

***THE TROUBLE  
WITH NIGERIA***

*by*

**CHINUA ACHEBE**

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# **THE TROUBLE WITH NIGERIA**

*in memoriam*

Mallam Aminu Kano

and

Sir Louis Mbanefo

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Chinua Achebe's books which have been translated into more than thirty languages around the world have earned him international praise and recognition. He has received numerous honours, including eight doctorate degrees from Nigerian, British, American and Canadian universities.

He was the first Director of External Broadcasting (Voice of Nigeria ) in the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation.

He has been Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, U.S.A., and at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

In 1979 he received Nigeria's highest accolade for intellectual achievement: the Nigerian National Merit Award (NNMA), and the Order of the Federal Republic (OFR).

He is the Chairman of the Association of Nigerian Authors, and Founder/Editor of *Okike*, an African Journal of New Writing.

He was recently elected Deputy National President of the Peoples Redemption Party.

## PREFACE

his little book is dedicated to my children and their ge-mates throughout Nigeria whose future the gument is all about. The inspiration and the vigour ome from them; the weaknesses and flaws are ine.

I cannot thank my wife enough for her self-sacrificing care and support and, of particular importance in hazardous enterprises such as this, her unwavering good sense and critical intelligence.

To Arthur Nwankwo, Publisher, who asked for his book years ago, listed it in his catalogue, then waited patiently, only occasionally prodding delicately; to Mamman Vatsa whose kind but soldierly poem on my fiftieth birthday bluntly minded me of the unredeemed promise of a certain publisher's list; to Chinweizu, Francis Ellah, Felix di, Chieka Ifemesia, Ben Uzochukwu, John eziako, Emmanuel Obiechina, Uche hukwumerije, Ikenna Nzimiro - friends whose brilliant and humane application of intellect to problems of our day and society has clarified in print or in conversation many a woolly thought for me; to Vin & Bimpe Ike, C.C. & Ethel Momah, Aig Owoola Higo, J.P & Ebun Clark, Agu & Monica gan, Uche and Liz Osakwe; Emeka & Nkechi uchukwu; Sam Nwoye; Obiora & Ada dechukwu, for enduring friendships, more thanks are due than can be conveyed here.

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# 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 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 defiled 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 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 on 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

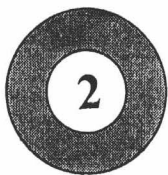
routine of small talk. No one can do much about the weather: we must accept it and live with or under it. But national bad habits are a different matter; we resign ourselves to them at our peril.

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, 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 over-staffed 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!



## 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 girlfriend 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 vagueness. 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*.

Every one 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 citizen, 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.





## 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 sometime speak about - a belief by backward people that someday without any exertion whatsoever on their own part, a fairy ship will dock in their