

*Praise for Chude Jideonwo and  
Are We The Turning Point Generation?*

It is rare to find a young person, below 30, who will commit his days to such difficult essays for a book—fearlessly, and honestly, addressing the complexities, and contradictions, that constantly confront any Nigerian. I am deeply impressed by Chude for this excellent work. There are many that hope his generation will answer the questions that Nigeria has posed to its citizens since Independence. As this book ponders unity, faith, calamity, leadership, and his generation's place in all this, my heart soared. It is honest about our failings—"Nigeria is not yet a great nation," it says—but clear-eyed about our opportunities—"The next best time to plant a tree is today". Chude has done his generation an important favour, and I know without a shred of doubt that there is plenty yet to come from this immensely talented and proudly Nigerian young man.

– **Emeka Opara**

This provocative collection of essays reveals the voice of a young man who is deeply passionate about his country. Jideonwo delves into the complexities of Nigeria "which has become Africa's largest exporter of Pentecostalism and one of the biggest sources of pilgrims to Israel and Mecca," but where the corpse of his just deceased father would not be accepted by a hospital without a police report, a report which the police would not issue without being bribed. Jideonwo, in addressing his generation of Nigerians makes the compelling argument that everyone is a change maker and challenges us to transform our frustration with the county into the motivation needed to drive the change we want to see.

– **Chika Unigwe**

This is the first time I have cared enough to write a blurb. Why? Chude. I met him for the first time at the famous *Enough is Enough* rally in Abuja and found out I had known him all along. This was the boss, but he acted just like everyone else. Always calm perhaps because he understood that the hardest and most important time is the preparation before getting to the ring.

With every new initiative and dream he's birthed, I see the same qualities I noticed that first time. He knows where he's going and he is focused in getting there. He is an endangered specie. I understand what that means deeply when I meet people like Chude Jideonwo. I hope Africa will not waste this gift.

– **Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde, Actress/UN ambassador/TIME 100 Most Influential People in the World**

Many Nigerians have created a hobby out of discussing and writing about their country's issues. Chude belongs to that rare breed, who go beyond mere sound and fury to provide unusual insight.

– **Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani**

Chude Jideonwo is the voice of a new Nigeria. Whether through Y! Magazine and YNaija.com, The Future Awards Africa, or through this new collection of his thoughts on the future of Nigeria, he has proved to be a solid force in creating a new vision of and for this country.

– **Uzodinma Iweala, author *Beast of No Nation***

Chude Jideonwo is one of the clearest and most passionate Nigerian voices screaming for change. The fact that he is young, and has been able to command a loyal following among other influential youth in his generation has further amplified this voice. *Are we the turning point generation?* is an excellent medium through which we can listen to Chude's words, learn from his experiences and gain inspiration for the immense work that we must collectively embark upon to transform this nation!

– **Ndidi Okonkwo Nwuneli (MFR), Founder, LEAP Africa**

As Afropessimism dims, a constellation of stars are circling and Africa is looking brighter again. It is hoped that these would brighten the continent of Africa. Chude belongs to one of those stars.

– **Bishop Matthew Kukah**

Chude's writing does not just exude strength of character, but an earnest message that resonates with hope—that tomorrow's Nigeria will be better

for all of us, if we apply ourselves today toward achieving the greater good. With this remarkable collection, Chude makes a crucial statement: that to reshape our continent, we will require thinkers, and we will require builders. He is clearly both.

– **Tony O. Elumelu**

This is an absorbing book. With healthy doses of cynicism and wit, the author vividly captures the essence of our collective disillusionment and the overwhelming temptation to defer the promise of our greatly endowed nation to a generation yet unborn. Yet the author succeeds marvellously in challenging us to believe in our capacity and duty to redeem our troubled nation. Jideonwo makes the case, firmly and confidently, I salute the author for this compelling narrative—and hope that it will rekindle hope in his generation, and mine.

– **Odein Ajumogobia, SAN**

Chude broke into national consciousness with his inspiring work at The Future Project. Since then, he has revealed other sides of his brilliance through his role in starting the *Enough is Enough Nigeria* coalition; establishing a media brand that sits pretty across traditional and new media spaces; extending the frontiers of The Future Project beyond Nigeria; and helping to shape national conversation with the power of his writing—on even controversial issues. With “Are we the turning point generation?”, Chude has wrapped his brilliance in timelessness and it is a gift I am personally grateful for. As he does when speaking, Chude’s words in “Are we the turning point generation?” will challenge readers to answer the central question in the affirmative—and hopefully inspire action.

– **‘Gbenga Sesan, Executive Director, Paradigm Initiative Nigeria.**

**@gbengasesan**

An authentic leader of his generation and beyond, Chude has clearly earned the right to be a compass, for the present and to the future of Nigeria, a country he has proven to love dearly. These essays are a testament of his enduring love for Nigeria, in spite of repeated heartbreaks. These essays challenge us to act and to build the Nigeria not only that we want but one

that our children will want to inherit from us. He is original, an inspiration and a beacon of hope for the future of Africa. If you've not joined the rest of the continent in paying attention, you should start from this remarkable book.

– **Biola Alabi, MD, MNET Africa**

Chude represents what I proudly refer to as my mentors from a younger generation [...]

