

The Case of the Clichéd Black Kettle and Pot

Who is more likely to be respected in your average Nigerian community—the teacher that has worked tirelessly and managed to build a small bungalow after saving for 15 years, or the minister that has built two mansions in the same community with embezzled money that is a subject of open discussion? That’s not all; his fame broadens when his mansions can also be sighted in Paris, London and Potomac. Of course dubious leaders must take extensive blame for Nigeria’s numerous problems. But the larger culprits are complicit Nigerians who talk from both sides of our mouths and lambaste “government” only when we are not beneficiaries of its widespread debauchery. Sometimes we do not necessarily gain in any big material way, but are determined to justify and support the villain as long we come from the same ethnic group.

There is so much robust talk, for instance, about the damage done to Nigeria by former military governments. But the story is often slanted and fails to acknowledge the extensive employment of civilians that were all too happy to participate in the highhandedness and excesses of the military. In fact, many civilians would never attain the grand social and economic statuses they currently enjoy if they hadn’t shared the plunder with military friends and relatives. These ones are not likely to be resentful of military dictators. In any case, what is so different about a shady civilian “democracy” and military dictatorship aside from outfit and procedure?

Undeniably, we honor and revere the colorful thieves amongst us. This is partly because, consciously or subconsciously, we envisage a time when we will be like them and enjoy the wealth and perks that they enjoy. Hiding behind a computer and false image on Facebook, we abuse them and pray for their destruction and summon the wrath of the Holy Spirit upon their entire families. But in their presence we cheer their entry as they arrive a meeting two hours late, and sing their praises with a string of tributes that we gladly repeat if given the opportunity to ask a question or make a comment. When they visit our communities we award them chieftaincy titles. When they visit our universities we adorn them with honorary PhDs. When they visit our churches we give them front row seats and call on them to give the opening and closing prayers. Even the one touted as the vilest of them all—Sani Abacha—went to his grave decorated with national awards while the streets named after him are yet to be renamed.

We honor our VIP crooks and ex-military dictators and, at the same time, wonder why they don't change or why the culture of valiantly stealing from the nation is thriving and seemingly unstoppable. Since being a glitzy thief is such commendable and profitable business, why aspire to be anything else?

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