nigeria at this point in time. 8 engineers from the Engineers without

Boarders-USA (University of Illinois at Champaign), who are scheduled to travel to my community to complete a water project this Spring, are facing some tough choices at this point in time. Last Spring, they successfully executed a similar project in Orissa, Kenya with little or no difficulty. Last December, they executed a solar-energy power generating project in India, with no difficulty. This year, unfortunately, they are facing tough and frightening challenges about coming to Nigeria. They had already concluded that this will be their first and last project in the country. This is only but tips of the iceberg in the catalogue of the good things our country loses everyday because of the Nigerian image and the unacceptable situation at home. How many Nigerians are denied positions of high responsibilities in international organizations because of the poor image and rating of our country? Why is it that carrying a Nigerian passport has become a liability and that Nigerians have to be treated with ignominy and flagrant disregard in many embassies, airports and international fora? Many prominent Nigerians abroad have similar stories of how their attempts to be pro-active for the good of Nigeria have often been defeated by ‘what is out there’ about our country, and the internal combustion that is choking our national life.

As Nigeria faces elections in the next two months, I propose that the main questions that every Nigerian should pose to himself or herself are: Why is it that our country is not realizing her potentials? Who is that leader among those who are lining up for the presidency who could heal our national memories and set the short and long term agenda for building a new nation? We cannot blame the Western media for the negative publicity into which Nigeria has been framed. We already see signs of decay all around us in our country. Why is it that international NGO coalition groups, the World Social Forum etc, who wish to seek network with Africa prefer Ghana, Senegal, Kenya, South Africa, and Botswana to Nigeria? Why is there no sustainability in our country whether in sports, education, arts, music, economy, politics etc? There is something fundamentally wrong with our country. Using the words of Shakespeare, the fault is in us and not in our stars.

During the Abacha regime, the publicity arm of that evil regime launched an image laundering program, *Not in our Character*. This was a potpourri of half-truths on an over-bloated national ego built on a truncated narrative of a nation in Renaissance. We do have a lot of positives about our country, which should be celebrated. *But greatness is not a claim that a country makes but a reality that the citizens live and celebrate*. I still believe in a great future for Nigeria. However, we as a people must begin to tell ourselves the truth, namely: that we are a

nation in perpetual anticipation of the realization of our potentialities for greatness; that the worst is always inevitable in our country, while the good is always receding from our national horizon; that we are a nation in decline because after 46 years of existence we have not yet laid a solid foundation for prosperity and growth in any aspect of our national life. That our religious revivals, miracles, crusades, ‘explosions’, vigils, pilgrimages to Mecca, Medina, Rome and Jerusalem have failed to produce better citizens. At the same time, our religious leaders are increasingly shortchanging the people, while pandering to and fawning on politicians and the high and mighty in order to receive special favors and generous donations for their above-the-ordinary-people lifestyles. That we are an unjust nation if the wealth of this country is in the hands of a thin top layer, while the majority of the ordinary people swim in the filthy underwater of poverty, suffering and generalized frustration. That most young Nigerians, especially those born after Independence, are frustrated and restless and want to leave the country for good. That we are a nation that is not at peace with herself because the life and property of most people are not safe, and our diversity has remained a constant thorn in our flesh. That as a nation, we are in bondage at the hand of a military mafia and an old and largely unpatriotic and self-serving political class. However, the time of these old classes is running out even as they continue to entrench themselves through various political subterfuges and manipulation of the religious, economic and ethnic divides in the polity, and many-layered forms of intrigues. These fortune-seekers are making the Nigerian federation the pawn in their political and economic chessboard.

The future of Nigeria is in the hands of ordinary Nigerians. I am convinced that grassroots actions, midwived through the civil society and social movements are the only real chances for the country. It may be the equivalent of the Yellow Revolution in Ukraine, or the simple non-co-operative resistance akin to what the Philipinos did to bring down the evil regime of Marcos. But the present political arrangement will not reform itself unless the people resist those political husks who are parading themselves in the shining armor of patriotism. As a people, we must identify the seismographic registration of the self-imposed quakes in our political, economic and religious landscapes, which read like an anthology of woes, missed opportunities and stagnation. That a country so blessed with so much by an all generous and gracious God should be in so much tension with herself, and be wrenching in the harsh pains of self-flagellation has been the saddest story that is playing out in the African continent since Nigeria’s Independence.