Much can be said about mentors and it is in Chude that I find practical expression of who a real one is. Here is a young man that embodies the hope and pride that is all that Nigeria can and will be; a patriot, a warrior, an entrepreneur, a leader, a friend and an ally. I could never have asked for a better mentor than Chude and his book is just one of those vehicles that is set to make me a better Nigerian and Nigeria a better nation.

– **Tonye Cole, ED, Sahara Group**

Chude is striking in conversation, impressive in action, but almost peerless when he writes. I found myself reaching for the phone immediately after reading many of the essays in this book—struck by the earnestness of his thoughts, the depth of his insight and the urgency of his vision. Chude stands out amongst the growing number of his peers in their generation who are increasingly voicing out against poor governance; not merely crying in the wilderness but speaking truth to power as often as they are inspired. He is willing to stand away from the popular opinion whatever be the cost; his words made powerful by the integrity—and stubborn independence—of his voice. Chude brings great credibility to his ideas by his readiness to do; to move beyond words into action. His is a generation I am extremely excited about. And to find him at the forefront among many equals, empowers my hope that there shall indeed be a New Nigeria.

– **Obiageli Katryn Ezekwesili**

Time and again, I have found myself smile or nod 'very well said' to a piece Chude Jideonwo has written. His pieces are insightful, to the point and necessarily provocative. His message resonates about the role that young people—and indeed every citizen, not just in Nigeria but across the

world—should play in building a responsible functioning modern society. I have never met Jideonwo, have not even heard him speak, but his voice through his essays rings loud, and clear, resonating with wisdom. His essays remind us all of the work we still need to do. His courage and modelling gives us hope that the Nigeria of our dreams is in sight, and makes us proud that the work of the generations before him have not been in vain.

– **Ifueko M. Omoigui Okauru, former Director-General, Federal Inland Revenue Service**

This book, provocative and tough, is worth the read whether you share his views or not. Chude, I'm proud of you. Keep up the good work.

– **Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Coordinating Minister for the Economy and Minister of Finance**



# ARE WE THE TURNING POINT GENERATION?

HOW AFRICA'S YOUTH CAN DRIVE  
ITS URGENT REVOLUTION

essays by

CHUDE JIDEONWO

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*This is for my mother—  
inspirer, cheerleader, leader.*



## FOREWORD

I might be an entrepreneur these days with the day job of managing the media companies under the RED group, and the team of people that keep us special, but I never forget that I am first and foremost, a storyteller.

It's what I have always wanted to be—first when I thought fiction, and then when I discovered my impatience was better suited to the notepads of a journalist. A storyteller in the now, in the present; in the center of the story as it unfolds, shaping, directing, pulling, pushing.

I have also been lucky to stand at a vantage position as my generation has evolved, and as my peers and myself come into our own—as a business person managing people and resources in a time of great flux, as a media owner not uninterested in driving the conversation, and combining that profession with the difficult passion of making change in a country and continent like ours.

As I have navigated those waters, I have always felt that I bore a responsibility to myself to share my thoughts and lend my voice to the issues that matter to me—with clarity, with honesty, and with deliberate disregard to the fears that gnaw at my heart time and again.

It's sometimes the fear of going against the grain, the fear of taking a tack against the popular stand, or what I call in one of the pieces, the courage to be reasonable. But at the end of the day, all I

have is my voice, and its independence, and I have chosen to guide it with all that I have, and am.

And, over the years, I have shared my thoughts as they have come—as a columnist at NEXT, on the pulpit of The Future Awards Africa, on our internet newspaper, YNaija.com, at important public events with the president or with corporate, political and civil society leaders, across the country and outside. There was no anticipation they would all tie in one day into this collection—that reflects thoughts I hold dear, my vision of modern society across the intersections that interest me.

In 2013, after the whirlwind of the rallies that brought the new president into power, the excitement of new elections and getting out the youth vote, as well as the euphoria of people power occasioned by the fuel subsidy protests of the year before, and as I considered the future of our country, and our continent, I embarked on the popular essay series ‘New Leadership’ on the nation’s leading online platforms. They were, for me, a statement of my vision—what I think is possible, what I think we must do.

I thank my friends, ‘Gbenga Sesan, Adaobi Nwaubani, Aziza Uko, Mfon Ekpo, Adebola Williams and others who insisted, after the series, that this was a book that had to be done; put together; a story that has to be told.

This book is as a result of my agreeing with them. Expanded beyond the essays, and spread over a timeline of at least seven years, they constitute my personal narrative of what it means to be young and to be African in these exciting times. It is a time of great disappointment in the present and in the state of our nations, and yet one of great hope and opportunity for what we can do, and for what is possible.

And yes, they were right. And I am glad I took off the cap of business and committed to getting this done. Our collective narrative needs be defined—and if not now, then when?

**Chude Jideonwo**

February 2014

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Why do many Nigerian leaders 'change' once in office? Will the present generation of Nigerians do any better than its predecessors? Was Occupy Nigeria indeed a failure? Do we need a 'Nigerian Dream'? Is 'One Nigeria' really worth it? These and many other difficult questions are raised in this thought-provoking collection of essays on the paradox that is Nigeria.

Written with the keenness of youth but earnest and wise beyond its years, *Are We the Turning Point Generation?* will resonate with young Nigerians while remaining relatable to previous generations. This book embodies the voice of a new breed of Nigerians willing to take a stand and do things differently. *Are We the Turning Point Generation?* promises to inspire a new way of thinking, posing a challenge to Nigerians, young and old, to 'pick a spot, and start digging'!



