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THE TROUBLE WITH NIGERIA

HEINEMANN
1 Where the Problem Lies

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership. On the morning after Murtala Muhammed seized power in July 1975 public servants in Lagos were found "on seat" at seven-thirty in the morning. Even the "go-slow" traffic that had defeated every solution and defied every regime vanished overnight from the streets! Why? The new ruler's reputation for ruthlessness was sufficient to transform in the course of only one night the style and habit of Nigeria's unruly capital. That the character of one man could establish that quantum change in a people's social behaviour was nothing less than miraculous. But it shows that social miracles can happen.

We know, alas, that that transformation was short-lived; it had begun to fade even before the tragic assassination of Murtala Muhammed. In the final analysis a leader's no-nonsense reputation might induce a favourable climate but in order to effect lasting change it must be followed up with a radical programme of social and economic re-organization or at least a well-conceived and consistent agenda of reform which Nigeria stood, and stands, in dire need of.

I am not here recommending ruthlessness as a necessary qualification for Nigerian leadership. Quite the contrary. What I am saying is that Nigeria is not beyond change. I am saying that Nigeria can change today if she discovers leaders who have the will, the ability and the vision. Such people are rare in any time or place. But it is the duty of enlightened
citizens to lead the way in their discovery and to create an atmosphere conducive to their emergence. If this conscious effort is not made, good leaders, like good money, will be driven out by bad.

Whenever two Nigerians meet, their conversation will sooner or later slide into a litany of our national deficiencies. The trouble with Nigeria has become the subject of our small talk in much the same way as the weather is for the English. But there is a great danger in consigning a life-and-death issue to the daily routine of small talk. No one can do much about the weather; we must accept it and live with or under it. But national bad habits are a different matter; we resign ourselves to them at our peril.

The aim of this booklet is to challenge such resignation. It calls on all thoughtful Nigerians to rise up today and reject those habits which cripple our aspiration and inhibit our chances of becoming a modern and attractive country. Nigeria has many thoughtful men and women of conscience, a large number of talented people. Why is it then that all these patriots make so little impact on the life of our nation? Why is it that our corruption, gross inequities, our noisy vulgarity, our selfishness, our ineptitude seem so much stronger than the good influences at work in our society? Why do the good among us seem so helpless while the worst are full of vile energy?

I believe that Nigeria is a nation favoured by Providence. I believe there are individuals as well as nations who, on account of peculiar gifts and circumstances, are commandeered by history to facilitate mankind's advancement. Nigeria is such a nation. The vast human and material wealth with which she is endowed bestows on her a role in Africa and the world which no one else can assume or fulfil. The fear that should nightly haunt our leaders (but does not) is that they may already have betrayed irretrievably Nigeria's high destiny. The countless billions that a generous Providence poured into our national coffers in the last ten years (1972–1982) would have been enough to launch this nation into the middle-rank of developed nations and transformed the lives of our poor and needy. But what have we done with it? Stolen and salted away by people in power and their accomplices. Squandered in uncontrolled importation of all kinds of useless consumer merchandise from every corner of the globe. Embezzled through inflated contracts to an increasing army of party loyalists who have neither the desire nor the competence to execute their contracts. Consumed in the escalating salaries of a grossly overstaffed and unproductive public service. And so on ad infinitum.

Does it ever worry us that history which neither personal wealth nor power can pre-empt will pass terrible judgment on us, pronounce anathema on our names when we have accomplished our betrayal and passed on? We have lost the twentieth century; are we bent on seeing that our children also lose the twenty-first? God forbid!
2 Tribalism

Nothing in Nigeria's political history captures her problem of national integration more graphically than the chequered fortune of the word tribe in her vocabulary. Tribe has been accepted at one time as a friend, rejected as an enemy at another, and finally smuggled in through the back-door as an accomplice.

