

BETWEEN NATION SPACE AND NATIONHOOD

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We all recall who first designated Nigeria a mere 'geographical expression' – none other than the Sage of Ikenne, the centennial of whose birth we are celebrating today - Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Many of our thinking compatriots understood exactly what he meant, and agreed. Others declared that this choice of expression, right or wrong, did give some serious food for thought, constituted a challenge to turn aspiration into reality. And yet others, some of whom understood only too well what he meant, took fright and went into a denial seizure, only generously described as ultra-nationalism: how dared this politician diminish the stature of 'our dear own fatherland', the 'giant of Africa' with such a reductionist phrase! He had questioned our 'sovereignty', never mind the realities that gave a fundamental dubiety to that presumptive ascription - nation. To accept the possibility that the space designated Nigeria had not yet attained nation reality meant hard work, a determination of mind and energy. It implied the exertion of intelligence, the bond of collective desire and the ethics of inclusion. A nation is brought into being through the political – and inclusive - will of its citizens, not through mere naming. I can name my dog Bill. Because some bipeds also bear the name of Bill does not make my dog a human being.

On my part, I have had cause to refer to the entity known as Nigeria as a nation space. It was, for me a convenient way of avoiding a pointless debate that would distract attention from whatever concerns I was engaged upon at the time. Quite simply, 'nation space' renders palpable the notion of Nigeria, advances it from mere representation from the printed atlas and places it on terra firma. We are all occupants of space, so we can jettison all fears that perhaps, in reality, we are a mere figment of the world's imagination. The entire world knows where to find us. When they do find us however, that is, when they explore the contents of that space, probe its interstices and enter both negatives and positives in the ledger sheets of national existence, what do they find? A nation? Or a mere inhabited slab of real estate with no cohering philosophy of reproducing our existence, of harmonizing co-existence, or

integrating the constituent parts into a discernable, functioning whole – all of which transform a mere nation space into true nationhood?

But perhaps, before proceeding further, we should align our minds with a few definitions, just to ensure that we are not thinking at cross-purposes. Certain terms, seemingly familiar to all, will come into use. They are ordinary enough but they carry different meanings to different users – terms such as ‘state’, ‘community’ and indeed ‘nation’ itself. Let me clarify the way I intend to deploy them, with a few illustrations, just to avoid all ambiguity. First, we should bear in mind that when I speak of nation, I intend nation with both a small letter ‘n’ and a capital ‘N’. To refer to the Ijaw, Ashanti or Serbian nation for instance, simply recognizes the fact that these terms are in current usage and remind us of certain historic claims. We should however conceive of such entities with the smaller ‘n’, since they have been superceded by a conglomerate now known as Nigeria, Ghana or Yugoslavia, all of which we shall now conveniently refer to as nations with a capital ‘N’. It does not imply that what passes for the Nigerian nation is more viable or more socio-politically grounded than any of its component small ‘n’ nationalities. The annual budget of the state of California, I am informed, exceeds that of the rest of the United States, but if I were to speak of the United States as being composed of a supposed California nationality plus others, I would still use the small ‘n’ for California. Fortunately California does not aspire to any such recognition, even though we should bear in mind that Puerto Rico still remains disunited over its loss of nationhood.

‘Community’ is another word that should be understood as being used with both small and capital ‘c’. We do not have to be Darwinians to accept that all organisms evolve in an upward hierarchical fashion – mind you I’m not really sure if humanity truly qualifies, from its record, as an improvement on the uni-cellular amoeba, but we must not get distracted. Let’s assume that homo sapiens is indeed at the apex of the living species. ‘Nation’, both as small and capital ‘N’ is considered a higher level of social organization of the community, or shall we simply say that, for reasons best known to human beings, communities aspire towards an upward rung of the ladder, nation, in the hierarchy of social organization. And this is where the ladder of upward mobility appears to break down, confronting us with certain paradoxes. I am

suggesting that community never completely loses its attractions as present reality and potential destination, so that we find today that nations actually struggle to return to that basic formulation, community, offering up negotiated portions of their national sovereignties as entry fee for admission. Thus, the European Community, formally known as the European Union. The French colonial power recognized the attraction of that broader group identity, one that appears closer to basic family, or clan bonds. They dangled it before their colonies as a desirable goal, even while reassuring them of their autonomy by conceding their right to continue to call themselves nations. That larger grouping should be read as Community with a capital 'C'. The British named their own Community the British Commonwealth, taking out the 'British' under rumblings of radical defection. No parliamentarians were invited from other parts of the Commonwealth to Westminster, unlike the French.