# PART ONE

## LOSING IT: HOW NOT TO RUN A NATION



# 1

## THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT GOVERNMENT

February 6, 2013

**M**y orientation about our government began to change in 2009. Before then, I had always felt—sadly without any historical or evidentiary perspective—that Nigerians can transform Nigeria in spite of our government.

It was easy for me to believe this. I came into awareness of my country's place in the world in an atmosphere of hope in the late 1990s, and at the turn of the millennium as we embraced democracy and the opening of many social spaces. There were very many examples to point out. Some are now clichéd like; Nollywood, an industry that has been hailed for rising up like a rose amongst thorns, and had become Nigeria's biggest cultural export to the world. Or our music industry which is also thriving simply by grit and talent. Or our youth who, from art to advocacy, technology to the media, had charted courses that didn't depend on government patronage or 'support'. Surely, if Nigerians could do these, in spite of Nigeria, then we could end up regenerating Nigeria through a network of people empowered economically and by knowledge, working to rebuild our country step by step.

That's what I thought.

That's what drove our passion and our work with The Future

Awards, and its evolution into The Future Project. That's what drove our focus on identifying the most inspiring of our generation as strong, positive role models to motivate others to transcend Nigeria's difficult environment and do great things. The idea was, and is still, the fulcrum of our work; that this network of inspired, effective new leaders would create a flywheel effect that will change Nigeria.

A chance comment from a friend got me thinking beyond the box, however. He asked: how far will we actually be able to go in transforming our society before we have to connect those efforts with what government is doing or what it needs to do? How much could we achieve if the government fundamentally remained the same?

The more I thought about it, the more I realised the answer—not far.

My experiences over the past few years have made apparent to me what has been obvious to the world's real change-makers in modern societies over the past few years. It's the same reality that confronts you when you read books like Lee Kuan Yew's *From Third World to First*, and *Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracles* – we can only go so far in changing our world without connecting with or transforming government.

Focusing on inspiring a network of progress outside of government wasn't a wrong message, however; it just wasn't the complete message. Just like many of us, I was falling into a well-worn trap of the single solution, of the single story. Of course, when you face a system like Nigeria's—where successive governments appear to govern by default, where it seems there are no values or vision from the top—it is easy to give in to the temptation to want to desperately ignore that government, to belittle it, to make it seem inconsequential. With the acute awareness that it is a huge, thankless task to change a government like ours, and with the abiding fear of the daunting path ahead to transform the way it thinks and functions, it is very easy to hope that we can change our country without it.

Unfortunately, we need to dig our heads out of the sand. Nigeria

is not going to be changed by non-governmental organisations digging boreholes; it will not be changed by advocates pushing for probity in government. No matter how earnest and well-organised they are, their efforts will be thwarted because they are not in charge of hiring competent officials and firing corrupt aides, the maintenance of an independent judiciary through responsible appointments or the judicious allocation of public funds. In the same way, Nigeria won't be changed by the USAID or any other international do-gooder because that is not what they are structured to do; just as a war will not be stopped by the Red Cross or Amnesty International, but by the governments and their enemies who started the war. This is the reason, in fact, that many donors and international organisations, from the British Council to the DFID, the US government to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, prefer to support organisations that interface with government, or partner with the governments themselves. Where they are not doing this, they are working with organisations that are in opposition to government, or that snip at the heels of government. Either way, there is an implicit global understanding, honed by years of ineffectual interventions and a vicious cycle of good intentions with poor results, that it all comes back to government.

The reason for this is simple: none of these bodies have the budget, the resources, the reach, the weight, the capacity to affect all levels and layers of society. Even when they do—which is almost impossible except when one country violates another's sovereignty—none of them can muster enough required to effect the kind of change that can be facilitated by the full power of the state.

Perhaps we can find in Egypt a perfect example. While its exemplary people have turned protest into an art form, arm-twisting their leaders into taking responsible decisions and sustaining the tempo of change leading from the Arab Spring, a people-driven revolution has still come back to the character and nature of the new government that they have. What Mohammed Morsi decides to do

(and not to do) in his relations with the judiciary, the military and civil society will turn out to be more important than the revolution that brought the Islamic Brotherhood into power.

Like Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein, King of Jordan, told participants at the World Economic Forum in January, the revolutions were the easiest part of the work that they have to do. Building a political culture, driven by their elected leaders in government, is the major task that lies ahead.

The message is simple: no matter how dirty and slimy we find our government (and maybe we are justified, maybe we are exaggerating), we are making a terrible mistake to think that we can transform our country without it. Government is the single most important force for change in any society—print that and paste it on your door if you really want to do something to change your country. It doesn't matter if, with government officials behaving like asses and the deplorable behaviour that passes for administration, government has become a dirty word; the dirtiness should not obscure that simple reality. We need a government that works, one way or the other. We cannot, *cannot* change Nigeria without its government.

The tragedy, of course, is that the clamour for working within government is usually championed by people whose motives are largely questionable. So it is important to note that joining government blindly, especially the legislature and executive, is not going to solve our problems. And, if history gives us any pointers, blind ambition causes more harm than good.

Fortunately for us, there is not just one way to make our government better. What we need to do is find our positions in relation to this organ. We need enough competent and vision-driven people to transform the government by working within it and helping it. We also need others to work from the outside: activists, freedom fighters, the opposition, radical lawyers, dogged journalists, progressive clergymen.