In the life-time of many Nigerians who still enjoy an active public career, Nigeria was called "a mere geographical expression" not only by the British who had an interest in keeping it so, but even by our "nationalists" when it suited them to retreat into tribe to check their more successful rivals from other parts of the country. As a student in Ibadan I was an eye-witness to that momentous occasion when Chief Obafemi Awolowo "stole" the leadership of Western Nigeria from Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe in broad daylight on the floor of the Western House of Assembly and sent the great Zik scampering back to the Niger "whence [he] came."

Someday when we shall have outgrown tribal politics, or when our children shall have done so, sober historians of the Nigerian nation will see that event as the abortion of a pan-Nigerian vision which, however ineptly, the NCNC tried to have and to hold. No matter how anyone attempts to explain away that event in retrospect it was the death of a dream-Nigeria in which a citizen could live and work in a place of his choice anywhere, and pursue any legitimate goal open to his fellows; a Nigeria in which an Easterner might aspire to be premier in the West and a Northerner become Mayor of Enugu. That dream-Nigeria suffered a death-blow from Awolowo's "success" in the Western House of Assembly in 1951. Perhaps it was an unrealistic dream at the best of times, but some young, educated men and women of
my generation did dream it.

And though it died, it never fully faded from our consciousness. You could always find idealistic people from every part of Nigeria who were prepared to do battle if anyone (especially European or American) should ask them: *What is your tribe?* "I am a Nigerian," they would say haughtily, drawing themselves to their fullest height. Though alive and well tribe had an embarrassing odour.

Then a strange thing happened at our independence in 1960. Our national anthem, our very hymn of deliverance from British colonial bondage, was written for us by a British woman who unfortunately had not been properly briefed on the current awkwardness of the word *tribe*. So we found ourselves on independence morning rolling our tongues around the very same trickster godling:

> Though tribe and tongue may differ
> In brotherhood we stand!

It was a most ominous beginning. And not surprisingly we did not stand too long in brotherhood. Within six years we were standing or sprawling on a soil soaked in fratricidal blood. When it finally ceased to flow, we were ready for a new anthem written this time by ourselves. And we took care to expunge the jinxed word *tribe*. And to be absolutely certain we buried the alien anthem in its own somnolent evangelical hymn juice (concocted incidentally by another British woman, the third in a remarkable line, the first being Lugard's girl-friend who christened us Nigeria) and invoked the natural dance rhythm of our highlife to mark our national rebirth.

But all this self-conscious wish to banish *tribe* has proved largely futile because a word will stay around as long as there is work for it to do. In Nigeria, in spite of our protestations, there is plenty of work for *tribe*. Our threatening gestures against it have been premature, half-hearted or plain deceitful.

A Nigerian child seeking admission into a federal school, a student wishing to enter a College or University, a graduate seeking employment in the public service, a businessman tendering for a contract, a citizen applying for a passport, filing a report with the police or seeking access to any of the hundred thousand avenues controlled by the state, will sooner or later fill out a form which requires him to confess his tribe (or less crudely, and more hypocritically, his state of origin).

Intelligent and useful discussion of tribalism is very often thwarted by vacuousness. What is tribalism? I will spare you a comprehensive academic definition. For practical purposes let us say that tribalism is *discrimination against a citizen because of his place of birth*.

Everyone agrees that there are manifestations of tribal culture which we cannot condemn; for example, peculiar habits of dress, food, language, music, etc. In fact many of these manifestations are positive and desirable and confer richness on our national culture.

But to prevent a citizen from living or working anywhere in his country, or from participating in the social, political, economic life of the community in which he chooses to live is another matter altogether. Our constitution disallows it even though, like its makers, it manages to say and unsay on certain crucial issues.

Prejudice against *"outsiders"* or *"strangers"* is an attitude one finds everywhere. But no modern state can lend its support to such prejudice without undermining its own progress and civilization. America, which we copy when it suits us, should provide an excellent example to us in this connection: that although we may not be able to legislate prejudice and bigotry out of the hearts and minds of individual citizens, the state itself and all its institutions must not practice, endorse or condone such habits. Not long ago I was writing a recommendation for a postgraduate student seeking admission into the University of Pittsburgh, U.S.A.
The form had the following direction in bold print to recommenders:

Please make no statement which would indicate the applicant's race, creed or national origin.