One after another, member nations began to cut even the loose apron strings by declaring themselves republics, freeing their judiciary from the British Privy Council, removing the Queen as the titular head of each member state, rubbing out her face from national stamps and national currencies, stripping her of the right to nominate a representative, called Governor-General, as a ceremonial head of state and her representative etc. etc. and, finally reducing Her Majesty to no more than a symbolic head of a loose organization of nominal equals. Furtively, the British smiled. They let the radicals have their say, even their way, but maintained *their* sway. The deed was already done: census figures had been cooked, pre-independence elections rigged – by the departing overlords - and their surrogates installed in power. Those who wish to *continue* to dispute this are invited to consult the massive compilation of de-classified papers - DOCUMENTS OF THE END OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE – published by the British government itself. Reinforcing that process, the internal primary community – the small 'c' constituent identities of member nations – Itsekiri, Ashanti, Igbo, Hausa, Ewe, Luo etc, were weakened, state strength consolidated, while Commonwealth/Community - capital 'Cs' - contented itself with the trappings of a moral force.

That brings us to 'state'. There is the state of Texas, and there is also Cross-River state. Kindly conceive these as states as being spoken of with a small 's'. When I refer to the 'State' as

the more powerful but thoroughly parasitic, non-productive organism that lords it over nation and community, it would be helpful to conceive of this as 'State' with a Capital 's', or else written in italics. The state, despite its impact on civil life, and its agencies - despite its military, police and even the legislature - exists in virtual reality, unlike community or nation which are palpable entities, and are the productive units of human organization. That theme will of course preoccupy our discourse, so, let us plunge headlong into the turbulent waters of nation being.

It is not so long since a group of individuals, exercised by a number of unresolved questions of Nigeria's existence, announced their intention to meet and deliberate on this very *problematique* and present their findings to the people. Not everyone came into this exercise with the same motivations, obviously, but all were concerned by the fact that the occupants of this nation space had never really met, in full freedom, to decide how to pursue the nation project, which obviously involves a formulation of the protocols of co-existence. They were motivated by the fact that, right from the convocations of the first-generation independence leaders in the Lancaster House encounters, to the last secretive exercise that resulted in what passes for today's Nigerian constitution, the truth is that the communities, the primary components of this nation space have never met, in total freedom, to decide those fundamental protocols. Each set of agreements has been mid-wived by supervening powers - the colonial, then the military, a cabalistic class that has proved every bit as alienated from the people upon whom they forced their rule, as were the master races of the Berlin conference.

Need I remind you of the response from the state? Peals of thunder rumbled out from Aso Rock, threatening incinerating lightning to follow, of which the only decipherable word was an absurdity that deserved to go into all record books: Treason! Was that surprising? It is the nature of the State, especially in its alienated condition, to find all actions on behalf of nation a treasonable act towards itself. The Inspector-General of Police, acting on orders, got into the act, warned that any such gathering, that is, any attempt by a free people to gather and discuss the protocols that would either turn them into, or confirm them as a nation, would be met with a violent response. Those who were involved in that effort, PRONACO, will recall that I was, until that point, no more than a moral, nominal member of PRONACO. The united opposition

to the Sanni Abacha dictatorship had already done its bit under the Abdusalami regime, commencing the process for re-constructing the post-Abacha nation on a more durable foundation - on the basic unit of communities. We convened a pre-PRONACO conference in Lagos - with the Abdusallami regime in two minds about whether or not to proscribe the event. In the end, wiser counsel prevailed and that encounter held – in Agege . Come PRONACO, I had not the time, energy, or inclination to expend on a more demanding exercise. My contribution was to have been nothing more than forwarding the findings of the pilot 1989 conference to PRONACO, assuring them of continued support. However, when matters took that menacing turn, a challenge by the State to the fundamental and democratic authority of the communal polity, it was clear that we all had to be physically present at the formative meeting, and so we were – Chief Anthony Enahoro, Beko Ransome-Kuti, Jadesola Akande, Dr. Fasehun, Asari Dokubo, Ahmed Yerimah and all, representatives from the length and breadth of the nation. The media, local and international were there in full force to witness the confrontation. In the end, the state decided to recognize its limitations, and let the nation pursue its mission.

Many have wondered what was the point of the PRONACO exercise, and some have declared it an exercise in futility. Several answers to that, but just one or two within the context of our theme, to remind ourselves that the nation question goes beyond its very existence but critically implicates the question: what nature of nation? Such voices failed to appreciate the necessity to contest every inch of ground between the state and the nation, using whatever weaponry is available and practicable. The right of free assemblage is only one of such grounds – an unconditional right - that must be tested and contested wherever it is threatened.

Let me recall to your minds the despicable police assault on women on a peaceful solidarity march with the bereaved mothers of schoolchildren, those who had lost their lives in the plane inferno on the Port Harcourt airstrip, a catastrophe whose responsibility, among others rested squarely at the feet of the state for its neglect, its failure at regulating the safety procedures of airline companies or maintain air-strips. These obscenities, even without the arrogant emasculation of that other arm of state – the judiciary – pointed to a project that had

resolved to contract even the state to a personal, sole, occupancy, and the inexorable motion towards a police state. It is only alertness to the fundamental entitlements of nation and community, backed by a combination of appropriate initiatives, that can stem the tide of state dictatorship.

