

A cry for my beloved country Nigeria

By Maigaskiya

It's amazing how you all sit there and watch yourselves die, the man next to him said. "Get up and do something about it. Brawny Walter, fully bald-headed, with intense, steely eyes, he was as cold as they come. When I first discovered, I was going to spend my New Year's Eve next to him on a non-stop JetBlue flight from Los Angeles to Boston, I was angst-ridden. I associate marble-shaven Caucasians with iconoclastic skin-heads, most of who are racist. My name is Walter, he extended his hand as soon as I settled in my seat. I told him mine with a precautious smile. Where are you from he asked Nigeria. Nigeria he exclaimed! Gowon, Murtala, Shagari, OBJ Yar'adua, Johnathan, PMB's country. Yes, I said.

But of course, he responded. You are soon going to elect your next president next year? My face lit up at the mention of next year's election. Walter smiled, and in those cold eyes I saw an amenable fellow, one of those American highbrows who shuttle between Africa and the U.S. "I spent some years in Nigeria," he continued. "I wined and dined with top Nigerians and many other highly intelligent Nigerians." He lowered his voice. "I was part of the IMF group that came to rip you guys off." He smirked. "Your government put me in a million-dollar mansion. I saw it all—the rich, the poor, the ailing, the dead, and the healthy."

"Are you still with the IMF, world bank, Paris club?" I asked are you with anyone of them? He said I have since moved to yet another group with similar intentions. In the next few months after election, my colleagues and I will be in Nigeria to hypnotize the government. I work for the broker that has acquired a chunk of your debt. Your government owes not the World Bank, but us millions of dollars. We'll be in Nigeria to offer your president a couple of millions and fly back with a check twenty times greater." No, you won't, I said. our president is incorruptible. He is ...

He was laughing. Says who? Give me an African president, just one, who has not fallen for the carrot and stick. Two of my Presidents name popped up. Oh, him, well, we never got to him because he turned down the IMF and the World Bank. It was perhaps the smartest thing for him to do. At midnight we were airborne. The captain wished us a Happy New Year and urged us to watch the fireworks across Los Angeles. Isn't that beautiful, Walter said looking down. From my middle seat, I took a glance and nodded admirably. That's white man's country, he said. We came here on Mayflower and turned red Indian land into a paradise and now the most powerful nation on earth. We discovered the bulb, and built this aircraft to fly us to pleasure resorts like Obudu ranch, Yankari game reserve, Olumo rock, etc. He curled his lips into a

smug smile.

You guys are as stagnant as the water in the lake. We come in with our large boats and fish your minerals and your wildlife and leave morsels—crumbs. That's your staple food, crumbs. That corn-meal you eat, that's crumbs, the small Tilapia fish is crumbs. We the Baturawas or oyinbos (whites) take the cat fish. I am the master and you are the servant. I get what I want and you get what you deserve, crumbs. That's what lazy people get — Nigerians, Africans, the entire Third World. The smile vanished from my face. I see you are getting pissed off, Walter said and lowered his voice. You are thinking this Bature is a racist. That's how most Nigerians respond when I tell them the truth. They go ballistic. Okay. Let's for a moment put our skin pigmentations, this black and white crap,

aside. Tell me, my friend, what is the difference between you and me?

There's no difference. Absolutely none, he exclaimed. Scientists in the Human Genome Project have proved that. It took them thirteen years to determine the complete sequence of the three billion DNA subunits. After they were all done it was clear that 99.9% nucleotide bases were exactly the same in you and me. We are the same people. All white, Asian, Latino, and black people on this aircraft are the same. I gladly nodded. And yet I feel superior, he smiled fatalistically.

Every white person on this plane feels superior to a black person. The white guy who picks up garbage, the homeless white trash on drugs, feels superior to you no matter his status or education. I can pick up a nincompoop from the New York streets, clean him up, and take him to Abuja and you all be crowding around him chanting is a Whiteman, American, American and yet he's a riffraff. Tell me why my angry friend.

For a moment I was wordless. Please don't blame it on slavery like the African Americans do or colonialism, or some psychological impact or some kind of stigmatization. And don't give me the brainwash poppycock. Give me a better answer. I was thinking. He continued. Excuse what I am about to say. Please do not take offense. I felt a slap of blood rush to my head and prepared for the worst.

You my friend flying with me and all your kind are lazy, (mentioned couple of months ago by one of our president) he said. When you rest your head on the pillow you don't dream big. You and other so-called African intellectuals are damn lazy, each one of you. It is you, and not those poor starving people, who are the reason Nigeria is in such a deplorable state. That's not a nice thing to say, I protested. He was implacable.



Oh yes, it is and I will say it again, you are lazy. Poor and uneducated Nigerians are the most hardworking people on earth. I saw them in Abuja, Lagos, Kaduna markets and on the street selling merchandise. I saw them in villages toiling away. I saw women in Abuja roads crushing stones for sell and I wept. I said to myself where are the Nigerian intellectuals? Are the Nigerian engineers so imperceptive they cannot invent a simple stone crusher, or a simple water filter to purify well water for those poor villagers? Are you telling me that after sixty-two years of independence your university schools of engineering have not produced a scientist or an engineer who can make simple small machines for mass use? What are the universities there for?"

