SHARING A COMMON HUMANITY

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So much has been said about unity and oneness and so much more would be said in the churches, mosques, shrines, newspapers, magazines, in far too many places and for far too long, yet discrimination and tribalism is continually on the rise. The depths of tribalism still persist from the mighty waters of Lagos Island to the hilly slopes of Markurdi. Favouritism thrives from the sandy tides of Owerri to the coastal regions of Niger Delta. So long as our relationship is defined by our differences, we will empower those who sow hatred rather than peace, those who promote conflict rather than the cooperation that can help all of our people achieve justice and prosperity. And this cycle of suspicion and discord must end.

We live in a nation that has been marred by tribal and religious prejudice. In virtually all communities and tribes, there are differences in culture, language and belief. An average Yoruba man ordinarily sees no reason why he can marry an Igbo girl; An Igbo man jettisons any opportunity of partnering with a Yoruba man in business; Hausa muslims and Yoruba muslims are in perpetual logger-heads; A catholic Christian sees no reason why he or she can abandon his/her faith on the altar of marriage, and the list is endless.

All these diversities are human creations imputed in our subconscious minds. It is absolutely true to state that at the point when we were born and even before we gained consciousness of which ethnic group or religion or doctrine or creed or society we belong to, we are human beings first of all and we are God’s children. It is time to seek a new beginning. One based on mutual interest and mutual respect, one based upon the truth that we are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, we overlap and share common principles of justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings. Now part of our conviction is rooted in our own individual experiences. We were founded upon the ideal that all are created equal and dedicated to a simple concept: *E pluribus unum “Out of many, one.”* We believe that Nigeria holds within her the truth that regardless of race, religion, or station in life, all of us share common aspirations to live in peace and security; to get an education and to work with dignity; to love our families, our communities, and our God. These things we share. This is the hope of all humanity. Of course, recognizing our common humanity is only the beginning of our task. Words alone cannot meet the needs of our people. These needs will be met only if we act boldly in the years ahead, and if we understand that the challenges we face are shared and our failure to meet them will hurt us all.

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All of us can attest to the wishes and aspirations of our founding fathers: Nnamdi Azikiwe, Ahmadu Bello, Obafemi Awolowo, etc – to live in a unified Nigeria as a nation of God’s own children. It is obvious today that the wind of tribal and ethnic prejudice has blown the common humanity that these people fought to keep away. It is indeed a lesson in shame that our parents are the main actors in instigating these forces that drives us apart. Obviously, they detest any move that would break the norms and traditions that have been passed unto them from their parents and grandparents. We conceive misguided thoughts about fellow Nigerians even before having personal dealings with them. A Nigerian from the Eastern extraction cannot freely elope, marry or date a lady he finds love in just because the lady in question is from Yoruba culture. The reason is not far-fetched, it is because our parents have created a misguided consciousness in us that married women suffer perpetually in Igbo land the moment they become widows. The truth is that these practices have ceased to exist over half a century years ago. It is this same reason that a Hausa muslim would see no reason for which his fellow country man should keep living just because he/she is a Christian. It is this same reason that a Yoruba lady prefers to marry from any other tribe apart from Ijebu or Igbo just because she perceives that the people from these places are stingy and maltreat their wives respectively. These assumptions can be seen in several aspects of life within our polity, from the ministries to schools, parastatals, promotion, politics, appointments, and elections, in far too many places and for far too long.

Nigeria is not the crude caricature of a nation at perpetual war. There are wars over land and wars over resources. And it is still far too easy for those without conscience to manipulate whole communities into fighting among faiths and tribes. These conflicts are a millstone around Nigeria’s neck. Now, we all have many identities -- of tribe and ethnicity. But defining oneself in opposition to someone who belongs to a different tribe, or who worships a different God, has no place in the 21st century. Nigeria’s diversity should be a source of strength, not a cause for division. We are all God’s children. We all share common aspirations -- to live in peace and security; to access education and opportunity; to love our families and our communities and our faith. That is our common humanity. It is the death sentence of a society to kill children and pregnant mothers in religious conflicts. All of us must strive for oneness which is a prerequisite if progress is to be achieved.