Why does one find it necessary to evoke these details? Because we need to remind ourselves, again and again, that the state is **not** the nation. That the state is historically opposed to nation-becoming, even while spouting nationalist fervour. It will always act in its own interests, not in the interest of the nation entity. A nation space may qualify for a police state, including, increasingly, the theocratic kind, but it still is not a nation., least of all when temporarily appropriated by an individual whose credo of existence is - *L'état, c'est moi*.

Another reminder to the negativists is that the aspiring nation has to learn to be proactive, to anticipate what measures the state might embark upon as deflative measures from the increased self-awareness, legitimate interests and entitlements of the nation. Out of the exercise of PRONACO emerged, not only a document, but a methodology, providing a model for future deliberations of this nature. Not for a moment did PRONACO claim that it had set out to pronounce the last word. On the contrary, it constantly stressed that its goal was to craft a draft document to be presented to the nation, a document whose very existence would challenge the imposition of false documentations of nation desire, and would, by contrast, provide an accurate mirror of the public will.

The methodology – please pay close attention to this – the methodology offers a viable model of societal advance towards nation formation, involving, as it did, the itemization and representation of an unprecedented number of ethnic nationalities within the Nation, one that provided one of the two principal vectors in the national grid-work, on which representation was based. The other vector was Civil Society organizations. I cannot stress this composition too strongly - the meticulous commitment to community representation – so let no one imagine, through ignorance, or lack of imagination, that all possibilities of the democratic process have been exhausted. It remains an instructive proceeding in the fashioning of

democratic strategies for inclusivity. Considering that this was a voluntary, permanently cash-strapped exercise, involving personal sacrifices high and low, this, let it be admitted, constituted a first in the numerous efforts at self-determination within this nation space and beyond.

Need I add that the organic integrity of this process spurred the state into emulative efforts – one, clearly dishonest and opportunistic, the other – well, we await the results. The first was the charade mounted by the then arrow-head of state who quickly convened something it named Constitutional Reforms. If only even that reductive effort to undermine the mobilizing potential of the PRONACO undertaking were sincere! It was not, however, as the entire nation quickly came to recognize. That incumbent arrow-head merely saw an opportunity to prolong his long-nurtured – as revelations have affirmed – long harboured plot against the nation – yes, it was on that head that the real charge of treason should be laid, that waste of a nation's resources to subvert the constitution even as it stood, Does anyone really need to be told that, had that ploy succeeded, it would have installed that aspirant as a Life incumbent of the presidential throne. This nation had a narrow escape, and the principled opponents deserve to be nationally honoured. But for them, most especially those hard-core *refusenik* legislators, we would today have been plunged into a Zimbabwean scenario, where a power-drunk individual has successfully subsumed firstly the nation of Zimbabwe under the state, then the state under his own nationally repudiated persona.

Yes, indeed Zimbabwe, the nation where in the midst of hunger, poverty, and an epidemic that has consumed hundreds of children, an octogenarian squanders millions on the celebration of his 85th birthday. The expenditure, state megaphones respond to the rage of critics, was made up of voluntary contributions by adoring citizens, those very citizens who had been bulldozed from their squalid homes, and even the affluent who had been silenced and sidelined from the task of nation-building. We know all about that kind of voluntary contribution. The monument to that miracle of voluntarism rides high in my home town, Abeokuta, a moral eyesore that will go down in history as the first - and hopefully only - Presidential Laundromat, since that was where the national summitry of money-laundering

and extortionist chicanery was monumentalized. So we know just how far the culture of 'voluntary contributions' can go, to what depths of depravity it can sink. The last word has not been spoken, I assure you, about that insult to the intelligence of this nation, never mind how many institutional figureheads are bribed or hoodwinked into lending it legitimacy,

Back to the Grand Treasonable Felony, as decreed by the state which, by its very nature rejects those constitutive questions that continue to preoccupy some of us, questions such as 'Why is the nation?' 'For whom does nation exist?' 'On whose behalf is the nation project pursued and sustained? The conveners and participants at the Berlin conference of 1881 were in no doubt as to the answers. They were at least honest. Nations – these new nations that they decreed into being, by divine fiat, with synthetic identities - were no more than spatial configurations designed to facilitate administrative control and resource exploitation. Far too many of the national leaders of our continent have pursued the same objectives as their answer, indifferent to the creative demands of the questions that surround the nation project. Nations do not exist as mere abstractions. A nation is a material implantation, and the building block of that growth is the human entity. The proof of this is both historic and scientific.

