

## THE MASSES ARE THE ANSWER

Presidential Address delivered by Professor  
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of the Nigerian Political Science Association  
May 17, 1984 in Benin

**The beat goes on — and the beat goes on.**

Musical chairs is now clearly part of our political culture. And the masses cheer as the various ruling classes drop out. That is, as they face the music. The first to drop out was the Royal Niger Company in 1900. It was followed in 1960 by the British Government, and in a quick succession by the British Crown in 1963. Thereafter, different factions and fractions of the Nigerian petty bourgeoisie have fallen victims to this politics. A civilian faction was ousted in January 1966 by a fraction of the military faction. Some petty bourgeois blood was spilled. A bloody repercussion visited the masses in May of that year. In July, this first military regime was drowned in a pool of blood and replaced by another military fraction. The immediate consequence for the masses was even bloodier. Indeed, it was a carnage. In addition, for thirty months following the resultant internecine quarrels among competing fractions of the military, the people were again slaughtered.

On July 29, 1975 this second coming of the military was terminated by another military fraction. No blood was shed. For the masses, it was only cheers this time. An attempt on 13th February 1976 to topple the incumbent military government by another military fraction failed. At the Lagos Bar Beach and elsewhere in the country the cheers of the masses could be heard, loud and clear, as the plotters faced the music. Also, in October 1979 it was all cheers when the military peacefully made way for the civilian faction. But another fraction of the military forced the civilians out on December 31, 1983. The people again cheered. As always, the cheering was for the music.

The people are battered and buffeted. They are cheated and defrauded by the Royal Niger Company; killed, pacified and then insulted as primitive and barbaric «natives» by the colonialists; mesmerized and cynically manipulated by the petty bourgeois nationalists; sold to the cabinet system of government, bought back by the military, and resold to the presidential system; used as cannon fodder in a fratricidal war for petty bourgeois advantages; whipped with kobokos and assaulted in various dehumanizing ways by law enforcement agents; and fed with unappetizing propaganda meals of Operation Feed the Nation, Green Revolution, Ethical Revolution, War on Indiscipline and other illusory concoctions. They are socialized into the norms of philistinism and opportunism, bribed into disbelief and cynicism, and thoroughly alienated from their work and society. Today, they are an empty shell of themselves. There is no food, no water, no light, no drug, no education, no security. Simply nothing! They live a life of nothingness. And tomorrow? The beat goes on. Cheers for the music.

The masses are beginning to be weary of the music, and hoarse with the cheers. Some are fed up with the whole charade, the political farce, and wonder when the beat will cease, and how it will all end. How much more blood, how many more slaughtered; what cost in social, economic and political progress; what cost to national prestige, national leadership of Africa, the moral integrity of the nation? How much more shame to the country, the continent, and the blackman?

Some perceptive and patriotic political scientists are haunted by the prospects of the latinamericanization of our country. Apologists of petty bourgeois reaction call them «prophets of doom». They would rather the people listened to the voodoo political scientists, the Oyewoles and Umaru Dikkos who feed on the fat of the people's tune-in into the music. Their science of hocuspocus is limited to wild guesses of who will face the music next.

Clearly, ours is a generation with a specific mission, to put the people back into history. In order to fulfil this mission, we must first correctly understand the trouble with Nigeria, why the beat goes on. We have been told that the trouble with Nigeria is its leadership. The Igbo say that a stream polluted at its source cannot be cleaned midstream. We agree. But to leave the discussion at that is to enthrone superficiality in analysis.

Of course, there are many things wrong with Nigeria. The trouble is multifaceted. It is at the same time social, economic, psychological and political. It varies from the foreign control of our economy, the consequent client mentality and high propensity to import, poor work habits, and corruption to nepotism, indiscipline, incompetence, selfishness of the leadership, insecurity, religious superstition and many more ills. The question is: which of these shortcomings is the most fundamental and critical for our generation?

In the political sphere the problem with Nigeria has been the total exclusion of the people from the political process. The small and middle-level subsistence farmers, rural-rural farm migrants, plantation workers, industrial blue collar workers, salaried workers on GL 01 - 05 and their equivalents in the private sector, day labourers, unemployed and layabouts, underemployed such as street hawkers, petty artisans including roadside mechanics, motor cycle and bicycle repairers, blacksmiths, welders, masons, carpenters, electricians, nightsoilmen, petty traders, tramps including touts at the airports and motor parks, beggars and prostitutes have been consistently excluded from politics. They have never participated directly or substantively deciding what is produced, when and how, and who gets what of the products.