Are there any bases for hope for Nigeria? I am not an optimistic person, but rather a hopeful person. This sentiment re-echoes the words of Desmond Tutu. In the twilight of apartheid, he was asked whether he was optimistic about the future of South Africa, he said ‘no’ rather than he was hopeful. Optimism is based on a concrete and human-centered ground for a better tomorrow. Here, in Canada, the citizens can be optimistic about their future on many concrete grounds. The people can look at the billions that accrue to the government in terms of surplus budget for 2006. They can also point to the enjoyment they have from their national wealth which has made the country a land that could afford free medical care for all her citizens, a land that could afford to provide for the education of all her citizens, pay out millions to citizens and racial groups who were treated unjustly in the past; guarantee job for over 94% of her workforce and pay huge unemployment benefits to the unemployed and unemployable. On what then do I build my hope for a better tomorrow for Nigeria? It is based on the emancipatory potentials of the Nigerian character.

Hope has a special quality. It is like stepping into the darkness and fearing no evil; it is that audacity of looking in the face of evil and saying: “I beg to differ.” It is not like the bravado of a demented pastor who falls into the lion’s den hoping to be saved like Daniel. Hope is the firm conviction that God is at work in our lives in our personal, group, national, and world history even and in spite of us. It is the firm conviction that should drive us to work for a better tomorrow by commitment to something positive and life-giving, even when one is surrounded by agents of death and harbingers of doom. Hope is built on the certainty that evil and violence, deception and intrigues, greed and ego-trips, unhidden vindictiveness that have characterized our present political scene, will not have the last say. I believe that no single individual in Nigeria can hold the country hostage without at the same time falling victim to the trap that he or she is setting for others.

I recall the last match of the Super Eagles I watched at the National Stadium, Surulere, which ended in a goalless draw. That was in 2001. I have forgotten with what country the Super Eagles played, but they did not suffer the kind of humiliation which they received in the hand of the Black Stars of Ghana last month. I, however, remember that the supporters club never stopped singing the popular song, *I have a father who never fails*. That song epitomizes what I have come to identify as the emancipatory potential of the Nigerian character: the *never say die* attitude; the *I go make am* conviction (as long as you do it right); the *I no go gree* spirit; the *no*

*play me ojoro* warning, and the *you no be God* rebuff, or even the *I go follow God sote I die* affirmation. That spirit prevailed against Babangida post June 12; it led to the mysterious death of Abacha. It is that same spirit that has given voice to many marginalized peoples of Nigeria, who have drunk for long the bitter nectars of injustice and state violence. They stretch from the forgotten people of the Niger Delta, to the restless spirits of millions of Easterners who lost their lives in the Civil War; from the minority tribes in the North who have often been treated as if they never mattered in the power game between the 'Big three', to the ordinary Northern 'Ahmajiris' who are refusing to be expendable 'things' in the political game to win the soul of the North; or the Westerners who, with other Nigerians, fought so much for the realization of the June 12 mandate, only to see one of their own prove why the rest of Nigeria should *ronu* (think 'twice') about allowing any military man in or out of uniform or any person from the old self-serving political order to occupy Aso Rock, especially if the person is driven by a vengeful ego. We have to credit Obasanjo with stabilizing the polity by at least scaring the military boys away for now, but I think this country needs a clean break.

My prayer is that the Nigerian spirit will once more inspire the people of this land in this election year to continue to hope, to work by night and day, against demagogues and self-seeking leaders. In the past, we carried ballot papers and voters' cards that translated into nothing; voted for leaders which meant no choosing because our votes never counted. In our country, it has become an unwritten law that the winners of elections are often known before the election takes place, and the ruling party, especially at the centre never loses any election. But this should not be the case. Taking back our country should be the battle cry for today. And every Nigerian, both at home and abroad, should search for how we can stir ourselves to realize the emancipatory potential that is hidden in the Nigerian character. When are we going to wake this giant from the sleep of ages?