



History, Political Elite and the Struggle for Nigerian Unity, 1960 – 2010.

Udida A. Undiyaundeye

Department of History and International Studies,

University of Calabar,

Etta Agbo Rd, Calabar, 540004, Cross River, Nigeria

Email: udidalibi@yahoo.com^{1*}

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ABSTRACT

While some British colonial authorities never hid their disdain for the concept of a Nigerian nation, others along with their bosses in the Colonial Office felt it would take Nigerians over a century to attain nationhood. At every opportunity that offered itself, the former used it to emphasize how widely disparate Nigerian peoples were on the one hand; and Nigerian peoples and their educated compatriots on the other. The 1945 constitution was one of those cogs that were thrown in the path of Struggle for nationhood. Regrettably, the Nigerian political elite did not see things, any much differently as they did cooperate with the colonial authorities and continued to pay lip services to the concept of a Nigerian nation even in the Post Colonial setting, evidenced by their policies that if anything, engendered and emphasized those things that separate rather than unite Nigerians. History, a tool for national cohesion and development, is so recognized by Nigerian peoples. Its trained practitioners in Nigeria have shown that the colonial authorities only quickened the pace of the unification of Nigeria; as all the ingredients for the evolution of Nigeria were already in place when the colonial authorities came. They have also pointed to the negative effect of the activities and utterances of the political elite on national unity but to avail. This paper seeks to deepen our understanding of the dynamics that informed the negative actions of both the colonial authorities and the political elite which in their aggregate have retarded Nigerian national unity.

Keywords: Nigeria; political elite; Nigerian Unity; British colonial.

INTRODUCTION

Since after the attained political Independence on October 1, 1960, Nigeria and Nigerians have not really enjoyed peace or political stability up to the end of the time frame of this paper - 2010 A.D the brief civil rule interval of 1979 - 83 between military Coup d'etat was confronted with the Maritane religious riots in the

Northern part of the country.

Pre-colonial Nigeria or what became Nigeria as it is known today was comprised of two types of societies –that is acephalous and centralized societies (Undiyaundeye 2011; Undiyaundeye 2017). In acephalous societies, there was a large number of villages, village – areas or clans, and towns. Each of these villages, towns, or clans was independent of the other (Ikime 2008), and relations between them took the character of international relations (Olufu & Offiong 2017). Nor had they common community interests even though they could, when it was desirable, cooperate in their mutual interest like settling disputes, inter-marriages, or such other matters. Because such communities were much smaller than what obtained in the colonial era, every member of the family or village were known, hence it was easy to track and punish those who fell foul of the laws of the land (Afolayan & Falola 2017). Warfare was a community interest as were intra and inter-community peace. This was so by the very nature or character of the community (Ikime 2008). For centralized societies or polities, it was quite a different ball game. In some of these polities, their ruling dynasties traced their origins to others, e.g. Benin-Ile Ife, Igala – Benin, Onitsha-Benin (Afolayan, A., & Falola 2017; Offiong 2016). These original places were where, more often than not, succession disputes were referred and from where cultural borrowings were made. In centralized polities in Yorubaland were the Oyo Empire was an excellent example, the ruler – the Alaafin was a divine and absolute ruler. He was addressed as Kabiyesi – an expression that means “ there is no question of anyone querying your authority (Afolayan & Falola 2017). While his other attribute was Oba, Alase Ekeji Orisa (ling the ruler and companion of the gods).

Although in theory, the Alaafin was an absolute ruler and had the power of life and death over his subjects, was not accountable to them for any of his acts, yet in practice, he was not an absolute ruler even though he was head of the executive arm as indeed other arms of government. His powers were checked by, one, a hereditary council of the state known as the Oyo Mesi-which had a variant in other Yoruba kingdoms; and two, the taboos he was surrounded by and his numerous duties. More crucial to this limitation of his powers was that the Alaafin had no standing army nor a police force (Lasisi 1997). He was therefore dependent on his provincial governors and warlords for levies in terms of national emergencies (Lasisi 1997). The general belief in Oyo Empire and indeed Yorubaland was that the well-being of polity depended on the amount of favour bestowed on it by Heaven through supernatural beings - the orisa of which the Alaafin was a companion, and the ancestors. The deities and ancestors were constantly propitiated by means of sacrifices and festivals held in their honour in order to ward off calamities, misfortunes and to ensure the fertility of women and bounteous harvests. It was then Alaafin's duty to ensure that these sacrifices and festivals were properly observed (Lasisi 1997). Clearly, it was on the Oba or Alaafin's shoulders that the well-being of the polity rested.