Defenders of the Nigerian system may point out that the American nation is two hundred years old while Nigeria is only twenty. But don't forget our declared ambition to become an advanced nation in the shortest possible time, preferably by the year 2000.

3 False Image of Ourselves

In June 1979 former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of West Germany made this comment about his country:

Germany is not a world power; it does not wish to become a world power.

In August of the same year General Olusegun Obasanjo said of Nigeria during his "Thank You Tour" of Ogun State:

Nigeria will become one of the ten leading nations in the world by the end of the century.

The contrast between these two leaders speaks for itself—a sober, almost self-deprecatory attitude on the one hand and a flamboyant, imaginary self-concept on the other.

One of the commonest manifestations of under-development is a tendency among the ruling elite to live in a world of make-believe and unrealistic expectations. This is the cargo cult mentality that anthropologists sometimes speak about—a belief by backward people that someday, without any exertion whatsoever on their own part, a fairy ship will dock in their harbour laden with every goody they have always dreamed of possessing.

Listen to Nigerian leaders and you will frequently hear the phrase this great country of ours.

Nigeria is not a great country. It is one of the most disorderly nations in the world. It is one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun. It is one of the most expensive countries and one of those that give least value for money. It is dirty, callous, noisy, ostentatious, dishonest and vulgar. In short, it is among the most
unpleasant places on earth!

It is a measure of our self-delusion that we can talk about
developing tourism in Nigeria. Only a masochist with an
exuberant taste for self-violence will pick Nigeria for a
holiday; only a character out of Tutuola seeking to know
punishment and poverty at first hand! No, Nigeria may be a
paradise for adventurers and pirates, but not tourists.
I once saw a car sticker in Lagos which said LOVE THIS
COUNTRY OR LEAVE IT.

The gentle reader of this booklet may feel like the man
who displayed that sticker and wonder why I still live in
Nigeria. The answer is simple. Nigeria is where God in His
infinite wisdom chose to plant me. Therefore I don't consider
that I have any right to seek out a more comfortable corner
of the world which someone else's intelligence and labour
have tidied up. I know enough history to realize that
civilization does not fall down from the sky; it has always
been the result of people's toil and sweat, the fruit of their
long search for order and justice under brave and enlightened
leaders.

I also believe that, hopeless as she may seem today,
Nigeria is not absolutely beyond redemption. Critical, yes,
but not entirely hopeless. But every single day of continued
neglect brings her ever closer to the brink of the abyss. To
pull her back and turn her around is clearly beyond the
contrivance of mediocre leadership. It calls for greatness.
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"Nigerians being what they are," he said, they will seek out
means of siphoning away our foreign exchange.

This is hardly fair. Nigerians are what they are only
because their leaders are not what they should be.

4  Leadership, Nigerian-Style

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In a solemn vow made by Azikiwe in 1937 he pledged:

that henceforth I shall utilize my earned income to
secure my enjoyment of a high standard of living
and also to give a helping hand to the needy.

Obafemi Awolowo was even more forthright about his
ambitions:

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.*

Thoughts such as these are more likely to produce aggressive
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*James Booth, Writers and Politics in Nigeria (London: Hodder and
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An absence of objectivity and intellectual rigour at the critical moment of a nation’s formation is more than an

academic matter. It inclines the fledgling state to disorderly growth and mental deficiency.

On Unity and Faith

The most commonly enunciated Nigerian ideal is unity. So important is it to us that it stands inscribed on our coat-of-arms and so sacred that the blood of millions of our countrymen, women and children was shed between 1967 and 1970 to uphold it against secessionist forces. I think it was Mr. Ukpabi Asika who defined Nigerian unity as “an absolute good.”

How valid is this notion of unity as an absolute good? Quite clearly it is nonsense. Unity can only be as good as the purpose for which it is desired. Obviously it is good for a group of people to unite to build a school or a hospital or a nation. But supposing a group of other people get together in order to rob a bank. Their unity is deemed undesirable. Indeed lawyers would call their kind of unity by the unflattering name of conspiracy. Therefore we cannot extol the virtues of unity without first satisfying ourselves that the end to which the unity is directed is unimpeachable.