What, we may ask, is the difference between the Valley of Storms on the planetary surface of Mars and the nation space known as Burkina Faso or the Congo? Why, on discovering some new heavenly body, do we not refer to it as the Jupiter or the Martian nation? Answer – none of these heavenly bodies is peopled. None consists of any social organization. None lays claim to any productive processes. And even if life were found on any - let us fantasize and say that a kind of Jurassic Park, filled with weird animal life were found on Jupiter - it still would not be designated 'nation' by our imaginary planetary explorers. No, a nation becomes one only when occupied, organised and worked by sentient beings. Maybe such requirements will change with discoveries of different forms of life, endowed with even more intelligence than the homo sapiens we know on terrestrial habitation. We cannot say. Maybe those who believe in Paradise, Hell or Purgatory, peopled by angels in one zone, by devils in another, and the Awaiting Trial in the third will propose that we add the nations of Paradise, Hell and Purgatory onto the school atlas – all of that is within the realms of projection. On this present earth

however, in the here and now, the primary unit of the nation that exists is the human entity – and living ones, not ancestors or ghosts. Future is a constant on the minds of all but limited minds, but even the future depends on the viability of the present, and that present is right here, within these walls where the constancy of electric power, breathable air, and potable water is not guaranteed, despite which the quality air we breathe in this hall is the very ambrosia of existence compared to the air that millions of others breathe. Thus to the question, ‘for whom is the nation project pursued or sustained?’ there can be only one answer – the human entity.

The contest between state and nation is an ancient one, and for a simple reason – the interests of state and nation seldom coincide. On the contrary, we find that both are constantly at loggerheads with each other. Do not be fooled by appearances, exceptions or political punditry - even the legislatures that are voted in, in the most ideal circumstances, by popular mandate, cease thereby to be part of the nation. Once elected, they assume their functions as arms of State. That they come in conflict with the executive arm of state is nothing strange – there is always a tussle for supremacy even within the internal arrangements of robbery syndicates, each trying to bloody the nose of the other. Consider the Nigerian instance – if the legislatures were – exceptionally – an analogue of the nation, not part and parcel of the state, their first task would have been to throw that dishonest bequest of a self-perpetuating, chameleonic militarized State – the constitution - back to the people, and ascertain the true national voice and will. Other tests abound, all related to the place of self-interest that an anti-nation document had bestowed upon them, including the preposterous chunk of the national budget that they swallow under different headings – obscene and people contemptuous allowances for waking, belching, yawning, spitting, swallowing and even breathing – for the honour of being an apparatus of state. The enemies of true nationhood are multiple and thus, the will to nation-being remains a constant challenge. It is the nature and consistency of that challenge that often narrates the true histories of peoples anywhere, and through the ages.

Dictatorships – and under that rubric I include all forms of authoritarianisms, both secular and theocratic – are of course the crudest form of State expression. The State looms larger than life under dictatorships, while nationhood diminishes progressively. Reluctant as I

am to grant him credit, objectively however, this is one of the reasons why Colonel Qaddafi, the Libyan ruler, presents one such an enigmatic, but ultimately instructive case-study. Here is a dictator who, even while wielding unlimited power over the citizens of that nation space, remains troubled by the contradictions of his very political existence. He qualifies as someone who nurses a vision of the withering away of the state, constantly seeking ways to whittle away at that agent of nation usurpation and re-establish the nation as the ultimate destination of the modern community of peoples. He appears to recognize intuitively that the state is an aberration, not evidence of social progression. Of course he is more impetuous than methodical, more authoritarian than democratic. You could even add that he is more fumbling than methodological. It is one thing to create a Jamahariya - as expression of nation will as opposed to state dictation, but as long as the state is embodied in the person of an individual, the evident extract is a contradiction within contradiction.

Still, the gesture itself, giving more direct voice to the people, provides evidence of some troubled thinking along these lines, manifests a readiness to challenge the givens of orthodox governance. It is in that context that his most recent gesture – to distribute his nation’s oil wealth directly to the people - can be understood. The wealth is the nation’s – that is, the people’s - to begin with, and what Qaddafi has attempted to do is restore that wealth where it actually belongs. There are other methods, more efficacious, and more scientific, as has been pointed out by some of his own people. Nonetheless, the lesson is there for all to read, the message that all resources and property within any nation space belong primarily, and indisputably to the people. The State appropriates those resources, ostensibly in order to manage them on behalf of the people. In reality however, it is primarily to sustain itself, a non-productive mutation of nationhood that is entirely parasitic and, to add insult to injury, deploys those very resources for the – often brutal – suppression of nation will.

From the self-arrogating claims of state, let us move to consider a more modest component, and primary begetter of Nation, that more familiar entity that we know as – community. Unlike the State, and even nation, it is to be doubted that any placement of community in the process of social formation will attract a contentious reaction. Community is an entity we all recognize, a word we constantly use. It is one of those expressions that

sometimes defy precision, yet we all can identify it and relate to its existence. It is both abstract and palpable. While 'nation' is finite, bounded – even though it occasionally expands through conquest, fusion, or accident, community remains permanently fluid in the sense that it is not regulated by physical boundaries. Next to the discrete entity of the human persona, community is perhaps the next candidate in the hierarchy of the building blocks of nation. Yet, it remains a rather unstable quantity, since it is not subject to the mechanics of nation arrangement. If – as is extremely likely – a tiny population of Nigerians were found in Uzbekistan or at the very end of the south pole, they would be referred to as the Nigerian community, and validly. Community exists both within a nation entity as its natural home, or becomes embedded as a kind of parasitic growth, hopefully benign, to various degrees integrated within a foreign body. Such a community would manifest distinctive features that would be near identical with similar communities in other host bodies, however geographically separated: example - the Yoruba community in faraway Brazil or Cuba.