POLITICAL CULTURE IN PRE-COLONIAL NIGERIA

It would be necessary that we know what exactly the term “political culture” means to enable us to put the discourse in proper perspective. Political culture is “a set of attributes, beliefs, and sentiments which give order and meaning to a political process and which provides the underlying assumption and rules that govern behaviour in the political system (Ikime 1967; Ekpo & Offiong 2020; Offiong & Uduigwomen 2021). It, therefore, concerns both the individual in a society and the society or polity as a group. To the individual in society, political culture

has an essentially psychological focus. It has to do with the important ways in which a person is subjectively oriented toward the essential elements in

his political system... what he feels and thinks about the symbols, institutions, and rules that constitute the fundamental political order of his society and how he responds to them (Ratha 1997, p. 224).

In the case of a collectivity — that is a polity, political culture has to do with how large masses of citizens evaluate their political institutions and officials. The distinction is therefore clear: that while in terms of the individual political culture is all about how individual citizens respond towards policy decisions of government or to his town, state, nation, etc to which he belongs and has strong loyalty, obligation and duty as well as a strong conviction of what those units to which he belongs mean to him (well or ill) in political life, for the collectivity, political culture is about what a polity accepts as fair and just in the conduct of political affairs; that is to say, the rules of the political game.

So, did political culture exist in pre-colonial Nigeria? The answer clearly is yes since political culture grows from the overall experiences of a people - whether acephalous or centralized. In the case of acephalous societies, authority and responsibility were widely dispersed from the family head up to the village head, who in each case was the oldest man. Age was therefore a major factor in reposing authority and respect as it was held that being the oldest and head, such a person became the representative of the ancestors in whom wisdom, sense of justice and fair play were supposed to reside. His religious activities gave his authority the necessary backing. His office had obligations and privileges. There was a clear Conception of duty and service to one's polity; for which there were sanctions for failure to discharge the onerous responsibilities - namely loss of authority and respect. In the case of a village head, he was assisted in the discharge of his duties by a council of elders into which all persons who distinguished themselves or were qualified by virtue of age were admitted. Since members of the council of elders held office for life, it was impossible to manipulate it to block entry. It looks at decisions on behalf of the community which decisions were executed by secret societies and age grades. The role a man, therefore, played in society that is within a secret society, guild, age grade or whatever depending on merit and proven ability. Ultimate power resided in the community but it was delegated for specific functions and periods to individuals, societies, or age grades. Since these polities were usually small, outstanding persons could easily be identified.

In terms of finances, because of the very nature of these acephalous polities, there was no distinction between the purse of the rulers and that of the polity because there was no need for it. Fines were imposed on any wrongdoing, more often than not, in the form of sacrifices.

In the case of centralized polities no matter the size, rulers emerged through hereditary title: through rotation among the ruling houses or lineages or primogeniture as in the Benin Kingdom. Generally, rulers in centralized polities were seen as divine kings because they were representatives of the gods on earth. Not surprisingly, they were highly venerated. Although absolute rulers, yet in practice, taboos, the priestly class, kingmakers and other high state functionaries greatly circumscribed their powers. Divine rulers were elected to exploit their divinity to ensure bountiful harvests, fertility of women, ward off epidemics and famines and ensure good health and general well-being of their subjects. Conversely, bad harvests, epidemics, famines and women infertility were taken as evidence of divine anger for which the ruler was held responsible and sanctioned — often by death or dethronement.

Rulers did not monopolized possession of coercive forces. In fact, they had neither standing armies or police forces and so could not ride roughshod over the

accepted ethos of their politics and peoples. In times of national emergencies, they depended on warlords, provincial governors for levies, after which these levies returned to their normal routines. Nor did these kings have fixed financial remuneration. There was no distinction between the Privy Purse and the state treasury. There was a balance between power and authority on the one hand and responsibility and performance on the other. Those who were charged with the responsibility of governance were there to achieve specific ends for the society and failure in this regard or subversion of these ends was followed by dire consequences.

