

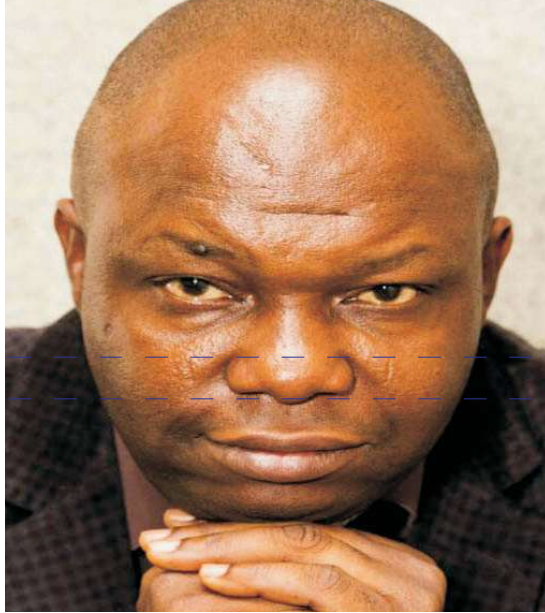
# Tinubu's certificate, open society and its enemies

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Who is the man who today sits atop the presidency of Nigeria? What is his name? Who are his parents? Who are his childhood friends? What was his childhood like? What primary school did he attend? Where did he attend secondary school? Or, the university? Is he a criminal? Is he a serial forger? On account of the above, can we trust him? Can he be trusted with the destinies of over 200 million Nigerians? Can the rest of the world trust him as the embodiment of Nigeria?

Last year, I wrote about the history of certificate forgeries and identity theft in Nigeria which is about a century old. In the 1940s, with the colonial government underscoring the essence of certificates, the ingenuity of Nigerians as fabulists, contortionists and fraudsters assumed frightening notoriety. On the social plane, one such character who the colonialists made an example of his academic fraudulence was a Prince Modupe, known also as Modupe Paris and David Modupe. Modupe lived in America under several fantastic disguises. In 1935, he claimed to have graduated from the Jesuit College, Oxford. When some Nigerians did an Atiku Abubakar inquisition into this fabulous claim, Oxford University denied having any name of such variant in its records. In March 1947, Modupe appeared in San Francisco, claiming that he was "His Royal Highness Prince Modupe of Dubrica." Seven months later, in the same San Francisco, he claimed that he was the "Crown Prince of Nigeria." His soul mate in confidence trickery was another Nigerian by the name of Prince Peter Eket Inyang Udo, who lived in America and Britain for about 17 years. The colonial government had him in its records for his dubious commercial claims.

At the political level, the highest in ranking among politicians of colonial and immediate post-colonial Nigeria who made dubious claims about their academic attainments was a man called Dr. Okechukwu Ikejiani. A strong member of the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) and a major acolyte of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Ikejiani was appointed by the Federal Government, of which Zik was president, as the Pro-Chancellor of the Ibadan University College. A visiting University of Toronto scholar was said to have raised issues with the Doctor of Science (DSc.) degree which Ikejiani flaunted. Ikejiani was later appointed chairman of the Nigerian Railways Corporation, an appointment which immediately erupted in chaos. Calls were made for Ikejiani's sack for misrepresentation of his attainment. While he was certified to have earned a medical degree as a



doctor from the University of Toronto, Ikejiani's claim to a DSc. degree was later found to have been false.

So many of such characters have lived and survived under false identities due to the Nigerian misconception that certificates define a man. Many of these rogues have been celebrated as national mascots, and today, it looks as though being a bona fide crook is a passport into and, indeed, one of the criteria of eligibility to Nigerian heroism. This fakery is also fueled by a conspiracy of silence in Nigeria. Many who fake certificates work in critical sectors and their fraud is known by many, without any whistleblowing, thereby enabling them to inflict their fraud on the people. They then continually harvest victims of their concocted identities in the process.

In Austrian, British philosopher, Karl Popper's Open society and its enemies, critical questions on the identities of our leaders appear as the oil that greases the engine of democracy. In the book, Popper made a strong defence of the open society which democracy represents and attacked its enemies who want a close society. Popper's book is regarded as one of the most important books of the 20th century and "an uncompromising defense of liberal democracy." In it, he argued that by not asking fundamental questions that help to reinforce free speech and good governance, we are abetting "the intellectual origins of totalitarianism."

So when Atiku Abubakar, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) candidate in the last Nigerian presidential election, approached an American court to mandate the Chicago State University (CSU) to release details of Nigeria's president, Bola Ahmed Tinubu's academic records, he was merely obeying the Popper injunctions and fulfilling the requirements of an open society. You may not like Atiku; he may not represent your ideal activist seeking purity in Nigeria's democratic space; you may even conveniently tag him a meddlesome interloper; he may be suffocating under the legal jargon where he is currently subsumed, as someone on a fishing expedition, but the truth is, Abubakar's courageous effort in approaching CSU for the truth will invariably lead to the strengthening of the health of Nigeria's democracy. And Atiku would not be the first, nor the last. It is forgers and identity thieves who should amend their ways.

When Yoruba elders take a deep breath and say, "Ogede nbaje, e l'o npon," they have taken a peep into their binoculars and sensed tragedy. "Ogede nbaje...", literally translated, is an impending rot in the banana/plantain that is selfishly interpreted as a fruit at the thick of ripening. In such circumstance, elders have seen otherwise good people attempting to excuse or rationalize evil.