The second ideal which the Nigerian coat-of-arms celebrates is faith. Again faith is as good as the object on which it reposes. For religious people faith in God is a desirable way of life; for humanists it is acceptable to believe in the intrinsic worth of man.

But what about faith in money, or faith in talismans and fetish?

So again, faith is all right provided it is to be placed on something acceptable. It cannot be good in itself. Before we are persuaded to have faith we must first ascertain the nature and worth of the receiver of our faith. We must ask the crucial question: Faith in what? Just as in the matter of unity we must ask: Unity to what end?

Therefore “virtues” like unity and faith are not absolute but conditional on their satisfaction of other purposes. Their social validity depends on the willingness or the ability of citizens to ask the searching question. This calls for a habit of mental rigour, for which, unfortunately, Nigerians are not famous.

But the really interesting question is why were we drawn in the first place to concepts like unity and faith with their potentialities for looseness? Why did we not think, for example, of such concepts as Justice and Honesty which cannot be so easily directed to undesirable ends? Justice never prompts the question: Justice for what? Neither does Honesty or Truth. Is it possible that as a nation we instinctively chose to extol easy virtues which are amenable to the manipulation of hypocrites, rather than difficult ones which would have imposed the strain of seriousness upon us? And was that one of the legacies of our Founding Fathers?
5 Patriotism

In spite of the tendency of people in power to speak about this great nation of ours there is no doubt that Nigerians are among the world’s most unpatriotic people. But this is not because Nigerians are particularly evil or wicked; in fact they are not. It is rather because patriotism, being part of an unwritten social contract between a citizen and the state, cannot exist where the state reneges on the agreement. The state undertakes to organize society in such a way that the citizen can enjoy peace and justice, and the citizen in return agrees to perform his patriotic duties.

In 1978 or 79 General Obasanjo paid an official visit to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Of the academic community assembled in the Niger Room of the Continuing Education Centre and which rose respectfully to its feet on his entry General Obasanjo made a totally unexpected demand. He asked them to recite the National Pledge! A few ambiguous mumbles followed, and then stony silence.

“You see,” said the General bristling with hostility, “You do not even know the National Pledge.” No doubt he saw in this failure an indictable absence of patriotism among a group he had always held with great suspicion.

Who is a patriot? He is a person who loves his country. He is not a person who says he loves his country. He is not even a person who shouts or swears or recites or sings his love of his country. He is one who cares deeply about the happiness and well-being of his country and all its people. Patriotism is an emotion of love directed by a critical intelligence. A true patriot will always demand the highest standards of his country and accept nothing but the best for and from his people. He will be outspoken in condemnation of their
short-comings without giving way to superiority, despair or cynicism. That is my idea of a patriot.

Quite clearly patriotism is not going to be easy or comfortable in a country as badly run as Nigeria is. And this is not made any easier by the fact that no matter how badly a country may be run there will always be some people whose personal, selfish interests are, in the short term at least, well served by the mismanagement and the social inequities. Naturally they will be extremely loud in their adulation of the country and its system, and will be anxious to pass themselves off as patriots and to vilify those who disagree with them as trouble-makers or even traitors. But doomed is the nation which permits such people to define patriotism for it. Their definition would be about as objective as a Rent Act devised by a committee of avaricious landlords, or the encomiums that a colony of blood-sucking ticks might be expected to shower upon the bull on whose back they batten. Spurious patriotism is one of the hallmarks of Nigeria’s privileged classes whose generally unearned positions of sudden power and wealth must seem unreal even to themselves. To lay the ghost of their insecurity they talk patriotically. But their protestation is only mouth-deep; it does not exist in their heads nor in their hearts and certainly not in the work of their hands.

