

THE NIGERIA OF MY DREAM

**BEING THE TEXT OF THE SPEECH DELIVERED BY
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Introduction

I am grateful to the officers and members of this Club for the honour of addressing this audience, consisting of some of Nigeria's best men and women. As we celebrate 50 years of our Independence from colonial rule, we must pause and ask ourselves the question: "where did we go wrong?" Against that background, no subject can be more appropriate at this time than the one upon which I am to speak – "The Nigeria of my Dream". This is the time for us to dream dreams. It was on just such an occasion that one of the most memorable speeches of our time was delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King at the Washington Monument during the centenary celebration of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

" I have a dream that one day this Nation will

rise up and live up the true meaning of its creed....."

As a preamble to his dreams, King drew the attention of the world to the fact that one hundred years after Abraham Lincoln proclaimed freedom for all slaves in America, black Americans were still not free to live and work wherever they wished. It is my significant and memorable experience that in August 1963, when that drama was unfolding, the late Brigadier General Emmanuel Sotomi and I were undertaking a course in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in America's Deep South. In downtown Fayetteville, a satellite town of Fort Bragg (one of the largest military bases in America) Sotomi and I were denied service in a restaurant a week before this event because we were blacks. So we sympathized with Dr. King and worried for his personal safety as we watched on television the crowd of some 200, 000 banner-carrying men and women singing, "We shall overcome, someday". I said to myself: "There is no way these people shall overcome through dreaming. That was August 1963. Forty-five years later, America has a black President in the person of Barrack Obama. So it is

good to dream dreams and to aim high. But we must take care not to overshoot the target. In dreaming dreams we must be careful not to make fools of ourselves. That is what we do when we call Lagos the “Centre of Excellence” and we equate our Nollywood film industry with Hollywood without blushing.

At this time when the nation is rife with every kind of faction and division, at a time when patriotism seems to be on the decline, I cannot but commend men and women like you who are committed to the peace, progress and unity of the nation. As you, in this Club, place the emphasis on the things which unite rather than on those which divide you, so it ought to be for our country. As divided as we may seem to be now, the emphasis ultimately shall be on the things which unite us. I am confident that in spite of all our differences we shall come together in one strong and united nation which shall be an example to the rest of the world and a pride to the black race.

The Nigeria of my dream is a truly democratic and free nation, transparently governed by knowledgeable, visionary, honest and pragmatic leaders who are accountable to all our people – an economically self-reliant nation where the majority of its people are gainfully employed. The Nigeria of my dream is one whose people shall have a sense of history, a sense of family and respect for ancestors and our cultural institutions. I feel sorry that we have destroyed or are fast destroying one of our most important cultural institutions – the village – at a time when we do not have a substitute. We have replaced our villages with slums. Conditions in these slums have inhibited the cultivation of morals and given rise to all the violence that we have to contend with now. I look forward to governments at all levels embarking upon programmes which will enable the millions of our people who have migrated to the cities to return to the villages and employ themselves beneficially. The Nigeria of my dream is one whose people are self-reliant, and who are not only disposed to learn from the rest of the world but who realize that we too have a great deal to offer to the rest of the world.

Our country is ours to build

This is not time to condemn others for what we perceive as their failures or their shortcomings. The nation has had too much of that. The right attitude at this time is that which I see demonstrated by the members of this Club. Whatever we have to offer, we should offer; whatever anyone has to say, let him say; whatever anyone can do to help, let him do. The question is no longer what any other person has done or failed to do but what we have done or are doing to uplift our country. That is my expectation.

The future of our country shall be founded on our dreams and our aspirations. The nation is ours to build. Our future shall not be determined by the insights, aspirations and capacities of others but by our own insights and capacities. It is for us, therefore, to recognize and build upon our capacities. That being so the Nigeria of my dream is that on which the emphasis shall be, not on what the nation can do for us but what we can do for the nation; a nation in which the emphasis shall be, not on what others can do for us but what we can do for others. That is the attitude which shall ensure our greatness as a nation. That is the only way forward. There are lots of things to be corrected and it is our duty to correct them. I do not agree with those who have become resigned to the situation and have chosen to do nothing at all.

The tenets of our country require radical change

The tenets of our country are long overdue for change. Each and everyone of us is called upon to be an agent of that change. If we fail to do our duty no one is going to do it for us. This calls for confidence in ourselves, faith in God and pride in the nation. One of the greatest obstacles to creative progress on our part is lack of confidence in ourselves and a total absence of pride in the country. We must come to the realization that each and everyone of us has something to offer the nation and the world. The Nigeria of my dream is that in which objectivity shall be allowed to take its proper place. At no time in our history has there been greater need for objectivity than there is now. In the conduct of our public affairs particularly, sentiment ought not to have a place. Unless we are very careful indeed the passions and sentiments which are now

running riot have the potential of destroying the very foundation on which the nation is built.