Before the advent of Christianity and Islam to the ethnic nations in what is present-day Nigerian State indigenous religion was a central ethos of society (Naseri 2017a; Naseri 2017b; Naseri 2021). There were clear dos and don'ts and a moral order governed the conduct of social and political affairs - that is to say, a political culture was vibrant in these pre-colonial polities whether acephalous or centralized. While the former came from the Southern part, the latter came from the Northern. So while one faith was making conversions in the north, the other was doing the same in the south. Both left their marks in their respective areas of operation. The indigenous faith was accommodating as opposed to what its two Stranger faiths were. The two new faiths drew their followers into a common culture (Emeng 2009, Emeng 2014a; Emeng 2014b). It also urged them to remain combative and exclusive. At the same time, each faith regarded its adherents as distinct and separate from the non-believers (Odey 2018; Odey 2019; Akpanika 2020a; Akpanika 2020b). Islam for one came with another dimension: no distinction between the state and the faith. With the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate, the new political edifice became a rallying point for the northern part of the Nigerian nation-state creating in the process, a northern togetherness. Nothing of the sort was existing in the southern part of the country.

What was more, Islam preaches that power comes from Allah and not from the people or founding dynasties; and that rulers are Allah's representatives not of the ancestors. Subjects are admonished to obey their emirs and this explains the tremendous hold the emirs have in the Muslim areas of the North. On the other hand, Christianity preaches equality of man before God; and it attacked the indigenous faith which was the basis of its adherent's socio-political order which situation explained the hostility of the rulers of southern ethnic nations. Not surprisingly, it was an attraction to the lowly in these polities. It became a subversive force to the existing social order; at least during its initial stage and this at a time when Islam was a state religion in the North while the South was secular, There was, therefore, no common ground among the various ethnic nations in what became Nigeria as to what ends society and government were expected to attain and to serve.

COLONIALISTS ANTI-NIGERIAN NATION ACTS

Colonial rule was established in what became the Nigerian colony between 1861 (when Lagos was bombarded and annexed) and 1913 when the Saukwala were Subdued and incorporated into Obudu District, Ogoja Province (Undiyaundeye 2005; Undiyaundeye 2009; Nwagbara 2009; Odey *et al.*, 2019; Odey 2019). By 1906 both the Southern Protectorate and its Northern counterpart were in existence; both British Creations. It was thought necessary on the basis of facts on the ground, that the two protectorates be unified if for nothing else because common sense dictated it. But there were other pressing reasons. The Northern Protectorate was more than double the size of its Southern counterpart and against advice that it be broken up into two before the proposed amalgamation, Fredrick D. Lugard went ahead and amalgamated the two unequal sections of the country on January 1, 1914

(Uhunmwangho & Ekpu 2011). Neither the laws of the two protectorates nor their peoples were unified. By so doing Fredrick D. Lugard inaugurated the North-South dichotomy (Uhunmwangho & Ekpu 2011; Offiong 2016b). Apparently what mattered to Lugard was to take away the financial burden on the British taxpayer for the administration of the Northern Protectorate and place the same on the more Prosperous Southern Protectorate.

Fredrick D. Lugard was succeeded as Governor of Nigeria by Hugh Clifford in 1919. Hugh Clifford's tenure ended in 1925 on his appointment as Governor of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Clifford assumed duty in Nigeria at the heydays of West African nationalism. In 1920 the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA) sent a petition to the Colonial Office requesting nine demands for the people of the territory (Fawole 2018). Clifford was not amused by their requests and ridiculed and described the members of NCBWA as

...a self-selected and self-appointed congregation of educated Africa gentleman who collectively styles themselves the West African National Conference whose eyes are fixed, not upon African native history or tradition or policy, nor upon their own tribal obligations and the duties to their natural rulers who immemorial custom should impose upon them, but upon political theories evolved by European to fit a wholly different set of circumstances for the government of people who have arrived at a wholly different stage of civilization (Okeke 2004, p. 43).