But whatever we do, we need to keep the government in our sights. Whatever we do, if we want it to have a lasting impact on the way our society is structured and governed, we have to find the nexus where these efforts connect to government and modifies its behaviour. Either that or we push it aside, and work to get a government that will act right.

## 2

# WHAT'S A 'DREAM' GOT TO DO WITH IT?

March 28, 2013

If you listen often to Nigerian motivational speakers, you might have heard them ask what seems like a pretty reasonable question: 'You've heard the Americans talk about the *American Dream*. Ask yourself, what is the *Nigerian Dream*?' These speakers go ahead to identify this as the root of our problems as a nation: we do not have a codified, popularised concept of where we want to go as a people, and the long-term sense of mission to stay on that path and achieve greatness.

Before one goes on, it is important to note that the first recorded use of the phrase *The American Dream* was in a 1931 book (*The Epic of America*) by a man called James Truslow Adams, written two centuries after that country was established. Therefore, Americans didn't essentially have their dream codified and made plain before the nation could work towards it. Also, many other successful nations don't have this same document. The Chinese and the Germans don't, and neither do the British, an advanced people who do not even have a written constitution. Be that as it may, these speakers are on to something important to the extent that these nations do have a compass—that sense of a common vision, a common essence of

why they exist and what they want their nation and their people to achieve, to become.

Truslow said that for America it is "The dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement"; a sentiment aptly pre-empted by the Declaration of Independence for the United States: '...amongst which are life, liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.' A visit to many parts of the United States, conservative or liberal, big city or small town, will reveal that essence.

Like America, every society has its character; its inbuilt essence—the collectivity of its peoples' behaviours and worldviews; the intangibles that inexorably define the way they engage themselves and the world. For the British, someone has described it as 'focused around the concept of *Deep England*—the desire to live a middle-class, culturally conservative lifestyle in un-spoilt settings—while still co-existing with modernity'. That's certainly a vision the Royal Family lives through as the ultimate symbol of English life. This deep sense of a people's collective essence is also responsible for the openness of Europe (save for outliers like Germany) to progressive, liberal social values as well as its propensity to provide a life that is paced and perhaps leisurely for its people.

In Nigeria, unfortunately, this process of thinking through and defining who we are seems to have never happened. Disappointingly, history seems to show that those who birthed the Nigerian nation never gave thought to understanding and harnessing its essence to build it for the future. Chinua Achebe succinctly captures this failure of depth in *The Trouble with Nigeria*: 'In spite of conventional opinion, Nigeria has been less than fortunate in its leadership. A basic element of this misfortune is the seminal absence of intellectual rigour in the political thought of our founding fathers—a tendency to pious materialistic woolliness and self-centred pedestrianism.'

So they presented to us a problem that we will need to solve.

Unfortunately, because our nation has not yet begun to function as any nation should, having already reached 50 years of independence, we first have to deal with our urgent and important existential challenges: food, infrastructure, basic security.

But when we are done with these, let it be known that we are actually just getting started.

To deliver a society that is, apologies to Jim Collins, *built to last*, we will have to construct it brick by brick. We will have to mentally and then physically build our country based on an understanding of where we are coming from and where we can go; based on a set of ideas and concepts that are inspired by and guided through the sociology (who we are), history (where we are coming from), philosophy (how we think), even cosmology (how we view the unseen) of both our constituent parts and the constructed whole.

To address this complicated challenge, we will need builders; leaders who understand the imperative and the mechanics of how truly great societies have been built. These will be leaders who deeply understand complexity—who have studied (or are studying), as far as contemporary nation-building goes, how emerging powerhouses like China have constructed their politics, business and education around these precepts.

Indeed, China is a perfect living example, warts and all. The leaders who constructed the China we see and adore today did it with the understanding that they are not America or Russia and would be making lethal mistakes if they simply transplanted foreign values in building their own country.

China, at heart, is a big country ruled essentially by an emperor and, as Singapore's visionary Lee Kuan Yew noted in *TIME* weeks ago, little emperors across a vast expanse who 'exercise great local influence'. China also has cultural habits that 'limit imagination and creativity, rewarding conformity', as well as a 'language that is exceedingly difficult for foreigners to learn sufficiently to embrace China and be embraced by it'. The Chinese are sociologically known

for a fear of chaos, and this natural sense of caution ultimately directs the actions of its elite who have stood against the potential instability of a multiparty system. As Yew noted, these are a people who, in their over 5,000 years of recorded history, have never counted heads; and their rulers lead 'by right of being the emperor.' This is the reason China has decided it will not give in to the temptation of adored Western systems and function as a liberal/parliamentary democracy; and this is also at the root of the ultimate failure of the Tiananmen Square revolution.

The Chinese have built a system of government and businesses that is based on this understanding, eschewing the loud, boisterous democracy of close-by India as well as the militant individualism of America. And because of this, China (at least today, disregarding debatable theories on its eventual stagnation) flourishes, transforming from a poor society to the second largest economy in the world, and still predicted to be number one in half a century.

Economic transformation is a challenge that Yew is eminently qualified to discuss considering that in delivering the Singapore Miracle, his book, *From Third World to First*, details a man who basically built the society stone on stone, stubbornly resisting the influence of the Americas and Europe, and employing the intrinsic, sophisticated understanding of his own people's culture, attitudes, location and ambitions to transform that country over a period of 30 years from 'a simple trader of commodities' into 'a sophisticated hub of finance and technology'. Yew, like many revolutionary leaders across the world, worked with the nation's strongest hands and sharpest minds to take apart their societies as they met them and re-shape them, as if it were architecture.