Almost 50 years ago, great Nigerian nationalists in whose symbolic shadows we stand today, signed the Independence pact, this pact came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Nigerians – Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Ibibio, Niger Delta etc and even those unborn. It came as a joyous daybreak to end our long night of colonial
bondage. When these architects of our Republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every Nigerian was to fall heir. This note was a promise to all Nigerians irrespective of tribe, sex and creed. A note which would guarantee all and sundry the opportunity of pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that the Nigerian populace have defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her tribal and religious sentiments are concerned. Nigerians have given us a bad cheque, a cheque which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds’.

But we refuse to believe that the Bank of Justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that the forces that drive us apart are firmer and more potent than our desire for religious and socio-political integration. And so, we have decided to cash this cheque, a cheque which would give us upon demand the riches of peaceful co-existence and economic growth. The world is what we make of it. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of tribalism to the sunlit path of socio-political and economic integration. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of tribal and religious bias to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice and peaceful co-existence a reality for all of God’s children.

When one tribe attacks another in violent conflict, the risk of insecurity rises for all tribes. When violent extremists operate in one stretch of mountains, people are endangered across an ocean. When innocents in Maiduguri and Jos are slaughtered, that is a stain on our collective conscience. That is what it means to share this world in the 21st century. That is the responsibility we have to one another as human beings. And this is a difficult responsibility to embrace. For human history has often been a record of nations and tribes and religions subjugating one another in pursuit of their own interests. Yet in this new age, such attitudes are self-defeating. Given our interdependence, any world order that elevates one tribe or group of people over another will inevitably fail. So whatever we think of the past, we must not be prisoners to it. Our problems must be dealt with through partnership; our progress must be shared.

The United States of America for instance has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. They were born out of revolution against an empire. They were founded upon the ideal that all men are created equal. And they have shed blood and struggled for centuries to give meaning to those words within their borders and around the world. The inhabitants of that country are drawn from all ends of the earth and yet they flourishing in the vast ocean of prosperity and economic growth. Their prosperity is neither premised on the heights
of their skyscrapers nor the strength of their military, nor their booming economy, it
is predicated on a singular premise that all men are born equal, and should have
equal opportunity to develop and excel irrespective of tribe, religion and creed.

We have a responsibility to join together on behalf of the world that we seek, a world
where tribalists no longer threaten our people; a world where governments serve
their citizens, and the rights of all God’s children are respected. Those are mutual
interests. That is the world we seek. But we can only achieve it together. There are so
many people who wonder if Nigeria can ever live in peace, unity and tranquillity
amidst cultural and religious diversity, some are eager to stoke the flames of
division, and to stand in the way of progress. Some suggest that it is not worth the
effort, that we are fated to disagree, and our unionism is doomed to crash. Many
more are simply sceptical that real change can occur. There is so much fear, so much
mistrust that has built up over the years. But if we choose to be bound by the past,
we will never move forward. And it is particularly important to let young people of
every faith, culture and in every religion in Nigeria to understand that more than
anyone; we have the ability to re-imagine the world, to re-make this world. All of us
share this world for a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that
time focused on what pushes us apart, or whether we commit ourselves to an effort
to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children, and to
respect the dignity and differences of all human beings instead of wallowing in
ethnocentrism. It is easier to start disunity and tribal conflicts than to end them. It is
easier to blame others than to look inward. It is easier to see what is different about
someone than to find the things we share. But we should choose the right path, not
just the easy path. There is one rule that lies at the heart of every religion, every
culture and every race, that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us.
This truth transcends tribes and languages; it is a belief that is not new; it is not
Yoruba, Efik, Igbo, nor Hausa; it is not Christian or Muslim or Atheismt. It is a belief
that pulsed in the cradle of civilization, and that belief still beats in the hearts of
billions of people around the world. All these things can only be done if we take
responsibility of our future to break the shackles of ethnocentrism and cultural
prejudice for the sake of love and the common humanity we share.