He did not surprisingly advise the British government (the Colonial Office) not to concede these demands. He then descended very heavily on Nigerian nationalist agitators and their quest for a Nigerian nation:

Assuming...that the impossible was feasible that this collection of self-contained and mutually independent native states separated from one another, as many of them are, by great distances, by differences of history and traditions, and by ethnological, racial, tribal, political, social and religious barriers, were indeed capable of being welded into a single homogenous nation - a deadly blow would thereby be struck at the very root of national self-government in Nigeria, which secures to each separate people the right to maintain its identity, its individuality and its nationality, its own chosen form of government, and the peculiar political and social institutions which have been evolved for it by the wisdom and by the accumulated experience of generations of its forebears (Owusu 2006, p. 81).

The government of Nigeria was clearly very hostile to the idea of a Nigerian nation which to it, was inconceivable and was thus determined to oppose its development. Second, as far as the colonial government saw it, the concept of national self-government was to be limited only to the: "self-contained and mutually independent Native states". Thirdly and finally, the government felt that true patriotism and nationalism were sentiments that must be directed to those natural polities. This was the frame of mind of Hugh Clifford when he promulgated the 1922 constitution which left the Northern Protectorate out of the competence of the constitution and the governor continued to govern it by proclamation. The Northern region remained Out of the mainstream of Nigerian political life till 1947 when Richards's constitution, which came into operation in that year, reintegrated it. By that time Northern separation had ossified (Ezera 1964).

Bernard Henry Bourdillon was appointed Governor and Commander-in-chief of Nigeria in 1935 succeeding Donald Charles Cameron (Ezera 1964). His regime carried out a reorganization of the country and the creation of provinces, and the

breaking up of the Southern Protectorate into the Eastern and Western Provinces in 1939, on grounds that the Southern Protectorate was too heterogeneous to remain as one unit. The Northern Protectorate was left intact because it was culturally more homogenous. Obaro Ikime (2008) is apt when he argued that “Anyone who knows the myriads of peoples and cultures in the Middle Belt alone may be tempted to laugh to scorn Bourdillon's claim of cultural homogeneity for the North. Bourdillon reinforced the solidity of the North which was now one giant in colonial Nigeria while the South was no longer even a geographical expression with no true political meaning.

While the North was being favoured in the scheme of things, the colonial authorities on the other hand actively discouraged Western education there. This was because, as the top colonial officials saw it, education was” a dormant volcano which only the colonial government could prevent exploding by controlling and making it available exclusively to the sons of Politicians. Hence at the eve of independence while the South had 13,473 primary and 176 secondary schools with a population of 2,343,317 and 28,208 pupils and students respectively; the North had 2,080 primary and 18 secondary schools with 185,484 and 3,643 pupils and students respectively. This lopsidedness has not only been maintained but also greatly reinforced since independence (Ballard 1971).

Benard H. Bourdillon on his departure from Nigeria had promised the nationalists that they would be fully consulted in the preparation of a new constitution. This promise was not kept as his successor Authur Fredrick Richards promulgated his constitution in 1945. Although the philosophy of the constitution was on its face value laudable enough, yet it was turned into something else as the regions which were created for these ends met became rather bastions of primordial loyalty from which darts were made to the centre to collect what was thought to be the regions' fair shares of the national resources (Ballard 1971). Besides, each of the three regions that were created was capable of effectively competing with each other or the entire federal union. Clearly, therefore, the smooth running of the federal system was not guaranteed. What was more, the population of the Northern Region was about 55% of the country's total population (Ballard 1971). And so by the sheer size of its landmass and population, the region had a commanding position to dictate terms, direction and pace of political developments. Another fall out of the Richards Constitution was the formation of political Parties which corresponded with the major ethnic nations each of which dominated the regions: the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (WCNC) and the Action Group (AG) dominating the Northern, Eastern and Western regions respectively (Ballard 1971).

Colonial rule left its imprint on the governance and psyche of Nigeria and Nigerians. First, to meet the rationale for which it was imposed, new administrative units were created from native court areas to districts, divisions and provinces. This exercise entailed aggregating the people who more often than not had little or nothing in Common to do with each other. Thus not unnaturally new affinities and hostilities were created (Ikime 2008). These new affinities and hostilities were intensified by Nationalist agitators as they sought advantages over each other as the nationalist struggle progressed. Whereas the rulers in the pre-colonial era had no monopoly of coercive forces and so depended on satisfactory performance in office to retain their offices and on proven ability to attain the same, in the colonial setting the colonized often had unpopular decisions forced down their throats. Nor did they have a say in the appointment of their residents, divisional and district officers, or native court members. These vital issues informed their hatred of both the colonial