With its natural homes - that is, home as in 'nation space' - the Yoruba community, or nation, would cognize itself as such, possibly linking up with other Yoruba in Benin, Ghana, Togo, Ivory Coast, all the way to Brazil, Cuba or Jamaica, to interact, in a non-structured fashion, as a wider Yoruba Community, interchangeable as an expression with a Greater Yoruba Nation. Awolowo would never describe community as a mere geographical expression. This fluidity, this borderless or trans-border reality of existence makes nonsense of the Berlin-style demarcation of boundaries wherever on the globe, with the additional charge of interrupting the possibility of far more homogenous nations emerging in the first place. This places us on guard with its reminder of artificial constructs, paraded as progress and modernity, in reality mongrel, hybridized patchworks of arbitrarily amalgamated communities. When they fracture at the seams, we witness the commencement of border clashes, often escalating into outright civil wars. We are not speaking of the African continent in isolation. China continues to wrestle with the restlessness of nation-communities. Yugoslavia offers us one of the most horrendous instances, and only more recently, Russia's brutal intervention in Georgia, on behalf of her 'communities' located in the latter 'nation'.

The Soviet Union in its heydays could be described as a mega-nation of structural, centralized fakery. While the United Nations Organisation had no choice to accept them as independent nationalities, its members, both East and West recognized quite clearly that they were fictional nation entities, anything but independent nations. Even as unit states, they were little more than local governments. The Soviet Union commandeered their resources, needed in its drive to become a world power, then commandeered their votes at division time in the United Nations. It was a game everyone understood. The United States must have regretted that it hadn't thought of it earlier or, in its eagerness to be seen as one nation, had failed to recognize the disadvantages at voting time. The only solution was to cultivate its own 'spheres of influence', kept in line through threats, bribes or deals.

Perhaps the French best understood the game, hence the French choice of elevating its designation of overseas holdings from 'departments' of France to national entities. After the de Gaulle referendum, the departments on the African continent - those who voted 'Yes' that is - were upgraded to the status of nations, conditionally independent. The grandiloquent gesture of offering them all their independence meant that they were still, in effect, entitled to French citizenship, could send deputies to the Assemblée Nationale, and endure French troops permanently stationed on their territories. Could we truly call these nations at the time? No. They were not creations of nation will but a substitution of the francophone sector of the Berlin family of nations with the French Family of Nations – the Communauté Française. The French Communauté provides us yet another twist to the designation of 'community' in our attempt to identify some basic characteristics of the emergence of nation from communities – or indeed the capital 'N' Nation from nations – as self-managing units of human groupings, immune from relegation as mere geographical expressions. Did leadership within these spaces truly aspire to create nations in their time, or were the leaders simply content to subsume nation under state? The state was easy enough to establish, that is, once the transfer of the machinery of control and management was transferred. So what we witnessed in the formula of the de Gaulle referendum was nothing more than the re-configuration of the nation space within the 'State', and that 'state' was not even internal, but exocentrically French.

Now, what of the exception, the one which said “No”? The late Sekou Toure, you may remember, was the outstanding abstainer at the inaugural banquet of the French Community. For this, he was lionized all over the African world as the radical flag-bearer of the francophone sector of African nationalism, a soul-mate of Kwame Nkrumah. Now, those who truly wish to understand how peoples attain nation-being should study the Guinean instance most carefully. De Gaulle was miffed – just as the Belgians were when Patrice Lumumba opted for immediate independence from Belgian Congo. Right from the handing-over ceremony, on that very open-air podium where one flag was lowered and the other raised – Lumumba berated the Belgians for their inhuman colonial policies in unmistakable language, saying to them, literally, ‘Thanks for nothing.’ He shocked the Belgian dignitaries into silence, then rage. Congo Kinshasa has continued to pay the price for that straight-talking, which was no grandstanding, but a bitterly truthful articulation of past colonial horrors and a resolve to build a real nation right from scratch. Lumumba was never given a chance to fulfill such dreams. Sekou Toure was in a similar position, but de Gaulle was a different mould from the Belgians – well, at least, proportionately, though not much qualitatively different in cast of mind. In any case, the world had moved on since Lumumba’s time, and Algeria was a reminder of how far the powers could go in ‘teaching’ their uppity colonies a lesson. In keeping with the pledge of Sekou Toure’s ‘No’ to Charles de Gaulle’s ultimatum, the latter provided him with a tabula rasa – a literally clean slate - of nation space on which to construct his ideal nation. You want independence, de Gaulle, virtually said, well, you shall have it. In grand Belgian style, the departing French colonials were ordered to pull out everything – staff, desks, telephone wires, flush toilets....everything right down to the last paper clip, and leave Sekou Toure with nothing. Sekou Toure shrugged, signed up with the Soviet bloc for the restoration of infrastructure and commercial relations.