They know that the end will not bode well for society. And the kingpins involved are otherwise respected and respectable. "Ogede nbaje..." is an aphorism where a binary view is made of an indisputably straightforward issue. If you see the banana/plantain as ripening when it is in fact rotten, you are in cahoots with the devil to disrupt existence. The wise-saying is an explanation of the calamity that lies ahead when society becomes victim in the hands of those who see the pleasure of today and not the challenge of tomorrow. In 1999, Nigerians were unanimous in seeing a rotten banana/plantain, rather than an inviting fruit. The country had just entered the current Fourth Republic. The Nigerian press was at the vanguard of that fight. It did not call the emerging rotten fruit of the banana/plantain a ripening beauty. The press called it by its real name. At the time, that press was still bursting at its seams with the residue of its activism against military dictatorship. The press seemed to have sworn to prevent impurity from having a place to hibernate in Nigeria's hard-earned democratic governance. That press fought against colonial government. So, in a cover story it did in February, 1999, TheNews magazine burst the bubble of Fourth Republic's maiden Speaker of Nigeria's House of Representatives, Salisu Buhari, a young man who epitomized the energy and verve of youth that was needed to kick-start the Nigerian democratic Turbo engine.

In the thick of the fanfare of return to democratic governance, on February 16, 1999, the magazine's investigative journalism revealed that Buhari was an identity thief. Born January 3, 1970, Buhari swore on oath that he was born in 1963. This he did to escape the provision of section 65(1) of the constitution. That law stipulated that anyone gunning for this office must be 30 years old. On his claim to have been an alumnus of the prestigious University of Toronto in Canada, TheNews put a lie to the claim. Not only didn't Buhari attend Toronto, he never attended any known university. The Speaker's claim to have observed the National Youth Service at a Standard Construction Company in Kano was also defoliated and found to be untrue. When confronted with these serial allegations of fraud, Buhari at first fumed, threatening to sue the magazine for libel. However, confronted with irrefutable evidence which showed that his shrew had escaped, with only peels of its tail left in his hands, on July 23, 1999, Buhari owned up to the binge of forgeries. Weeping profusely, he pleaded, "I apologize to you. I apologize to the nation. I apologize to my family and friends for all the distress I have caused them. I was misled in error by a zeal to serve the nation, I hope the nation will forgive me and give me the opportunity to serve again."

In tow, the press felled the big elephants of similar identity and certificate forgers in the room. Senate President Evan(s) Enwerem fell, having been alleged to have forged his identity. With the same vigour which completed a cycle of peering searchlights round the tripod of Nigeria, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, then governor of Lagos State, also got caught in the puddle. Tinubu, like Salisu Buhari, had multiple of allegations hanging on his neck, ranging from identity theft, forgeries to perjury. Three of the schools he swore on oath as having attended were found to be outright forgeries. From St. John's School, Aroloya; Government College, Ibadan to University of Chicago, the press effectively tar-brushed him.

About 23 years after the Nigerian press mounted that Olympian

height and became a pride of the profession for dismantling houses moulded with dross, its has become the case of the proverbial "Ogede nbaje..." For instance, Bayo Onanuga, Editor-in-Chief of that investigative journalism magazine, TheNews who spearheaded that brilliant Salisu Buhari revelation has today become enmeshed in that systemic rot, feeding even fatter than and becoming indistinguishable from the maggots in the Nigerian political sewers. In a tweet he did last Thursday on the recent inquisition into Tinubu's alleged forgeries, Onanuga said that any attempt at drilling into the president's certificates was "an infantile obsession" and "a display of utter desperation," as well as "a calculated attempt to shamelessly whip up public sentiments." The man whose medium reached out to Toronto to authenticate Salisu Buhari's certificate said a similar expedition today was a "purposeless judicial voyage," and a "needless negative exposure of Nigeria and the institution of the presidency in (a) foreign land." Was exposing Buhari's forgery a voyage different from today's Tinubu's? Salisu Buhari was Nigeria's number four when the press unclad him in the market square. By the time he woke up, cloths thrown at his Omoye was unable to save her as she had walked naked into the market square.

"Ogede nbaje..." Indeed, the Onanuga banana/plantain is already bringing out maggots. At its prime, a ripe banana lures all with its fair complexioned beauty. It is enticing and exciting. Everyone wishes to have a bite of it. However, the reality is that, at that ripening state, the banana/plantain is at its autumn. It is exhausting its glow and biding its time to enter the next state of disintegration. All of a sudden, that beautiful, inviting and captivating fruit begins to lose its colour and savour. Dark patches appear on its trunk, disfiguring the otherwise beauty that myopia or greed hid from the eyes a while ago. Tanning, sallow shades take over the fruit. The beautiful coat loses its drape and the tasteful fruit turns into a sour bite. Rottenness takes it over. In forecasting the unfavourable outcome that will ultimately be the lot of the ephemeral beauty of the banana/plantain, Yoruba elders use this allegory of the banana/plantain to warn against equating the luxuriant beauty of today with an enduring pride of tomorrow.

That courageous Nigerian press of 1999 which called politicians' banana/plantain a rotten fruit is today celebrating the same fruit's vanishing beauty. If you do a content analysis of the press' reportage of that shameful inquisition into Nigeria in Chicago last week, you would notice that the fruit has turned full throttle in its rot. Apart from courageous reports on the social media that belled the cat, the traditional press was like a cat that tucked its tail behind its bum. It was on sabbatical, either self-imposed or a result of huge financial compromise from serial forgers and identity thieves. The Atiku Abubakar voyage to Chicago in search of the true colour of Nigeria's president, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, has confirmed that Nigeria is in a more serious mess than she may think. When a people arrive at a straightforward road but assume it is an intersection where three footpaths meet, they provoke elders to see calamity ahead. How could anyone has imagined that a day would come when political convenience, ethnicity and willful desire not to rock the boat would make Nigerians moralize forgery? And debate whether underhand cyclostyling of a certificate was forgery or legitimate?