structures, policies, and officials (Ikime 2018). This was more so because in the people historical experience, they decided the basis of inter-community relationships and for what purposes. This vital practice was rudely violated; thanks to the colonialists' arms. Not unnaturally, the people were alienated as they saw these new structures as distant bodies. It was an act of heroism to disregard or sabotage them. Agreed, there was no financial accountability in the pre-colonial era as it was enough that the rulers discharged their responsibility satisfactorily. In the colonial era, there was strict accountability, which situation was understandable as the bosses of colonial officials were in far off metropolitan capitals. Nor were colonial officials noted for upholding the rule of law since it ran, in the final analysis, against the grain of the rationale for colonialism. The rule of law was in fact in practice in the pre-colonial era even though it was not manifest (Mutua 2016).

Ethnicism we know today is a creation of colonialism. In the pre-colonial era, there were no ethnic nations as we now know them. They did not exist either in their present size or form till the advent of colonial rule. The expressions like Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba did not convey any political meaning but only as representations of the languages spoken by the different independent communities in and beyond present-day Nigerian borders. Nor did these autonomous communities have common interests which situation explains why they were fighting among themselves at different times in their histories. It was the British colonialists who started to refer to Nigerians by the languages they spoke. Another cause for the new identification was the administrative and other arrangements that came at the behest of the new colonial situation that gradually nudged these hitherto separate groups to develop common interests and to act together. These new interests and competitions led to the forging of new identities which involved giving up some of their hitherto separateness in order to get something in return for the new identities.

So it was that in the context of national politics that these new ethnic groups made sense because it was competition for office, resources, and development at the national level that made sense. Clearly, therefore, these hitherto autonomous polities gave up their autonomy to get something substantial from ethnicity. The lesson here is that ethnicity will give up its identity to become Nigerian that is to say, equal recognition, fair distribution of socio-economic amenities and infrastructures at national, state, and local government levels.

But then what was the plight of the Nigerian pleasant, petty trader, and junior public officials? An unenviable one; solely on grounds of the nature of the colonial rule. It was imposed for rabid exploitation of the colonized. The administrative structures, socio-economic infrastructures and other economic endeavours were all designed for maximum exploitation. Hence "the suffering of the masses went largely without remedies and that extensive abuse of power went on unchecked..." (Oppong 2018, p. 118), the more so as the official policy was to back up the native authorities in line with the dictates of Indirect Rule. Hence residents, district officers all kept their eyes "tightly shut...and ears tightly plugged against any information or evidence which did not proceed from the ...approved official channel" (Okonjo 1974, p. 282). Not surprising, the colonial state was very remote from the people and it was heroism to sabotage state policies and efforts or rise in full rebellion as was displayed at Iseyin-Okeiho, Warri and Aba in 1916, 1927/28 and 1929 respectively (Ashe 2017).

Electoral malpractices also were among the legacies of colonial rule. The colonial authorities were dearly pro Northern region. They worked "assiduously" to tilt the scales in favour of the NPC which manifesto Byran Sherwood Smith boasted he had helped produce. British officials also guided voters during the 1951 general elections. While in the South there was wholesale bribery and corruption and sale of

ministerial portfolios in the East. It was therefore an unwholesome political and economic legacy that colonial rulers bequeathed to Nigerian leaders at independence in 1960 (Ojedokun 1971).

NIGERIAN ELITES TAKE OVER

On October 1, 1960, the Nigerian political and bureaucratic elite took over the reins of governance on the lowering of the Union Jack and raising of the Nigerian flag. The political and bureaucratic elite simply moved and occupied the offices vacated by the colonialists and adopted in the bargain, their policies completely oblivious that the retreating colonialists were rabid exploiters whose policies would rather have been abandoned. The colonial economy was designed for exploitation which rather than abandoned, the post-colonial rulers added new dimensions through which the peasant masses and petty workers and traders were viciously exploited as vividly revealed by Eme N. Ekekwe (Joseph 2014). Toyin Falola (2005) has revealed that Nigerian state governors work twenty nine days stealing and work for their people one day only in a month. Not surprising, the people are as alienated from their rulers as they were from their colonial masters. It was the fear of domination that informed the minority ethnic groups in the country to agitate for the creation of states. Their fears, as the Willinks Commission established were real (Oduntan 2017). But then the creation of states, as experience has shown, only results in the emergence of new majorities and minorities.