Why are the people excluded? The colonialists had nothing but contempt for them. The Nigerian petty bourgeois has virtually no commitment to democracy. His undisciplined role in production cannot sustain popular political participation. Soon, his selfishness and inordinate ambition for power compel him to view democratic values and institutions as luxuries which he cannot afford. His arbitrariness in the exercise of power replaces respect for the people. Inevitably, the leader and the people drift

apart under conditions of mutual mistrust. The leader trusts only himself, his blood relatives, and a gang of petty bourgeois sycophants and philistines. Others become objects for control and manipulation. He abandons the search for legitimacy and relies on lies, intimidation, blackmail, bribery and naked force. Dissenters are crushed. Rivals are liquidated. The people are dissolved into indifference and apathy. Anyone that stands up for truth and the masses is his enemy and must be bought over or destroyed. In the end he faces the music. The people cheer. And the beat goes on.

At times the people are excluded on grounds of the urgency of the immediate problem to be solved. It may be the civilizing mission of the colonialists, the drift and disintegration of the nation, or the imminent collapse of the economy. The urgency of the situation needs the skills, competence and fine points of the expert, not the interference of the «ignorant» masses. The civil servants, technocrats and consultants now proceed to bury themselves in figures, diagrams, graphs and statistics rather than in the hearts of the people. The government assumes the task of supervising the masses. It becomes an administration, relying on the police and the army to control the people merely to exact loyalty and obedience from them. The masses respond. In the presence of government officials, they behave like a flock of sheep and sing praises of the regime. Their bitter disappointment, despair and anger only make themselves heard when the leaders and officials face the music.

The masses are abandoned in the pit of ignorance, poverty, squalor and disease. There, they are crushed, degraded, disenchanting, blinded and divided by the power of money. Far away from the economic, political and military seats of power, and outside the mainstream of modern science and technology, they live under a pervasive condition of powerlessness which needs illusions to sustain. Organized and unorganized religion cashes in on the situation. A sterile but self serving argument is advanced: that social progress for the masses in the form of the benefits from free education, free health services, free mother and child care, adequate pension, and state social insurance runs counter to economic progress because it diverts funds away from economic investment in productive enterprises. The ideology of the IMF takes control. The most important freedom encouraged in our society is the freedom to exclude the poor from social amenities and political power.

The truth is that Nigeria cannot be pulled out of its seemingly irreversible slide into economic disaster and unfathomable national humiliation without the active participation of the masses in the politics of their country. They stand in the sharpest contradiction to the forces that now degrade the nation. The inherited colonial institutions dominated by foreign capital, decadent values, and reactionary ethos represent an unjust exploitation of their labour, and the neglect of their socio-economic needs. Their interest lies solely in replacing these institutions with others which promote activities that serve the interests of the vast majority of the population.

Their track record is enviable, unexcelled. For example, during the prepetroleum days they provided the «almighty» foreign exchange.

the economic banditry of the Shagari administration. And by bearing in silence the major brunt of the consequences of the high prices of goods and services, and the loss of benefits from programmes that might have been undertaken in the broad public interest, they have been the guarantors of whatever socio-political stability there has been in the country.

Only the pressure of the vast number of the toiling masses applied through their active participation in the supervision of agricultural, commercial and industrial enterprises and supported by their organized political power is capable of eliminating poverty, overcoming economic backwardness, and in general catering to the welfare interests of the people. Such a democratic participation will stimulate the masses to greater creativity and awaken their latent desire and energy to work hard. Conscious of his political power over production, the worker will not only strive to improve his productivity but that of his colleagues as well. And as true supervisors, the masses will carry out a search for unexplored and unexploited ways to improve the results of common labour. The experience of the socialist countries is illuminating.

If the people's direct involvement in politics is thus inescapable, it must be politics of a fundamentally different kind than that practised by the petty bourgeoisie. Disappointed by the harrowing experience of our political past, the masses must discover in real action a new form of political activity which in no way resembles the old. The new politics must explode old myths, reveal unexpected and unexposed facts, dispense the most deeply rooted political illusions, and forewarn the masses of all attempts at mystification. Otherwise, as Frantz Fanon has aptly observed, «there is nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of trumpets. There is nothing except a few reforms at the top while at the bottom the people are still endlessly marking time».