True patriotism is possible only when the people who rule and those under their power have a common and genuine goal of maintaining the dispensation under which the nation lives. This will, in turn, only happen if the nation is ruled justly, if the welfare of all the people rather than the advantage of the few becomes the cornerstone of public policy.

National pledges and pious admonitions administered by the ruling classes or their paid agents are entirely useless in fostering true patriotism. In extreme circumstances of social, economic and political inequities such as we have in Nigeria, pledges and admonitions may even work in the reverse direction and provoke rejection or cynicism and despair. One shining act of bold, selfless leadership at the top, such as unambiguous refusal to be corrupt or tolerate corruption at the fountain of authority, will radiate powerful sensations of well-being and pride through every nerve and artery of national life.

I saw such a phenomenon on two occasions in Tanzania in the 1960s. The first was when news got around (not from the Ministry of Information but on street corners) that President Nyerere after paying his children’s school fees had begged his bank to give him a few months’ grace on the repayment of the mortgage on his personal house. The other occasion was when he insisted that anyone in his cabinet or party hierarchy who had any kind of business interests must either relinquish them or leave his official or party position. This was no mere technicality of putting the business interest in escrow but giving it up entirely. And many powerful ministers including the formidable leader of TANU Women were forced to leave the cabinet. On these occasions ordinary Tanzanians seemed to walk around, six feet tall. They did not need sermons on patriotism; nor a committee of bishops and emirs to inaugurate a season of ethical revolution for them.
and the jet of urine, I still would not have believed it if I had not had confirmation in the horrified reaction of other travellers around us, and if my wife and driver had not recoiled instinctively from the impact of that police piss on their side of the car. Fortunately for them the glass was wound up.

It was almost humourous.

Postscript

The wanton and colossal destruction of national resources — life and limb, public utilities and private property — on our highways is a thousand times more grievous than the wildest threat armed robbers and other violent criminals can pose to our society’s security.

In non-material terms mass indiscipline on the road, which has long deteriorated into lawlessness, fosters a national style which must and does inevitably spill over into other areas of national conduct.

We must now recognize the emergency status of this situation and treat it accordingly. The descent into “mere anarchy” must be halted and reversed.

A Presidential Commission on Road Safety is urgently called for. It should be given sweeping powers to draw up and implement a programme for sanity on Nigerian roads. This is not another Commission for Emirs and religious leaders to sit on or an opportunity to reward party stalwarts. A serious and business-like Commission will not only tackle and solve the problem at hand, it will also remove the excuse of certain state governments for creating para-military formations for political purposes.

8 Corruption

Quite recently an astonishing statement credited to President Shagari was given some publicity in Nigeria and abroad. According to the media our President said words to the effect that there was corruption in Nigeria but that it had not yet reached alarming proportions.

My frank and honest opinion is that anybody who can say that corruption in Nigeria has not yet become alarming is either a fool, a crook or else does not live in this country.

Shagari is neither a fool nor a crook. So I must assume that he lives abroad. Which is not as strange or fanciful as some might think. Many Presidents, especially Third World Presidents, do not live in their country. One of the penalties of exalted power is loneliness. Hannesed to the trappings of protocol and blockaded by a buffer of grinning courtiers and sycophants, even a good and intelligent leader will gradually begin to forget what the real world looks like.

When a President of Nigeria sets out to see things for himself, what does he actually see?

Highways temporarily cleared of lunatic drivers by even more lunatic presidential escorts; hitherto impassable tracks freshly graded and even watered to keep down the dust; buildings dripping fresh paint; well-fed obsequious welcoming parties; garlands of colourful toilet paper hung round the neck by women leaders; troupes of “cultural dancers” in the sun, and many other such scenes of contented citizenry. But history tells us of wise rulers at different times and places who achieved rare leadership by their blunt and simple refusal to be fooled by guided tours of their own country. In antiquity we read, for example, of Haroun al Rashid, an eighth-century caliph of Baghdad, who frequently disguised himself and went unaccompanied into the streets of his city.
by day or night to see the life of his subjects in its unadorned and uncensored reality. Modern history has its examples too, but they may be too close for comfort.