Since 1957 when exploitation started in the Niger Delta, the operational areas of these multinational companies have been subjected to severe environmental degradation (Kpae 2021). The state and the oil multinationals have, on the whole, turned a deaf ear to violation of the people's sources of livelihood, which Situation informed the emergence of militancy in the region clamoring for a stop to these deadly acts and resource control (John & Nnadozie 2021). The rabid regional rivalry of the colonial and post-colonial eras was transferred to the states when the state creation exercise started. With the adoption of the politics of "winner-takes-all and "we-want-our-own-man," the Nigerian polity has been overtaken by the two evils of mediocrity and lopsided allocation of development projects and provision of socio-economic amenities (Achebe 1984). Merit and social justice which are germane to efficiency, effectiveness and loyalty have become very rare commodities - making national unity and cohesion almost impossible (Ikime 1967).

Although electoral malpractices were introduced by the British colonialists, yet rigging elections is a new dimension courtesy of the sagacity of the Nigerian political elite - put to evil use. They engage in this vice because they know they are unpopular and so remain in office without the peoples' consent through the use or threat of the use of force; just as the colonialists did. Corruption was bequeathed by the colonialists. However, its new dimension yet corruption among post-colonial Nigerian political and bureaucratic elite is traced to the path chartered by Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo. Nnamdi Azikiwe had pledged in 1937 "Henceforth I shall utilize my earned income to secure my enjoyment of a high standard of living and also give a helping hand to the needy" (Onyeocha 2007, p. 200). Obafemi Awolowo was even blunter: "I was going to make myself formidable intellectually, morally invulnerable, to make all the money that is possible for a man with my brains and brawn to make in Nigeria" (Lim 2005, p. 29).

Nnamdi Azikiwe for one was implicated in the crisis that involved the African Continental Bank (ACB), which was "owned and run by his (Nnamdi Azikiwe's) family (Ajayi & Fashagba 2021, p. 43). Being the accepted leaders of their people and top leaders of Nigeria, was morally untenable for them to be both businessmen and

political leaders and torchbearers. So it was that all manner of corrupt practices were unleashed on the Nigerian state by its functionaries with each succeeding regime coming with its own new and exciting dimensions of the vice. While billions of naira disappeared from the common till into private pockets of the elite, the helpless citizenry wallows in ignorance, poor health, and want.

The pervading poverty in the land and uneven development has engendered Indigene/settler crises that have erupted in different parts of the country just as they are at the root cause of religious conflicts that have become a recurrent decimal in the Nigerian polity (Karl 2000). Needless to say that all these crises do not make for national unity and solidarity.

THE ROLE OF THE NIGERIAN HISTORIAN

While History is the memory of human group experience, the historian studies and writes history in a professional or expert sense. The purpose of History is “to deepen understanding about men and society not for its own sake, but in the hope that a more profound awareness will help to mold human attitudes and human action (Howell & Prevenier 2001).

Since nation-building “...is the search for collective identity... solidarity and shared acceptance of a patterned normative order” (Hoogvelt 1978, p. 140), it stands to reason that Nigeria and Nigerians desperately need the historian and his services. So what has the Nigerian historian done in this regard the more so as history enables us to acquire knowledge of how we came to be and who we are? As it is evident from professional journals, theses and dissertations, books, newspaper features, Inaugural, Distinguished, Award-winning Lectures, Keynote Addresses, etc. Nigerian professional historians have addressed all aspects of Nigeria's historical experience, more often than not, to the discomfort of the political and bureaucratic elite. Which discomfort would tend to explain the removal of History from the primary and junior secondary schools' curriculum of the nation's education system. By the nature of the discipline, historians can only produce their materials to be used by the planners, policymakers and the society at large; which if deliberately and diligently applied would make for more understanding, tolerance and desire to work harmoniously together on the part of the multifarious people of Nigeria for their common good.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria as a country is like any other country on earth. Nigerians are also like any other human beings anywhere. Nothing is basically wrong with them, their country, its climate, or their environment. Nigerians are vibrant and enterprising people. The country simply has a leadership failure. It is this leadership failure that explains why she still languishes in the backwaters of underdevelopment, disunited and unstable.

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