The hopes that have been disappointed

When we gained independence from Britain in 1960, hopes were high that we would become the continent's first super power and a stabilizing democratic influence in the region. With immense mineral wealth and well over 100 million people, the most educated work force in Africa, the new Nigeria seemed positioned for success. Nigeria was dubbed "The Big Black Hope" by a section of the world media. That expectation appears to have been disappointed.

Our gross domestic product (GDP) is larger than the combined GDP of our fifteen neighbouring West African countries which make up the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS). We are blessed with abundant wealth from crude oil and natural gas. We have the best and most educated workforce in Africa, and we enjoy a vibrant free press. We have some of Africa's most effective electronic media. We are leaders in the arts and the sciences. We also hold the lead in the industrial and financial sectors. We are by far one of the largest contributors of troops to the UN peace enforcement missions worldwide. Despite having all the prerequisites to become a regional superpower, we are still a crippled giant struggling to fulfill our vast potential.

That notwithstanding, we are entitled to commend ourselves for some of the the progress that we have made so far. The fact that we have remained together as a nation is a great achievement indeed. Far though we may be from our goal, we are entitled to commendation for the progress we have made so far. When we compare events in our country with those of other nations with identical backgrounds and experiences we will find that we have indeed made remarkable progress. The death of Joseph Tito of Yugoslavia was followed by the disintegration of that country. The death of Samuel Doe was followed by a civil war in Liberia and that country is yet to know peace and stability. The Democratic Republic of Congo has known only war and

instability following the overthrow and death of Patrice Lumumba. In Rwanda and Burundi, in Somalia and the Sudan, the story is the same. The economy of the Soviet Union collapsed and that nation disintegrated following the fall of communism. Yes we too, in Nigeria had our own civil war. But our nation survived the war with a reconciliation and forgiveness that is remarkable in world history.

On national unity

The Nigeria of my dream is one which remains whole and united. Some critics today trace most of Africa's conflicts and civil wars to the colonial partition of Africa which took place without regard to ethnic and cultural boundaries. In that connection, Somalia used to be touted as an ideal African state – with one people, one language and one religion. But Somalia is today a failed state, a state under siege. Coming nearer home, if ethnic and cultural homogeneity were the determinants of political and social cohesion, then the three Ibo States of South Eastern Nigeria should be oasis of peace and harmony following state creation. The reality on the ground is far from that. Other critics say that Nigeria is not a nation but a colonial contraption of warring “nationalities” in permanent state of disintegration. Mercifully, we have survived one civil war. It is my earnest hope and prayer that our country shall fight no more wars.

I personally believe that we ought to be deeply indebted to Britain for lumping so many of us together in such a wonderfully well-endowed country, even if it was done to suit British interest only.

We must begin to reach out to one another across state boundaries. The public services of our States and Local Government Areas must be open to all irrespective of State or Local Government of origin, just as there is already free movement of goods and services throughout our country. The Nigeria of my dream is that in which Nigerians of whatever religion or tribe, whatever their states of origin, will hold high offices in states other than their own and the nation will be more united, more efficient and more peaceful. Under military rule, governors were made to serve in states other

than their own and the nation was better for it. Just because we are against military rule, we should not abandon those practices of the military which served to unite and integrate the nation and made it more efficient and secure. It ought to be possible that having lived and paid taxes in Lagos for more than thirty years, I should be eligible for elective and appointive political posts in Lagos. Lest we forget, the late Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe was a prominent member of parliament in the Western Region of Nigeria for some years before our independence.

The critics of the nation never cease to contend that the nation is an artificial creation. They say that we are not one people; that we were welded together by the British because they found it politically and administratively expedient. To these critics of the nation we point out that all nations are constructed. There is not a single nation on earth that was not constructed. In any case, what is wrong with being welded together by Britain?. The most advanced and by far the wealthiest country in the world, the United States is often described as the melting pot of Irish Americans, African Americans, Latin Americans, American Indians, etc etc. It took some two hundred years for this pot to melt. One day we too shall melt.

The need for a strong central government

The Nigeria of my dream is that in which we shall have a strong central government. And that is what our Constitution envisages. That strong central government is consistent with the principle of limited government. Unless the central government is strong, the nation will be unstable. In all its provisions the Constitution looks to an indivisible and indestructible nation. We may restructure or rearrange the nation as we please but its integrity as such must be preserved and protected. Some people contend that the Constitution is not a product of the will of the people and that its declaration to that effect is false. They attribute the Constitution to the military and reject it on that ground. This is not tenable. In the course of their tenure the military enacted several laws for the nation of which the Constitution is the fundamental one. They did several things which are binding and which cannot now be reversed. They created States and local governments all of which are in operation. They entered into

contracts many of which have been executed. Many of the institutions by which the nation is governed today are a product of the military transition program. We cannot accept democratic rule instituted by the military while rejecting the fundamental law upon which it is founded.