Under the new dispensation, the leaders must see political activity no longer as a way of bamboozling the people or lulling them to sleep but as the only method of preparing them to undertake the governing of their country and the production of their means of livelihood. They must rid themselves of the false colonial notion that the masses are incapable of governing themselves. Explanation by the leaders is the hub of the new politics. Experience proves that the masses understand perfectly the most complicated problems. If the ruling circles adopt the attitude that they can manage the country without the people's involvement, that the people hinder the running of the many limited liability companies which make the poor, then their language of explanation will be one which is obsessed with the perverse desire to spread confusion and get rid of the people.

If on the other hand the leaders really want the people to participate, to understand and speak to them in everyday language, it will be quite clear that the masses can quickly understand every shade of meaning, and learn all the principles and processes exposed to them.

The task of the leader is to continually raise the consciousness of the masses to new heights. Otherwise, the people may at any moment be disarmed by one concession or another. Their enthusiasm for the political process will wane and they will sooner or later abandon the struggle if it continues. And it will continue. Primarily, the leader must stop the

people's consciousness from getting bogged down. He must realize that the involvement of the masses in politics does not consist in mobilizing many thousands of them to attend mass gatherings and spectacular meetings in the manner of a show of force. Nigerian leaders have often wrongly believed that to educate the masses politically is to deliver a long political harangue from time to time, bombard the people with crisp slogans and clichés, sermonize on the need for patriotism and godliness or launch various campaigns, operations, revolutions and wars orchestrated through the mass media.

Political education of the masses comes from their close interaction with their leaders, in which the ones teaches and learns from the other. Through such an interaction the masses generate forces which supply the leaders with their dynamic and make it possible for them to forge ahead politically, economically and socially. It also teaches the masses that the leaders are essential for the coherence of the society. Thus the masses should be able to meet together with their rulers, discuss with them, and propose as well as receive directions. Allegiance presupposes awareness and understanding of the mission to be fulfilled no matter how rudimentary that understanding may be. The time taken up in explaining policies to the people and the time «lost» in treating them as human beings are usually made up by their enthusiasm for work.

At all times the people must know where they are going, how, and why. The future remains a closed book as long as the consciousness of the people remains imperfect, elementary and cloudy. Government business cannot be run in the manner of a conspiratorial clique, springing surprises on the people. It ought to be the business of the masses.

The people must grasp the truth and meaning of every governmental policy, programme, action and decision. Otherwise, they would begin to waver, imagining that victory is already won or that the patriotic objectives are impossible to achieve. Such a continuous programme of explanation is necessary because the people's struggle for progress is a very long one. It goes on and on. It does not consist in taking one bold giant step. «The war is not a single battle but rather a series of engagements none of which is really decisive. The final settlement of account will not be today nor yet tomorrow, for the truth is that the settlement was begun on the very first day of the war». If the situation is left unclarified it will contribute to the bewilderment of the people who will begin to splinter on the reefs of misunderstanding. The battles may be won. But the victory would certainly be lost.

However, unless the people are politically involved with the leader in an organized form, their involvement will not last. The latter's honesty will increasingly crumble. He will come inevitably to believe that his authority is hated and that the services he has rendered his country are being called to question. To the people's «ingratitude» he will counterpose brutality and oppression. This same leader who earlier had promised the people salvation, redemption or liberation will now wish to expel them from politics and history.

The political involvement of the masses is only possible within the framework of an organization, and inside the structure of the people. Their unorganized efforts can only be a temporary dynamic. Neither stubborn courage nor fine slogans can be a substitute for organization. People's power is people's organisation. Without it the masses will be too slow to take up the structural or social reforms introduced by the government even though such changes may be quite progressive. In that case, the nation will have a reasonable, even progressive, head to it; but its body will remain weak, stubborn and non cooperative. The government would have paid a price for its laziness and unrepentant mistrust of the masses.

Such an organization will succeed only when it is built around a programme. The latter presupposes clear objectives and a methodology. A viable nation does not exist outside of a programme which is pursued with the full understanding and enthusiasm of the masses. A progressive government that is dedicated to uplifting the people economically, socially and politically is characterized by the substance of its programme. There must be an economic programme. And there must be a doctrine concerning the division of wealth and the associated social relations. Indeed, there must be an idea of man and of the future of humanity. No demagogic formula, no wishful thinking, and no repertory of decrees can take the place of a programme.

A social programme concerning the division of national wealth is particularly important because although the masses are usually willing to sacrifice everything for the nation, they have to be encouraged, especially in the sphere of the distribution of material welfare. A fair system of distribution according to work done, coupled with an enormous increase in the funds for the social forms of personal consumption such as state welfare services will stimulate an upsurge in the people's labour enthusiasm and creative powers.