The proponents of both a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) and 'True Federalism' in Nigeria understand this imperative. Their solutions might not be workable (the SNC for instance doesn't appear to be an idea that is practical) but they are perfectly reasonable, some would say inevitable: to build a society that works, we have to

consider the vast differences that define us and think through how to harmonise them for our development.

For instance, there is a dissonance that has lived with us through history in trying to govern our constituent parts in the exact same way. How can we hope to do that when, for instance, the Igbo sociology (the '*Igbo have no king*') is fundamentally different from the Yoruba (where the concept of '*parapo*', loosely defined as togetherness, is important)? Even the etymology of the names of the pre-eminent cultural organisations (Oha N'eze, Afenifere, Arewa) across the country speaks to a sociological divergence. It cannot be ignored. You cannot build a nation through *wuruwuru* and hope to achieve the answer—what a thing can be is largely dictated by what the thing is.

This is the point we missed from Achebe's *There Was a Country*, in our predictable 'knee-jerkiness', demonstrated by echo-chamber rejoinders. Achebe spoke about the culture he knew best, and tried to explain how much we can achieve if we, to put it in modern speak, '*believe in ourselves*'. In telling of the victories of the Biafran spirit, from the *Ogbunigwe* weaponry to the literature and anthem, and in speaking with deep sadness about the defeat of our vibrancy and its linkage to much of our national stagnancy, Achebe was reminding us that we will need to go back to the basics.

It is also a point we miss when we continue to champion our empty 'nationalism' and accuse people like Wole Soyinka of 'ethnic jingoism' when he says he is first a Yoruba man before he is a Nigerian. But that is who he is. That is his identity. Why should we ignore it if we are serious about building a country of people who believe in, and live out those identities?

Interestingly, it is not just the respected, like Soyinka and Achebe that have understood this. It has been communicated by at least two Nigerian dictators who could have done great things if their personal ambitions hadn't got in the way: Ibrahim Babangida, who has continually insisted that our character does not support a multi-party system, at least not now; and Sani Abacha, who, in a rare

instance of intellectual clarity, insisted on a *home-grown democracy*. He was adamant that countries we admire, like America, should be an inspiration but not necessarily role models.

What will best suit us? Maybe a system of government that emphasises the local government and leaves the centre weak. Maybe a system that enforces accountability through our keen sense of community. Whatever it is, we will have to decide definitively, and this will not be an *ozugbo-ozugbo* (quick-quick) process.

A mentor of mine brought this point home to me recently in speaking about the Nigerian economy. Nigerian banks speak of credit worthiness and how common it is for debtors to not pay up. But is that who we are as a people, or who we have become because we haven't learnt like the Asians how to build our finance institutions around our sociology? Whilst this instance might be simplistic, don't debt-collectors in Mushin or Onitsha routinely get loans paid and run an efficient community finance system? Where are the visionaries who will begin to study that and scale it up, perhaps working with Nigerian intellectuals in our universities who understand our character, our evolution? Why are we focused on aping HSBC if we can build a better system based on what we have always had?

We had societies and a collectivity of character before we were colonised. Yes we did. We need to understand, and believe deeply in our core, that like the British or Roman Empires or the defining French Revolution, we had defining moments; we had the Benin and the Oyo Empires; and we had sophisticated philosophies expressed by the likes of Uthman Dan Fodio.

In building the Nigeria which we all want, we will need to begin to wrestle these questions; and we will need to engage their complexity. The result of this process will birth our Nigerian Dream, whether or not we write it in a book or in a declaration.

It will be an understanding driven and grasped by our leaders and passed on through a structured process of mentorship and knowledge-exchange to each new generation of leaders. These

leaders will then need to communicate this to the Nigerian citizenry so deeply that we can understand with our minds or, even better, with our hearts.

The first challenge, as you might have noticed, is to find and elect or install leaders who have the intellect and depth to understand this imperative. The best examples I can find of men who did were; Odumegwu Ojukwu and, more credibly, Obafemi Awolowo, a man who is famed for, amongst other things, balancing his budgets. Awolowo was a deeply flawed, perhaps even bigoted man but he is deified for good reason; he didn't just act—he acted based on a well of important knowledge. That knowledge informed his excellent vision for the Yoruba society in Nigeria. He took the fabric of the Yoruba culture and infused it into the way they were governed; from folk songs to modern village squares. He weaved values central to the Yoruba psyche into politics, economy, education and society, and made the people proud of and in tune with their way of life in a manner that motivated them to preserve and then advance it.

Awolowo's vision was a success because of one simple but unyielding truth: nations don't evolve into greatness. It doesn't just happen. A nation doesn't just become great. It is a deliberate, almost academic process of theory and practice hand in hand. That's how nations from Germany to America, Japan to Singapore have done it; led at the top by leaders who appreciated the art—and it's an art—of nation building.

Our ideal leaders will guide us in building the system of government we need, the theories our economy should follow, the relationship between church and state, the place of our traditional institutions in a modern society, the grundnorm of our legal system, and the philosophy for our education.