The question is, did Sekou Toure thereby proceed to build a nation? Well, we know that, with the aid of the Soviets, he also did establish a state. That was his priority. Did the Guineans object? A few did. They discerned what was going on, discerned that an opportunity was being lost, that the pledge of ‘Non’ to France was implicit with a ‘Yes’ for the establishment of a

genuine nation. Mostly however, the Guineans, as were most of the Third World, were head-over-heels with euphoria. The reinforcement of the state at the expense of the nation was accepted as a necessary price for the containment and defeat of the anti-nationalists – the colonial powers and their “stooges, revisionists, reactionaries, compradors, capitalist running dogs” and all other favourite epithets in the vocabulary of radicalism. And so, they acquiesced in the sacrifice of the nation and its intellectual and creative forces. They remained largely indifferent to the submission of the entire nation to a rival global force, the anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, revolutionary flag-bearers. They were kept at a distance from the expropriation of the nation’s resources by the self-declared champions of the down-trodden. A nation-builder was at work, and dissent was unpatriotic. Thus, the putative nation was built on disappearances, torture chambers, including the notorious electric box – the very kind of nation that Sanni Abacha, attempted, decades later, to replicate on Nigerian soil. Neither the Guineans nor the continent could however ignore the incarceration of the first Secretary-General of the African Union, Diallo Telli, and his eventual miserable death in one of Sekou Toure’s prison cells. The flight of creative and intellectual forces – the foremost resources of any nation – was predictable – some to neighbouring Senegal, a few to the Antilles, most of them to the bosom of the former colonial master, France. The nation project was aborted – visit the post-colonial history of Guinea-Conakry from then till now and decide for yourselves whether it was the nation-in-waiting, or metropolitan France that enjoyed the last laugh.

Now, we have already identified community as the forerunner of nationhood, a self-evident truth, since community is the most rudimentary unit of social organisation, and – from the experience of humanity till now – an eternal one. One of the ways by which embedded communities are judged in any society has always been in the degree and quality of their integration. The issue of integration, a litmus test of self-confident nationhood, is one which, today, confronts many European nations as an urgent reality, one that, rather belatedly, they find themselves compelled address in a structured fashion. African nations need not beat their breast over this, however, or attempt any holier-than-thou approach to what has become a global issue. Right in this nation, we cannot forget the shameful treatment of Ghanaians under

the presidency of Shehu Shagari when that incontinent government chose to make them scapegoats for its bankrupt policies. The very expression 'Ghana-Must-go' bags came from that untidy exodus, when every form of container had to be commandeered to hold their belongings as they struggled to beat the inhuman deadline that had been declared for their departure. It was of course – let this be also admitted – a return play for a like treatment of Nigerians under the government of Professor Busia. Both events still rankle in the minds of the migrant entities on either side, hard working, law-abiding individuals on whom the bolt fell from a clear sky. They bore the brunt of the failed economic policies of our politicians, and the criminality of artificial boundaries between the authentic communities of peoples.

There is no need to go after other instances – Nigerians being notoriously adventurous, it is no surprise that they tend to be first line of fire in these calculated bouts of xenophobia that overtake governments, often gleefully aided, alas, by the local citizenry, but I imagine that nothing in the histories of these nation spaces of the African continent quite beats the horror of the yet ongoing orgy of migrant cleansing unleashed on Mozambiquan and Zimbabwean refugees within South Africa. Several have been openly murdered by 'nationalistic' mobs, in the confidence of impunity, some of them by the notorious method of 'necklacing' – placing a tyre around the neck of the victims and setting them on fire. I watched a television coverage, filmed during and directly after a spate of such killings. One of the assailants, interviewed, had no regrets whatsoever and indeed promised the same treatment for any of 'them' who still remained within South African borders after some indeterminate deadline set by him and his killer squads. 'What do they want here?' he queried. "Let them all go back and face their problems in their own countries'.

This, in my view, represents the tragedy of nation on the continent – one of its most depressing facets. Nation forgets its antecedents – that is, community as the cell from which nation is cultured. Nowhere is the banal dimension of such self-betrayal felt more keenly than in nation spaces that we have referred to, most accurately, as mere 'geographical expressions', spaces whose 'nationhood' was dictated by external forces, acting with unabashed arrogance in their own interest. Let us take note of the internal contradictions that surface daily in the

imposition and maintenance of nation status everywhere, and review our facile notion that community is nothing more than a primitive state of social formulation, asking ourselves instead the following question: given the high maintenance cost – and not merely of material but of human lives within these ‘nations’, given the fact that the nations that bequeathed the nation ideal to their colonial possessions have themselves begun to embark on new formations that progressively jettison some of the nation claims, claims that once brought them repeatedly into violent conflicts with one another.....and so on and on, could it be perhaps that the world – and the African continent in particular - is overdue for a review of the nation concept and its substitution of a more humanized unit, one, that is, that actually pursues the line of the withering of the state in favour of Community of the capital ‘C’?