I held my breath. Do you know where I found your intellectuals? They were in bars quaffing. They were at the Golf Clubs, beer parlors, partying on streets, mammy markets, hotels, etc. I saw with my own eyes a bunch of alcoholic graduates. Nigeria intellectuals work from eight to four and spend the evening drinking. The oyibos don't. We reserve the evening for brainstorming. He looked me in the eye. And you flying to Boston and all of you Nigerians in the Diaspora are just as lazy and apathetic to your country. You don't care about your country and yet your very own parents, brothers and sisters are in Sokoto, Birnin kebbi, Zaria, Kano, Maiduguri, Jos, Kaduna, Enugu, Ibadan Lagos, Calabar, P/court and in villages, all of them living in squalor. Many have died or are dying of neglect by you. They are dying of malaria, malnutrition, tuberculosis, AIDS because you cannot come up with your own cure. You are here calling yourselves graduates, researchers, scientists and are fast at articulating your credentials; once asked—oh, I have a PhD in this and that—PhD my foot!

I was deflated. Wake up you all he exclaimed, attracting the attention of nearby passengers. You should be busy lifting ideas, formulae, recipes, and diagrams from American, British, German, French, manufacturing factories and sending them to your own factories. All those dissertation papers you compile should be your country's treasure. Why do you think the Asians are a force to reckon with? They stole our ideas and turned them into their own. Look at Japan, China, India, just look at them. He paused. The oyinbo has spoken, he said and grinned. As long as you are dependent on my plane, I shall feel superior and you my friend shall remain inferior, how about that? The Chinese, Japanese, Indians, even Latinos are a notch better. You Nigerians/Africans are at the bottom of the totem pole. He tempered his voice. Get over this white skin syndrome and begin to feel confident. Become innovative and make your own stuff for god's sake. At 8 a.m. the plane touched down at Boston's Logan International Airport. Walter reached for my hand. I know I was too strong, but I don't give it a damn. I have been to Nigeria and have seen too much poverty. He pulled out a piece of paper and scribbled something. Here, read this. It was written by a friend. He had written only the title: Lords of Poverty.

Thunderstruck, I had a sinking feeling. I watched Walter walk through the airport doors to a waiting car. He had left a huge dust devil twirling in my mind, stirring up sad memories of home. I could see Nigeria's literati—the cognoscente, intelligentsia, academics, highbrows, and scholars in the places he had mentioned guzzling and talking irrelevancies. I remembered some who have since passed—how they got the highest grades in mathematics and the sciences and attained the highest education on the planet. They had been to Harvard, Oxford, Yale, Massachusetts Institute of

Technology (MIT), only to leave us with not a single invention or discovery. I knew some by name and club with them at hotels.

Walter is right. It is true that since independence we have failed to nurture creativity and collective orientations. We as a nation lack a workhorse mentality and have millions civil servants' dependent on governments pay cheque. We believe that development is generated 8-to-4 behind a desk wearing a tie with our degrees hanging on the wall. Such a working environment does not offer the opportunity for fellowship, the excitement of competition, and the spectacle of innovative rituals.

But the intelligentsia is not solely, or even mainly, to blame. The larger failure is due to political circumstances over which they have had little control. The past governments failed to create an environment of possibility that fosters camaraderie, rewards innovative ideas and encourages resilience. Majority of top government functionaries embraced unpractical orthodox ideas from colonialists and therefore failed to offer many opportunities for drawing outside the line. I believe our leaders reset has been cast in the same faculties of not knowing thinking out of the box as those of their predecessors. If today you tell your boss that we can build our own car, he would throw you out with statements like are you mad? Get out of here. Let's look for innovative leaders at local government, state and federal levels who have craved for technologically active-positive pursuits to lead the country or state for two terms. That way we can make our own stone crushers, water filters, water pumps, razor blades, and harvesters.

Let's dream big and make tractors, cars, and planes, OR like Walter said, forever remain inferior. A fundamental transformation of our country from what is essentially non-innovative to a strategic superior African country requires a bold risk-taking educated leader with a triumphalist attitude and we have one in YOU. Don't be highly strung and feel insulted by Walter. Take a moment and think about our country. Our journey from 1960 has been marked by tears. It has been an emotionally overwhelming experience. Each one of us has lost a loved one to poverty, hunger, crises and disease. The number of graves is catching up with the population. It's time to change our political culture. It's time for Nigerian intellectuals to cultivate an active-positive progressive movement that will change our lives forever. Don't be afraid or dispirited, rise to the challenges and salvage the remaining. Nigeria is the giant of Africa, so we must substitute our under development and lead by creative technological development. It can only happen when our politicians promote intellectual actualization of what the nation has acquired.

Our politicians and other Nigerians should challenge intellectuals to think out of the box and be creative to solve our numerous challenges. However, politicians should provide funds to promote research from diploma, basic degree, to doctorate levels. The reliance on skills from outside the country promote dependence. Does it mean we could not for example develop our own Primary health care theoretic base and establish a health care delivery system that talks to our needs and challenges using available skills and make continuing education an attraction to ensure academic excellence? Power is transient... Always Remember. All power belongs to God, the unchangeable Changer.

This article was penned by a Maigaskiya. He is a US-based Nigerian media practitioner and author. He is a PhD candidate with a B.A. in Mass Communication and Journalism, and an M.A. in History.