The Constitution is only a written document and like all written documents it has its errors and omissions. It behooves us, therefore, who long for the prosperity of our country, calmly and deliberately to examine and consider such defects as may exist in it, and set ourselves to the work of remedying them to the best of our ability. It is the peoples' Constitution and it is our work to correct its deficiencies.

The presidential system of government

Some people have criticized and condemned our adoption of the Presidential System of Government as a system in which we had absolutely no experience at the time we adopted it. It was adopted for a good and patriotic reason. It is that system of Government wherein all executive power is vested in one man in the expectation that he will use all that great power to bind together a nation that tends to be atomistic or divisive. The faults that have been found are not in the system but in our selves. Systems and laws are not self – enforcing. However good the laws or the systems are, they require good people to enforce them.

Misconception of democracy

Many of the political practices, institutions and processes which exist in the country fall far short of the democratic ideal and fail to meet the social and political needs of a truly multicultural society. Attempts are being made to solve this problem through amendments of the Constitution. Nevertheless, mere tinkering with the constitution will not serve the best interests of the nation. Radical reconstruction is necessary but such reconstruction must be built upon a thoroughly democratic foundation. Having embraced capitalism we must institutionalize democracy in order that the nation may

truly be founded on justice and equity. As it is, we have a total of misconception of democracy.

Democracy, for some of our people, has meant the right to do as they please, without regard for the rights of others, and without regard to the law. They see politics as a game of deception and division, a game of intrigue, a game without rules. They assume that politics without force or without fraud cannot produce results. They aspire to be strong in numbers without being strong in spirit and in truth. As long as that is the case, we shall continue to have the problems that menace us today. Our methods must be right. The result can never be acceptable once the procedure is wrong.

We have witnessed a very serious problem of fear, suspicion and prejudice rooted in inequality. This deep rooted fear and suspicion we must fight with dignity, diplomacy, education, understanding and dialogue. Unless the problems of inequality are addressed, irrational people will continue to commit irrational crimes against the nation. We must make concerted efforts to eliminate all injustices and exploitation.

There has been a widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. Unless there is some degree of mutual respect and equality between the parties there can be no harmony. When there is gross disparity of wealth, power and privilege, dialogue is very difficult. We have to make a choice, individually and collectively, between confrontation and dialogue, between destruction and construction. Our loyalties must cease to be sectional and must become national. Every tribe or zone must develop an overriding commitment to the nation as a whole. Only by so doing can we preserve the best in our individual societies and in the nation as a whole.

We must reduce the emphasis on politics of patronage. It ought not to be enough to belong to the ruling party. It ought not to be enough to be a friend of the Governor or the President. We must institute merit. Government at all levels must not be run along the lines of patronage. Our leaders must be accountable.

The annihilation of the opposition

Our democracy has also been characterized by the assimilation of the opposition. To the extent that the former PDP Chairman once boasted that his party shall rule Nigeria for fifty years. The Congress Party ruled India for more than fifty years and the PRI ruled Mexico for 70 years. Both countries stagnated in the end until each party was thrown out by a coalition of opposition parties. The Government must realize that constructive opposition is essential for democracy and economic growth. This assimilation of the opposition has been aided by the fact that the legislature, instead of operating along party lines, has often operated as a faction. In virtually all our legislative houses, we do not have an opposition. As long as it is so the efficiency of government shall be impaired. If we are serious about constructive and transparent government we must restore the opposition. Overnight, elected representatives of our Local Government Areas were removed from office and substituted with Caretaker Committees. In some States, that is still being done. I say nothing about those States which for many years impounded Local Government funds and continue to do so on the ground that the Local Governments do not have or seem to have the capacity to utilize their funds well. The Local Government as an institution has lost its place as a tier of government and has become appendages of State Government.

The educational system

Side by side with the problem of unemployment is that of the quality of the education we offer our youth. The nation must teach, not only the use of the mind but also the use of the hand. The studies which we offer ought to be of great utility to the nation. We should modify our curricula to meet our conditions. Education should not render its recipients unfit for the practical duties of life as it appears to have done. It should not make its recipients proud or distant from the community. Our studies must be relevant to our condition and our aspirations. The minds of our students must be more properly directed. We must begin to take more seriously those courses by which the minds and hearts of the citizens are formed. We must learn about our duties to ourselves, to fellowmen, to society and to God. Education must teach self-respect, a proper appreciation of our own powers and of the powers of other people.