What we are witnessing today, in short, is a return to first principles, but at a higher level of evolution. The contrast with Colonel Ghadaffi’s project is that the latter believes that the first principle, at the same rudimentary level, is perfectly in order, and that the sooner the usurping intruder called state is eliminated, the earlier humanity will find itself, be true to itself, and in the only way that brooks no argument – a return to the rule of the organic beginnings of Community. Despite his admittedly untidy, troubled, but intuitive methodology, I find myself in more than mere sympathy. A return to first principles may prove more beneficial to the primary unit – the human entity and its community – than our present efforts to shore up a construct that only ends up being gobbled up by, and subservient to that most rapacious and unproductive outsider – the state. Others have nursed allied projections in the past. Kwame Nkrumah’s proposition of a United States of Africa – if only its unit component had been based on primary nation-communities – in short, leading to a dissolution of the colonial States - might have proved durable, but in reality his was a vision of the mega-State. Thomas Sankara, on a more modest scale, came closer to the ideal. Informing his revolutionary policies was a clearly defined vision of reducing the gap between state and nation until the parts became as close to indistinguishable as possible – not eliminating the nation in favour of the state but making the one functionally complement the other.

Yes, I know, we shall not want for cries of ‘populism’, plain, primitive ‘populism’. Even ‘anarchism’, since the ultimate aim is to eliminate the monstrosity of government. My answer would be not to waste a moment contesting the pejorative view but to ask instead just where the practice of state supremacy has landed us. What has it cost the world – not just the African continent? To ask what are the factors that have led to the dysfunction of a number of so-called nations – most notably Somalia, where even the state vanished as a functional entity. And even as Somalia is attempting to pull out of those decades of her unenvied distinction as the *primus inter pares* of all ‘mere geographical expressions’, the Congo appears poised to keep it company or perhaps, simply take its place. Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia, Sierra Leone – all have taken their turns in collapsing the nation around the state, only to have the state itself disintegrate, leaving the nation prostrate for the pickings by outsiders, vigilante squads and marauding killer units, until rescued, in the end, principally by outsiders. The notion of the nation as it exists today, from both external and internal examples, appear to have been a stage that should have been bypassed – at least theoretically. Is nationhood then completely obsolete? Are we looking for a higher order of social organization? Is this perhaps the vision that lies behind motions that result in a European Union?

While we ponder that possibility, let us at least recognize that for now, even the most rudimentary nation claim can only be sustained by protocols of association fashioned by its constituent elements which are its identified nation groupings. Yes, no matter by what method a nation space comes to regard itself, or be regarded as a nation, its nation-being becomes viable only by its constitutive protocols, even if such protocols are articulated after the event. This seems self-evident, judging by the constant effort to write and re-write a constitution for the nation, sometimes in all sincerity, other times merely as a time-gaining device for the consolidation of the state. Keep the fools busy, the state says, while we consolidate. Or, as the master-stroke, the time-saving device – simply by-pass the nation. Those who doubt that this last was the post-Abacha strategy, secretly fashioned during the transitional state of General Abdulsalami, must surely have seen the light the moment that elections, that ritual ordination of State, were called before the people had a chance to view, much less debate the protocols of

the new nation being. A people were corralled into standing elections, voting and being voted for, without having so much as glimpsed the so-called constitution. The putative nation was treated with utter contempt, and a chance lost to raise a new nation on the ashes of the past.

Something is askew, and that something may be due to our beginning, to our antecedents. There is a palpable falsity about our existence, one whose bottom has fallen out, a falsity at whose doors can be laid the intermittent eruptions of a devastating nature, one that has left us questioning – just what are we? To make matters worse, there are highly motivated individuals who treasure that falsity, who exploit it, manipulate it, form alliances of self-interest that fool the committed entities in society, who pander to the basest, the most atavistic and primitive instincts of the unconscionable, who have the interest only of their individual selves, or else their quite numerically insignificant but well organized band of manipulators. Yes, it is from such individuals and groups that we hear, loudest of all, those time-worn, meaningless jargons of ‘national sovereignty’, ‘territorial integrity’ plus extended versions in sabre-rattling forms – ‘the sacred mandate of our incumbency is that the unity of this nation be not compromised.’ Please, what unity? Just who undermines the unity? Who are those that systematically, religiously undermine the putative unity of the nation space? No, not those who gather to re-examine the protocols of association. It is those who prevent such gatherings, those who attempt to circumvent it with their own reductionist proceedings. It is those who, like the proverbial poison rodent known in my part of the world as *asin* – breathe soothing air on the spot from which they are about to, or have just taken a chunk of your flesh.