So Shehu Shagari should return home, read the papers and from time to time talk to Nigerians outside the circle of Presidential aides and party faithfuls.

Corruption in Nigeria has passed the alarming and entered the fatal stage; and Nigeria will die if we keep pretending that she is only slightly indisposed.

The Weekly Star of 15 May 1983 has this on its front page under the title The Nigerian and Corruption:

Keeping an average Nigerian from being corrupt is like keeping a goat from eating yam.

This is a bad way of putting it, worse perhaps than the President's denial of its severity. A goat needs yam because yam is food for goats. A Nigerian does not need corruption, neither is corruption necessary nourishment for Nigerians. It is totally false to suggest, as we are apt to do, that Nigerians are different fundamentally from any other people in the world. Nigerians are corrupt because the system under which they live today makes corruption easy and profitable; they will cease to be corrupt when corruption is made difficult and inconvenient.

Furthermore the concept of "the average Nigerian" in this connection is hardly helpful. If indeed there is such a creature as "an average Nigerian" he is likely to be found at a point in social space with limited opportunities for corruption as we generally understand the word. Corruption goes with power; and whatever the average man may have it is not power. Therefore to hold any useful discussion of corruption we must first locate it where it properly belongs — in the ranks of the powerful.

The ostrich evasion of President Shagari and the fatalistic acceptance of the Weekly Star writer are among the major obstacles to a proper assessment of, and solution to, the problem of rampant corruption in Nigeria.

As I write this in my hotel room in Kano (Monday 16 May 1983) I have two of this morning's papers on my table — National Concord and Daily Times. I shall go no further for my examples of Nigerian corruption.

The Concord carries a banner headline: FRAUD AT P and T, followed by a story with no less authority than that of the Federal Minister of Communications, Mr. Audu Ogbe, that "the Federal Government is losing N$50 million every month as salaries" to non-existent workers.

In the course of one year then Nigeria loses N$600 million in this particular racket. A series of little comparisons may bring home the size of this loss.

With N$600 million Nigeria could build two more international airports like the Murtala Muhammed Airport in Lagos; or if we are not keen on more airports the money could buy us three refineries; or build us a dual express motorway from Lagos to Kaduna; or pay the salary of 10,000 workers on grade level 01 for forty years!

And please remember that Minister Audu Ogbe is not telling us about all the fraud in the Posts and Telegraphs Department but only about one particular racket which has just come to light: payment of salaries to fictitious workers.

And please, please remember also that Mr. Audu Ogbe is in no position to inform us about fraud in other Federal parastatals; not to talk of state government companies and corporations; not to talk of the Federal Civil Service including, if you please, the Department of Customs and Excise; not to talk of nineteen state civil services; not to talk of Local Governments, or Abuja, or etc., etc., etc. And of course there is the completely different world of the Private Sector!

Would it be too fanciful then to reckon that the sum of all the fraud committed against the people of Nigeria in the public and the private services would come to a figure so
staggering as completely to boggle the imagination?

We have become so used to talking in millions and billions that we have ceased to have proper respect for the sheer size of such numbers. I sometimes startled my students by telling them that it was not yet one million days since Christ was on earth. As they gazed open-mouthed I would add: Not even half-a-million days!

In traditional Igbo lore numbers like one million are called agukata agba awari: you count and count till your jaw breaks. And yet it is now the prime ambition of so many to steal so much from the nation.

Now let’s look at the other paper on my table. The Daily Times editorial headlined The Fake Importers brings us another revelation, this time at the ports — a story of Nigerian importers who having applied for and obtained scarce foreign exchange from the Central Bank ostensibly to pay for raw materials overseas, leave the money in their banks abroad and ship to Lagos containers of mud and sand!

I consider myself a reasonably humane person, but I must confess that after reading that editorial I dredged up from the depths of my psyche the following punishment: insert the importer head-first into his mud, seal the container once more and ship it back to his overseas collaborators!