Non-enforcement of laws

The nation is founded not only on laws but also on men. Men, by themselves alone, however great and numerous, do not suffice to make a nation unless they have laws. Laws, on the other hand, by themselves alone, however good and well conceived, do not suffice to make a nation unless there are men. The laws of the nation ensure the production of good citizens. Those good citizens, in turn, ensure the maintenance of the laws. Good laws we have in abundance but because they are rarely enforced most citizens have either never known about them or lost all respect for them. The laws are not applied because the outstanding men who should apply them are lacking. Why is this so?. Because the people are demoralized by sustained and extensive corruption. The laws were intended not just to give theoretical satisfaction but to have practical use. We must move quickly to strengthen the police and the judiciary. A weak police force and a weak judiciary is an encouragement to people to take the laws into their own hands. Because the machinery of law enforcement is weak, many violations of the law have gone undetected and unpunished. This failure to punish crime is responsible for the escalation of violence in the country.

There have been noticeable improvements in the judiciary but we still have a long way to go. We still have to do a lot to rehabilitate the judiciary. The measures that the judiciary has taken to rid itself of its bad eggs have gone a long way in restoring faith in that institution and in the rule of law. Given some of the judgments that have been passed in recent times, it is apparent that the judiciary is not a tool in the hands of the Executive.

The electoral process

In a participatory democracy voting is considered to be the most fundamental expression of participation. But presently the opportunity of the people to participate effectively in the elections is denied them by the unfair practices that have become prevalent. It is now a notorious fact that our elections are not fair.

When the various political parties go into an election determined to employ the most dubious methods to win, it is not possible to have fair elections. We must make up our minds as to the type of elections that we desire. Our elections will be as fair as we make them. There is little that the Electoral Commission can do if all those who are engaged in the elections are determined to employ unfair methods. It is for us to choose our leaders and representatives. In doing so we must comply with the law, but if we chose instead to exploit the weakness in our law enforcement machinery, we shall ultimately pay the price. Again, the decision is ours whom to vote for. If we prefer to sell our votes to the highest bidder we will have ourselves to blame for the ensuing corruption or bad governance. The decision as to who the leaders and representatives of the people shall be must be left entirely in the hands of the people. We must trust the judgment of the people. We can guide them in coming to that decision but the ultimate decision is theirs.

The legislature

Compared with the other arms of Government the legislature is relatively new. Mistakes have been made. The legislature has come under justifiable suspicion. The enormity of the allowances of its members is a genuine cause for concern. The frequent changes that have occurred in the leadership of that institution, for the reasons that have been given, confirm public suspicion that our legislators are serving their own ends. The State Assemblies in particular lack will and that continues to enable some State Governments to get away with gross violations of the Constitution. The growing feeling that Governors are immune from the laws is due to the failure of the legislature to invoke its powers to impeach when it ought to.

Our democracy has also witnessed great misuse by the legislature of its oversight powers. Under the constitution, the power of the legislature to investigate is incidental

to legislation. In the form in which it is now used, it certainly exceeds the limit set by the constitution. If the present fraud continues it will not be long before the doctrine of the separation of powers is obliterated.

The Economy

At independence, we were one of the richest of the nations that were described as poor; today we rank amongst the poorest of the nations that are considered poor. There is great need for us to strive to be self-reliant. It ought not to be the case that in all our cities and even in some of our villages our young men and women, in their thousands, are to be seen on the streets and highways selling goods manufactured by other nations which are less endowed than ours. We are not going to be self-reliant by enjoying the luxuries that other nations have produced. We shall become self-reliant only by making those sacrifices which those other nations made to produce those luxuries.

We are a hardworking people – strong, resilient, patient and humble. In that case it is we who ought to be feeding other nations. We should not be fed by them as is now happening.

As far as the economy is concerned the Nigeria of my dream is that in which the nation shall be inward looking, following the path of import substitution and export promotion. We are an intelligent, hardworking and resilient people gifted with vast mineral and natural resources. Only by participating in world trade through the export of our goods and skills shall we bring prosperity to the nation. It is indeed unfortunate that fifty years after independence we have added no value to the crude oil which we continue to sell to the world in crude form.

I commend the efforts we have made at privatization even though that exercise left much room for improvement and suspicion. Nevertheless it is an important first step

in our efforts at dispensing with our massive, inefficient and monopolistic public sector. In my estimation, nothing has discouraged direct investment and capital inflow more than our lack of dependable energy. The greatest setback for this sector has been the corruption of its officials and members charged with responsibility for the sector. The lack of dependable energy, more than anything else, accounts for the poor return on investments. I say nothing of our over-regulated private enterprises with crippling controls and our pampered organized labour with extremely low productivity. We still have many rivers to cross.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to say that leadership is crucial in setting the course of our society. I would like also to submit that the Nigeria of my dream can only emerge when it is led by the right man or woman. I am an absolute believer that one right man or woman at the top can make all the difference in the life of a nation. Nigeria has so far not been lucky. Let us pray for that luck, so that we shall overcome some day.