Sadly, this is not a conversation that a new generation of leaders is having; and this is understandable. We first need to be good before we can be great, and right now our nation is barely managing to stay afloat.

But we need to have it at the back of our minds that this is a task that will have to be done; one that we cannot escape. Nigeria will eventually have to discard this invented, and inverted identity and find its place in the world by understanding the core of who they are.

Let those who are passionate about the future of Nigeria begin to think through these questions—and I am fervently hoping that there is a transformational leader in or out of government somewhere who will help (or who is already helping) take up this challenge of getting serious-minded people together to provide the answers.

If there isn't, well the next best time to plant a tree is today.

# 3

## SO WHAT IF PEOPLE HAVE AN AGENDA?

March 25, 2013

**T**here is a dear friend of mine, working in the change-maker spaces, who has approached his passion for his country with a single-mindedness and aggression that can be compelling. Everyone says he wants to be a politician, and the reason he is organising, mobilising and engaging, despite his repeated protestations to the contrary, is that he is building a network and goodwill that will serve him when he runs for office; that all of this work is mere positioning for that time when he declares his ambition.

And to that I say: so what?

As I have stated before, there is nothing wrong with ambition. Societies are transformed by people who have ambition: ambition for fame, fortune, glory, legacy. According to a quote attributed to Mahatma Ghandi, 'The history of the world is full of men who rose to leadership, by sheer force of self-confidence, bravery and tenacity.' This speaks nothing of naivety, self-effacement or a lack of drive. Sadly, the more one listens to the current conversation among young people, the more one gets the sense of a certain (wilful or unconscious) naivety about the nature of societal or political change across the world.

The thing is, nations are not changed by the innocent and the unscarred, and people who have an unblemished record. In reality, such people do not exist—consider leaders like Paul Kagame (who continues to be accused of fomenting war amongst his neighbours) and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (whose record from the Liberian War is, at best, murky), to use African reformist examples. Nations are changed by people with the willpower, passion, energy and the strategy to transform society in ways that benefit the greatest possible number of people.

What we now appear to have in Nigeria is an unending search for the perfect. Where we don't find that, we have unfortunately begun to cannibalise our own: we have begun to attack those we should support, malign those we should encourage and second-guess those we should line up behind. This is understandable; we are surrounded, as it were, by disappointment. This is a nation where role models are few and far between, and where lines of principle and integrity are blurred in a mad dash away from poverty, or towards more money. Yes, it is understandable, but it is still not productive. We shall not canonise those without integrity, and there shall be no hagiographies written about those whose agendas are narrow; but we should not impede talented people who have important value to add to the country we say we love.

So, news flash: we should have no use for people who have no agenda, or who claim to have no agenda. On the contrary, if any activist, advocate, public official or politician pretends to have no agenda beyond an inchoate *better Nigeria*, then we should be worried. There is no leader across the world that is successfully able to carry a torch without a clear idea of where he or she is taking that torch.

Many capable leaders will be flawed and will have undesirable attributes, but Bola Tinubu need not be flawless if he could create the political environment for a visionary like Babatunde Fashola. I will not waste my time pointing out Olusegun Obasanjo's many

faults if I identify in him a man who understood the challenges of constructing a modern society, just as I will not join in the unending joy at uncovering new chinks in Nasir el-Rufai's armour when he has laid a foundation that future public servants can look up to as a model for good governance.

I have a feeling that as long as China continues its march to rival the United States in absolute GDP in the next 20 to 30 years, the Communist Party, despite the series of scandals from the house of Bo Xilai and others, will continue to enjoy the support of the majority. In the same vein, if the ACN-affiliated Movement for National Change or the newly minted PDP Youth Forum is going to build the kind of political system that will be responsive and responsible to an empowered electorate and that will help construct a society that works, then I will hold my nostrils shut and jump in.

Let's practically look at corruption for instance. Yes, Nigeria's many greedy, slothful leaders are part of our problem; but as my friend Femke Van Zeijl has written, if corruption were the major reason for lack of development, then 'a country like Indonesia—number 118 on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, not that far removed from Nigeria's 139—would never have made it to the G-20 group of major economies.' Nigeria is instead plagued by a despondent dearth of men with character who were born and shaped to lead a modern society. Nowhere is this more symbolised than in the fact that our last two presidents were accidental in several important ways: one ill and incapable of making tough and long-term decisions, surprised as he was with a presidency he never sought, and the other pushed in by a series of unfortunate events. Just imagine what could have happened if men with the long-term will, the vision and the drive to be president of the world's most populous black nation had the opportunity to do so. The absence of this is Nigeria's one unending tragedy, and the reason for its continued celebration of mediocrity.

We need to begin to identify and support people with an

agenda for our country—an agenda of competence, an agenda of development, an agenda to build. We need to build and sustain coalitions of people whose individual agenda drive the general agenda of a national rebirth.

No generation is perfect; and a generation like ours, birthed out of one defined by rot, cannot bring forth perfection. In fact, by its very nature, this generation will be defined by its imperfection—thus, the disappointments that we witness amongst young politicians and change-makers. But, like I always say, we cannot use our generation as an excuse to fail the next. We must make the best of what we have. And there is plenty that is good in our midst.

The battle for Nigeria isn't as simple as that between good and bad, nor is it a battle between the PDP and outsiders. It is a battle between the systemic forces that have kept Nigeria from marching forward, and these forces are driven by people whose interest it serves to perpetuate faux fault lines because they have nothing else to offer. What we need now is a country that works on a basic level—to move Nigeria beyond the logjam of existential problems we face presently. We must begin to find leaders that understand this, and when we find them we must support them.

