

A Stand for Nigerian Unity: The Inconsistencies

Touting Unity

When I read from or listen to the hypocrisy of those who malign the audacity of Biafra, and who must alternatively delineate themselves as crusaders for unity, I am not sure whether to laugh, cry or simply shake my head. While their high-sounding call for unity is increasingly brazen, it is also their slanted regional and ethnic leanings that drive them to deride any reference to the Biafran tragedy.

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Most of the talk and write-ups in favor of Nigerian unity share a common thread—an absence of the basis and ingredients for unity. Have these ever been fully established or even deliberated on? The start of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil war (50 years ago) was recently revisited in Abuja in what was arguably the most prominent assembly to gather for that purpose. That it would take 50 years to show significant concern for a tragedy that resulted in the loss of over two million lives within a space of two and half years is not

a compelling reason for me to excitedly embrace a doctrine of unity. I am not rejecting unity; it is a noble philosophy; but certain factors determine its plausibility. The 50-year commemoration did not establish a sincere desire for unity; instead, it confirmed the dispensability and insignificance of certain Nigerian lives. Why did it have to take so long, other than demonstrate a vaguely concealed fact: to many who were not victims of the war, the lives that were destroyed are inconsequential.

There is something blatantly disingenuous about people who claim a desire to unite with those whose lives they evidently hold in such low regard. For 50 years and counting, the Nigerian media, government and even educational institutions have paid minimal attention to this issue, making its victims feel quite worthless. As a Yoruba friend and history graduate told me recently, she is conversant with World Wars I and II, the Vietnam War, the American Civil War and the Wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), etc., but knows little or nothing about the civil war that happened in her backyard. When we try to suppress a tragedy because we weren't its primary victims; when we essentially wish away the desecrated lives of innocent men, women and children because they were not from our regions or ethnic groups, our proclamation of a desire to unite with such people is little more than cheap and illusive, even if political grandstanding.

Vice President Yemi Osinbajo on Biafra

I have listened to Vice President Osinbajo's speech at the colloquium on Biafra and commend him for being articulate in expressing his views. One of the weaknesses of his delivery, however, is his failure to establish a compelling case for unity. Unity cannot be forced, no matter how nicely we package it! Justice precedes peace and peace precedes unity. Justice embodies a range of values, otherwise it is unattainable—respect, understanding and appreciation. Attaining justice also means confronting past injustices.

Our culture of showcasing certain lives as sacred while delineating others as worthless and disposable is hardly the path to unity. We cannot unite if our lives are not equally valued, especially if an institutional culprit is involved, which is different from, say, being mugged by a thief. A pattern is recognizable in this regard, and not only at ethnic or regional levels, but also at individual and familial levels. The assault on the Kuti family by “unknown soldiers” at “Kalakuta Republic” in Lagos in 1977, which resulted in the death of one of Nigeria’s preeminent heroines, Mrs. Funmilayo Kuti, continues to reek of institutional duplicity. Monuments should be built to Mrs. Kuti, who organized thousands of women to successfully challenge excessive colonial policies in 1946. She was the first Nigerian woman to become a school principal and, in 1953, was the only female member of the Nigerian delegation to the Constitutional Conference in London, which negotiated the country’s independence. After 51 years, when will the murderers of General Ironsi and Colonel Fajuyi be held accountable? When will we receive justice and closure vis-à-vis the assassinations of journalist Dele Giwa in 1986 and Attorney General Bola Ige in 2001? The pain suffered by the families and loved ones of these victims can only be imagined, but one thing is clear; they will forever feel betrayed by their country and will find it hard to trust any of its self-righteous calls for unity.

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On a larger ethnic and regional scale, the desecration of human life is compounded and has far-reaching disruptive consequences. This is where Osinbajo, as a leader and a champion for unity, should have offered a reassuring statement, especially in response to the growing number of individuals and groups calling for secession. Instead, he snidely refers to them as “some [that] are suggesting that we must go back to the ethnic nationalities from which Nigeria was formed.” (Formed by who and with whose permission?) Coming from a top official, I recommend a more diplomatic approach, regardless of how extreme these individuals may be viewed. They are fellow citizens with the right to express themselves within the context of our democratic system and should not be silenced, belittled, punished, victimized or simple discarded as “some” people.

If indeed we are the democracy that we tout ourselves to be, then there should be room for the extensive expression of our different views. Such civility would probably be a good step in convincing pro-separationists that we are sincere about uniting with them. When the ones that we truly love and want to bond with (our children, brothers, sisters, parents, friends, etc.) are troubled by anything, what do we do? Condemn or penalize them? No, we reach out to them! With the pro-Biafran agitators, I believe this is possible. Whatever we consider their flaws, they

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have not come with the savagery and rancor of the likes of Boko Haram for whom there have been suggestions of holding discussions. We even negotiate with the scandalous Abacha family in hopes that it will return some of the millions (billions?) that it stole from us.

So, while it is fashionable to denounce and attempt to silence those who champion the Biafra movement, any well-meaning and sincere agent of unity, particularly those in leadership

positions, would at least listen to their grievances. But very few, if any, are prepared to afford them the opportunity to relay their concerns in an atmosphere devoid of blame and accusation. Incessant hostile reactions to their campaigns merely confirm their fears of exclusion, and to continue to respond to them with rage and denunciation is a grave mistake.

On unity in diversity

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I've heard a lot about how Nigerian ethnic groups were interconnected culturally and commercially prior to colonialism. True, but let's not stop there. Let's also go deeper into the nature of their interactions and remind ourselves that such interactions were based on choice and not on a forceful admixture carried out by a self-seeking colonial power. Let's also remind ourselves that even as the Ibibios and Igbos, for instance, liaised culturally and through trade, they also maintained their administrative

autonomies. Under the circumstance, it is unlikely that the Igbos would have built a refinery on their lands and forcefully drained oil from Ibibioland.

Finally, a lot has also been said about many nations being able to achieve cohesion despite their cultural and racial diversities. Vice President Osinbajo makes the point in his talk, citing countries like Italy, Spain, Belgium, the United Kingdom and the United States as examples of such countries. At this point in our history we should have learned that just because it works with someone else doesn't mean it will automatically work with us. We don't possess the same historical, cultural, spiritual and managerial values as these other nations and should therefore not assume that imitating them would proffer a practical solution. We should also do our homework and research the measures that were put in place to ensure unity in these nations. Above all, we should also not be quick to define these nations as being united even if they may give that impression. The United States, for instance, is not "united." And if we must commend the attainment of unity by some culturally diverse nations, we must also consider those instances where unity was not feasible and where breakup was the result. The former Soviet Union is a good example here, while India-Pakistan, Ethiopia-Eritrea, North-South Sudan and Senegal-Gambia are other instances where splits would be elected over a merger or confederacy.

So, while I agree with the vice president that "we are greater together than apart," our togetherness does not hinge on the success stories of integration in other countries, but on our willingness to determine and nurture the fundamentals of unity as they apply to our unique history and cultural peculiarities, as well as a willingness to enforce the principles of equity and equal value for human life across ethnic and status lines. The latter will also require a sincere desire to understand and appreciate one another, and to reexamine outstanding cases of institutional injustices at familial, regional and ethnic levels. As said earlier, I'm all for unity, but this is unachievable without

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first consolidating the ingredients of unity, which must be preceded by justice for all and subsequent peace! Otherwise, we'll be trying to fly without having first crawled!!

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