Let no one misunderstand, from the attention we have given to the protocols of co-existence, that this alone is the route to nationhood. Constitution is only a part of the story. Sometimes there are events, even of a fortuitous nature, such as a concerted resistance to external aggression and domination, that can forge such organic bonds of common identity, survival and internal consolidation, that the nation space becomes, virtually overnight, a nation. An election, in very special circumstance, can prove such a catalyzing agency. On June 12, 1983, this nation space did have a chance to claim the beginnings of nation-being. Would we have emerged effectively as a nation? I am no prophet and have no interest in hindsight. I insist

however that the nation claim did stand a chance of embarking on the route to affirmation. A democratic election, let me repeat again and again, is only one of the several means – as witness the very special case of post-apartheid South Africa. Most nations we know of on this continent cannot even boast of one defining moment, a moment when the possibility of nation actualization was handed to them. Our chance came to us on June 12 1983, and we blew it. We? No. I do not believe in undeserved guilt. The insincerity, indeed hypocritical, double-talk and matching conduct of a handful of individuals, their abuse of the trust of the people, scattered the hopes of that moment of nation-becoming. A candidate – may I please remind you? – won a mandate across the national landscape, unambiguously defeating his opponent. That contest was universally adjudged to be impeccably fair. The aspirant to the mantle of state subdued his opponent even in that opponent's most intimate constituency – his local ward. Now let anyone tell me that this did not resound like the starting-pistol of a nation race, a marathon of course, not a sprint, but a leap forward from the starting-block after so many false starts, several of them deliberately planned and cynically executed.

The overseer of that debacle, General Ibrahim Babangida, then embodiment of the state, has finally opened up and conceded the undeniable – that election was true, and a victor emerged. History has taken note of his confessions and History sits in judgment, no matter what excuses are invoked by him. None is acceptable, least of all the totally incongruous plea that, as the then Head of State, he feared that that nation enterprise would be aborted by a military coup. I find that plea an afterthought, and unconscionable. His loss of nerve - if that is what it was indeed – constituted a gross act of governance dereliction at a crucial moment. There were consequences. There were casualties. Some of this I have recounted in my memoirs, *YOU MUST SET FORTH AT DAWN*. Homes and businesses were destroyed. Nigerians perished. I do not speak from records, since I was a witness, fortuitously embroiled in those days of nation wrath and state terror. My calling is not that of a soldier, so I do not deal in bloodless statistics. I concern myself with sacrifice, especially needless, avoidable sacrifice. Those who instigate sacrifice through failure of their mandate must also understand that

survivors will demand of them more than mere and belated acknowledgement of Truth. Ambition is no substitute for contrition.

Now, that event unleashed, in short space, the degradation of nation and affirmed the illegitimacy of state. We shall not belabor the aftermath, only remind ourselves that we did imagine what followed was the ultimate. We screamed at the world for help and acted within our means to terminate the nightmare. How wrong we were – that is, to have imagined that we had survived the worst possible affliction of nightmares. Along came a successor, and then, people like me who deal in words were left bereft of ammunition – we had expended it all on what we thought was the very end of the nation antithesis, the state as ego, as a solipsistic aberration, filled with all the criminalities that we associate with power gone berserk – I refer to the evil reign of Sanni Abacha. We will not permit this nation to forget the further years of sacrifice and loss that it underwent.

And then, guess what? Along came the Messiah who had trumpeted to the nation at the time of the sabotage of June 12, that the nation choice was not the awaited Messiah. A new round of nation expropriation and disintegration followed in his wake. Again, this is no place to itemize his crimes against the nation. We know the state, being protective of its own, will never put him on trial, and therein lies the lesson that we must impart to ourselves: where, as so often happens, the state fails in its primary responsibilities even towards itself, the nation must pick up the slack and rescue both. We have proclaimed our intention, and are putting in place the mechanisms to put that Master of Hypocrisy on trial. There comes a point when the nation says: the state is dead; let the nation act.

Given recent events, I cannot end without mentioning, albeit briefly, the increasing reactionary role of the Religious factor. Religion is one enemy of potential nationhood that requires, not just a separate address of its own, but a full week, even a month of seminars, lectures, expositions, artistic events, films and documentaries - but all of a frank, even brutally frank nature, since the intervention of religion in nation being has been of the most savage, unconscionable, and increasingly intolerant kind. No other word for it but butchery, waste and

devastation. We cannot continue pretending that, as long as any one religion aspires to dictatorship in secular matters, we can call ourselves a nation. A theocratic order is anathema to nation-being, since it implicates exclusion, not inclusion. Only the secular order embraces all. To Religion all its deserving – spaces of privacy, protection, and cultural identity. Any religious following can evoke parallel but opposing sets of protocols, citing the authority of some unseen and unknowable god in realms that have no perceptible contact with the actual. Religion must therefore submit to community, to nation, otherwise co-existence becomes impossible and the human entity reverts to a state of brutishness.

And thus, finally, the question: is Nigeria a nation today? My answer is - Not yet. Is Nigeria aspiring to be a nation? The answer - Unsure. Can it? Possibly. Should it? My answer to that is absolutely non-sentimental, purely technical and subjective : I prefer not to have to apply for yet another visa when I need to travel to Enugu or Borno. If it is any consolation – let us simply remember – we are not alone in this predicament. So, for now, we may continue to sleep, dream, open our eyes at dawn on the recurring vision of nationhood on the horizon, hopefully not receding, indeed, almost close to touch, requiring only the complete surrender of hegemonic dreams, the ethos of inclusivity, the recognition of religious privacy, community primacy, and the manifested will of the authentic landowners of – a designated nation space.

Wole Soyinka