If people really do care about our country, their words and actions will show it; their willingness to make the decisions and compromises that can encourage a forward march will come through. Are they competent and capable, and ready to work for the greater good and maintain the highest standards possible in this environment while achieving the goals that are important for our country at this time? Are they ready, like Nelson Mandela, to risk their reputations and the anger of their constituencies, to do that which they know to be right? Are they prepared to put nation above self, progress above ego, and function above form?

If that is the end game, then whatever the secondary agenda is, I suggest we welcome them to the field of play; welcome them to a collective and sustained effort to build a country that we can be

proud of, while we continue to force them to get better. We should not let the 'perfect' be the enemy of the good. We should not let what should be stop us from achieving what can be. What we need now is a nation that works so we can quickly move on to the demands of greatness. We have a lot of catching up to do.

We need to focus.

# 4

## WHY NIGERIA'S ANTI-HOMOSEXUALITY BILL SICKENS ME

December 2, 2011

It is important to first understand that no gay Nigerian, as far as anyone knows, is seeking marriage in Nigeria. You can comb through the length and breadth of our decidedly homophobic media. (“*Homosexuals are in trouble!*” crowed *The Sun*, no doubt mirroring the excitement of its upright editorial board.) There is neither anecdotal nor empirical evidence of a clamour, even a quiet one, for gays to be married in churches, mosques or courts.

Still, our legislators were hard at work over a considerable number of weeks while the rest of sane Nigeria, in a state of suspended disbelief, ignored them, convinced that, in a country with pressing issues such as the fuel subsidy removal and debilitating insecurity, this frivolous legislation would not see the light of day.

But, of course, it did.

Our elected representatives in the Senate, armed with their version of our National Moral Code, took time off urgent national issues to tackle the even more urgent evil of gay marriage. Before we could catch our breaths, our over-paid and under-worked senators had legalised homophobia. According to the law, not only is gay marriage a crime punishable by a 14-year jail term, but ‘any person who registers, operates or participates in gay... organisations’ faces

a decade in jail—a clause that specifically targets the many active sexuality rights advocacy groups in the country. By the time the House of Representatives adds its predictable voice to this and the president signs it into law, writing a piece like this one might involve the risk of jail time.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note, though, that I and other aware young people who are sometimes misidentified as the ‘elite’, might spend precious hours in vocal incredulity on Twitter and Facebook, shouting down a law that we can hardly do anything about; but we are, sadly, in the minority, at least for now. You see, in Nigeria, homophobia is alive and well. Barely ten days ago, the influential Nigerian blogger, Linda Ikeji, shared what was supposed to be a touching story about a young man, Rashidi Williams, who had faced physical abuse for his sexuality. The comments that followed made my heart sink—more threats of violence and death. And it wasn’t from a fringe minority; this was a thriving majority.

Many Nigerians are convinced that homosexuality is ‘of the devil’, against our ‘culture’ and an encroachment of ‘sad Western values.’ A young man recently tweeted that ‘homosexuality is the cause of the present rot in America.’ But what rot? America’s thriving Silicon Valley? A democracy it can be proud of? Or the millions of dollars in aid that its government and people have invested in treating everything from malaria to HIV in our dear country? That’s forgetting that the real giant of Africa, South Africa, is the continent’s bastion of sexuality rights.

‘Our values are our values,’ the pompous Senate president, David Mark, replies to critics of the bill. This is nonsense he can get away with only because a large segment of our educated population is unaware that some animals have been found to practise homosexual. Dead clichés like ‘God did not make Adam and Steve’ continue to get excited choruses from sedated congregations, and people still declare

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1 In December 2013, the anti-gay marriage bill was passed into law.

with ignorance that 'homosexuality is not a part of our culture,' conveniently skimming over historical evidence of the practice in the east and north of the country and blissfully unaware that the origins of homophobia in our societies can only be traced to the influx of foreign religions.

Indeed, you have to weep for a people that decry '*foreign imperialism*' on the one hand, and then ignorantly hide under the cover of colonial influence to perpetuate intolerance. This is the same country whose ex-president recently paid a 'courtesy visit' to appease confessed terrorists; the same country where the actions of four men who savagely raped a girl and recorded it on camera were defended by a police chief as 'dealing with snobbish girls.' Indeed, what else can one expect from a Senate that houses a member who, only last year, defiled and took for a wife a girl barely in her teens?

But gays—who only pray for the right to be left alone since they do the rest of us no harm—are the mortal threat to our 'moral fabric.' They severely threaten the morality of a nation that finds its place at the bottom of corruption rankings year after year thanks to politicians like David Mark who have sodomised the populace for decades now.

Today, I am ashamed to be Nigerian, not because a gang of morally questionable legislators have forced through a piece of legislation that is both irrelevant and irresponsible. I am ashamed because, in a country burdened by a lethal mix of misplaced priorities, a confused sense of culture and an ignorant electorate, this intolerance is in fact a popular choice.

We have allowed the politicians to fool us once again.

# 5

## BURSTING THE BUBBLE: A THEORY ABOUT THOSE WHO ‘LOSE THEIR HEADS’ IN GOVERNMENT

March 1, 2013

**I**t is difficult to correctly see Nigeria’s problems from the penthouse of the Transcorp Hilton. The Hilton—that pulsating centre for the elite in the nation’s capital—in this case is a metaphor for the plush conditions within the much-talked-about ‘corridors of power.’