The experience of the socialist countries explodes the myth that such a social policy is not feasible especially during times of severe economic down-turn and austerity. On the contrary, it shows that a progressive social policy is possible provided that the living standards of all segments of the population, and the real wages of the working people, do not as a rule increase for any considerable time faster than the increase in production and productivity of labour; and that progressive legislation is employed to ensure the maximum removal of non-productive incomes from conspicuous consumption towards more productive areas, as well as to social welfare for the masses.

Since the standard of living is a result of the volume of production of both the raw and final products generated by the people, its growth rate, and the level and growth rate of labour productivity, it must not run ahead of the expansion of creative production, but must follow the latter, keeping a certain distance behind it as far as all segments of the society are concerned. Only the observance of this condition can ensure harmony between the economic and social aspects of development, which turns social progress into a motive force for economic growth. It also helps to eliminate poor health, ignorance and, in general, the hostility of the environment which adversely affect the ability of the masses to contribute maximally to

production. Similarly, it undermines the socio-economic insecurity of the individual that gives rise to, and exacerbates, aggressive anti-social economic competition and ethnic chauvinism which cause instability of the social order.

In fact, the bulk of the wealth of the rich in Nigeria is utilized for non-productive consumption enabling them to live in luxury at the level of ultra-modern standards. It is this pattern of life rather than state welfare programmes such as free education that reduces the funds available for economic development. It also creates a home market that is extremely unfavourable for economic growth. As a result of this constricted market and the protected foreign market, a considerable part of the local money resource finds no productive application and is, therefore, employed for land and other speculation, or is removed from circulation and hoarded within and outside the country. This is one of the deepest and most persistent causes of our economic malaise.

Thus, improving the condition of the working people through progressive welfare policies, and reducing the income of the rich may be frowned upon by the IMF, but they are not an obstacle to economic growth. On the contrary, they are among the indispensable prerequisites for stable economic progress in our country. Strengthened by a network of cooperatives capable of defending the interests of the ordinary primary producers and consumers from market anarchy and rapacious exploitation by traders, money lenders, and the foreign monopolies they are capable of making the lives of the masses livable.

In the political sphere the incentive the masses need most in order to realize their potential for progress is relief from the monstrous oppression arising from bureaucratic arrogance of both the public and private institutions. And to achieve this, the masses must constitute themselves into viable organizations that unite in politics, in one political movement. They must seize the initiative in politics, take the government off the hands of the rich, and prevent the officials and the army from rising to defend the rich. The people must take control of politics.

The involvement of the masses in the decision process of economic enterprises should take place through the instrumentality of a political movement of the poor which is motivated and directed by their interests, dominated and guided by their organizations, devoted to the implementation of progressive policies, and protected by an army that would have been transformed from an inherited colonial institution to a veritable people's defence force committed to progressive change. Thus, the masses must participate actively in the national tasks of our generation, serving at least to hold the fort against any attempt by the leaders to shrink back from achieving the patriotic goals.

Any regime that claims to be patriotic and progressive, or proclaims a genuine desire to help the nation out of its present socio-economic and political morass must cultivate and strengthen a viable permanent alliance with the masses and their economic and political organizations. It must devote a significant proportion of national resources to forming, where they do not exist, viable associations of the masses in the social, economic, political, and military fields. It must organize such popular forces as

cooperative societies of the poor and middle farmers, associations of artisans and motor mechanics, cooperative unions of petty traders, trade unions of blue collar workers and other workers on G1 01 – 05, national association of students, associations of revolutionary intellectuals, and cooperative societies of the unemployed. On the basis of these organizations, political committees, economic committees, and defense committees should be elected to learn from and teach the leaders as well as the people how to protect and promote patriotic and mass interests. Also, they will act as the instrument for the political education of the people, and their mobilization for the performance of the patriotic tasks of the nation. These committees will constitute the vanguard of the people's involvement in politics. As the consciousness of the people advance with each performance of these tasks a stage will be reached when a party of the people will become possible to coordinate the activities of these committees on a permanent institutional basis.

Of course, the reactionaries will cry «utopia». But what is their alternative, the reality? It is a life enriched with nothing. A ceaseless beat. Music. And cheers.

Problems are not explained. The People are demoralized.

The masses are not organized. The people are powerless.

The society has no guiding doctrine. The masses are confused.

The masses are not mobilized. The people are opportunistic.

The masses are disadvantaged. The people are alienated and hostile.

The leaders introduce changes. The masses suffer.

The leaders build palaces. The people wallow in squalor.

The masses are disoriented and exploited. The people refuse to work.

The masses are administered. The people cheer for the music.

And the beat goes on.