These two stories — the payment of ghost workers at the Posts and Telegraphs and the importation of mud into Nigeria — are carried by two newspapers which I just happen to have bought this morning. If I had more papers or more days to choose from I could multiply such scandals and frauds against the nation a hundred-fold, nay, a thousand!

Knowledgeable observers have estimated that as much as 60 percent of the wealth of this nation is regularly consumed by corruption. I have no doubt that defenders of our system would retort: Mere rumours! Where is the proof?

No one can offer “satisfactory” proof for the simple reason that nobody issues a receipt for a bribe or money stolen from the public till. We do know, however, that when the revolution which such scandalous behaviour invites does come, proofs tend all of a sudden to pour out in torrential abundance. Meanwhile, as thieves say to one another, mum’s the word!

So we must fall back on intelligent observation, surmises, estimations and even rumours.

A few years ago a new cultural facility was opened in London by Queen Elizabeth II. It was called the Barbican Centre and it cost the British tax-payer £150 million, which is roughly equivalent to ₦180 million. It was such a magnificent structure that one account described it as the Eighth Wonder of the World.

We know that Nigeria in the last decade has built many structures worth more (or rather that cost more) than ₦180 million. But show me one wonder among them, unless it be the wonder of discrepancy between cost and value!

The reason for this is quite simple. A structure that costs us, say ₦200 million carries a huge hidden element of kickbacks and commissions to Nigerian middlemen and, increasingly, middlewomen; it carries inflated prices of materials caused largely by corruption; theft and inefficiency on the site fostered by more corruption; contract variations corruptly arranged midstream in execution, an inflated margin (or, more aptly, corridor) of profit. When all these factors are added to others which our corrupt ingenuity constantly invents, you will be lucky if on completion (assuming such a happy event occurs) your structure is worth as much as ₦80 million.

It would be impossible and, even if possible, of little value to attempt a comprehensive picture of the types and scope of Nigerian corruption. I will only say that most people will agree that corruption has grown enormously in variety, magnitude and brazenness since the beginning of the Second Republic because it has been extravagantly fuelled by budgetary abuse and political patronage on an unprecedented
scale.

Public funds are now routinely doled out to political allies and personal friends in the guise of contracts to execute public works of one kind or another, or licences to import restricted commodities. Generally a political contractor will have no expertise whatsoever nor even the intention to perform. He will simply sell the contract to a third party and pocket the commission running into hundreds of thousands of naira or even millions for acting as a conduit of executive fiat.

Alternatively he can raise cash not by selling the contract but by collecting a "mobilization fee" from the Treasury, putting aside the contract for the time being or for ever, buying himself a Mercedes Benz car and seeking elective office through open and massive bribery.

If in spite of all his exertions he still fails to win nomination or is defeated at the polls he may be rewarded with a ministerial appointment. Should he as minister find himself engulfed in serious financial scandal the President will promptly re-assign him — to another ministry.

Although Nigeria is without any shadow of doubt one of the most corrupt nations in the world there has not been one high public officer in the twenty-three years of our independence who has been made to face the music for official corruption. And so, from fairly timid manifestations in the 1960s, corruption has grown bold and ravenous as, with each succeeding regime, our public servants have become more reckless and blatant.

As we have sunk more and more deeply into the quagmire we have been "blessed" with a succession of leaders who are said to possess impeccable personal integrity but unfortunately are surrounded by sharks and crooks. I do confess to some personal difficulty in even beginning to visualize genuine integrity in that kind of mix; for it has always seemed to me that the test of integrity is its blunt refusal to be compromised.

But be that as it may, we are all living witnesses to the failure of helpless integrity to solve the problem of rampant corruption which threatens now to paralyse this country in every sinew and every limb.

Obviously this situation which has built up over the years will take some time to correct, assuming we want to do it peacefully. But to initiate change the President of this country must take, and be seen to take, a decisive first step of ridding his administration of all persons on whom the slightest wind of corruption and scandal has blown. When he can summon up the courage to do that he will find himself grown overnight to such stature and authority that he will become Nigeria's leader, not just its president. Only then can he take on and conquer corruption in the nation.