This is a social phenomenon that has confounded many Nigerians, including young people, over many years: how is it that perfectly reasonable and principled people get into the Nigerian government and suddenly begin to speak in tongues that normal people cannot understand? How come what is crystal clear to everybody else is not at all clear to those who make and drive public policy; or how is it that people say one thing before they get into government and another when they are in?

I have come across three theories regarding this matter. One is that we thoroughly underestimate the length and width of the problems that afflict Nigeria in many areas, and do not take the time and calmness to dissect them rationally, and are thus caught unawares by their magnitude when we get the opportunity to attempt to solve the problems. Two, we misjudge the character of those who enter into government, projecting our principles and aspirations on to them and thus mis-imagining—or unfairly pre-empting—how they

will conduct themselves in office. But thirdly, and most alarming: the trappings of government office in Nigeria are simply not conducive to reality.

Government in Nigeria is, *ab initio*, a corrupting influence.

Government in Nigeria is too comfortable, too lavish, too affluent, too wasteful, too obese; and under these circumstances, it does not lend itself to reason or reasonableness. For instance, how does the government view public reaction when it announces that, as part of its expenditure, there will be an additional N9 billion allocated for the vice president's residence?

It does not understand what the outrage is about, and immediately blames it on a misinformed press and a hyperactive opposition. After all, it says, this is how lodgings in the Presidential Villa have always been maintained, and the new vice president doesn't understand why his case should be different.

This money was properly requested for and approved per government processes, just as a lot of monies—millions, billions—are spent in government circles daily on the most innocuous things, and what outrages the public does not stand out as a sore thumb to those on the other side.

In an atmosphere of bloated contracts, over-invoicing, lack of monitoring and efficiency tracking, and a steady stream of revenue, no one used to the comforts of government life is immediately ready to question the log in the eyes of another government official.

Many who work in government are already used to its obesity. Before they join government, they do not understand how overpowering its allure is, and so when they get in they cannot resist it. The life of a government official in Nigeria is a life too easy. It's like living in a luxury penthouse at the nation's most famous hotel. The rooms are plush, the food is rich, the service effusive and the company elite. Two rooms across probably lies a minister of the Federal Republic; one floor down, the publisher of a major government-friendly media brand; and in the elevator, a governor friend of yours.

When you look out your window, all you see is Abuja in its splendour and finery—mountains, swimming pools, skyscrapers, and the smell of fresh air. It is a step above the real Nigeria; a place where all things are bright and beautiful.

Imagine that this is the life that the oil minister or a special assistant to the president lives every single day, then you can begin to understand how, from that position, it becomes very easy to be divorced from reality. This is the mental zone from which government ministers take hundreds of aides along to inconsequential visits abroad; this is the zone from which they buy newer aircraft to make their bullet-proofed lives easier as they go from state to state; this is the zone from which they emerge when they block the Lagos roads on each of their lavish visits to the state.

Many of them come from a place where excess is a way of life, and when they get into office they want to preserve that lifestyle at any cost. They will delude themselves, they will shut down their consciences, they will make justifications for the ludicrous, they will ridicule their critics, they will fight tooth and nail to maintain the status quo. What you need to understand is this—they have entered into their rest. And from that place of unaltered comfort, of private jets and motorcades, endless foreign travel and new houses, first class travel and five-star hotels across the world, they will refuse to listen to those who scream that they are crippling the nation. As far as they are concerned, those screaming themselves hoarse are only looking for an opportunity to join the train.

If we want to change our country for real, we will have to start by changing the way its government works; the way its officials live, the way its functionaries spend, the expansiveness within which they are allowed to operate. This does not mean that government should not be comfortable. Leaders need, perhaps have earned, a certain level of comfort, even luxury, and a knee-jerk response to every expense must be eschewed in favour of context. Excess is where the problem lies. The president of America can launch an operation to defy the

sovereignty of another nation in search of Osama bin Laden without any domestic uproar, but Barack Obama lamented to *Vanity Fair* last year about his inability to change furniture in the Oval Office without an uproar over fiscal responsibility.

Governance should be made unattractive to those who only want the easy life. It should be functional and purpose-driven, and former president Olusegun Obasanjo understood this when he began the process of stripping civil servants and public officials of free cars and houses, attempting to ensure that they gave value for what they used or took through the monetisation policy.

We have to close the gulf between the governed and the governor to the extent that perhaps the only thing that separates the two is power, maybe influence—certainly not money. One only need look at our country's recurrent expenditure, how much it takes just to run the government, in order to understand the depth of our challenges. This is why it is such a shame that the true value of the Occupy Nigeria protests seem to have been swallowed by our nation's incestuous oil politics. The real issue is the cost of governance, and government waste. The waste also makes graft easy, even inevitable.

As long as we continue to make public life a bubble, as long as government committee members find it easy to fly first class to submit white papers that are exact copies of white papers of two decades ago, it will be unable to attract, and sustain, the kind of character- and discipline-driven people that we need to restructure our society.

Our government is one continuous *owambe* party, and it's time for the music to stop.

It will be hard, and those on the dance floor will fight with all they have—but what other choice do we have as a nation? We need to fight this battle to the finish.