

Predator & Prey, Heroes Alike

Confusion is a terrible thing. To be confused and function effectively do not go hand in hand. In my dear country, Nigeria, it is not necessary to look for confusion in grand governmental policies designed to manage hundreds of ethnic groups under one administrative system. There are more basic instances of confusion that are as glaring as they are puzzling. Consider, for instance, the standards by which the murderer and the murdered have had streets named after them. Take a quick tour of Abuja, our Federal Capital Territory, and you will see how this phenomenon plays out. During the July 1966 coup, General T.Y. Danjuma (then Major) oversaw the murder of General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi. Isn't there something curiously unsettling about the fact that both men have streets named after them in our capital city? If Danjuma's murder of Ironsi was justifiable, then a street shouldn't be named after Ironsi. If it wasn't justifiable, then a street shouldn't be named after Danjuma. But naming streets after both men is something of a tasteless farce. A similar paradox exists in the naming of streets after the coup plotter and the deposed. Also in Abuja, you will find highways labelled in honor of Ibrahim Babangida and Muhammadu Buhari. General Babangida dethroned General Buhari in a 1985 coup.

Now, let's look a little further. Specifically, let's look at our Council of State. Frankly speaking, I don't know what this body has ever achieved. This, of course, doesn't mean that it hasn't achieved anything; it just means that I don't know what they are and perhaps need to be enlightened. But I do know that the Council is supposed to advise the executive on development centered policies. I also know that its membership is huge and, among others, comprises all former presidents and heads of state, whether they were voted in or imposed themselves on us. One can only imagine the amount of money spent on the upkeep of this group, especially since there's something suspect about its inclusion of ex-military rulers. General Gowon is a member of the group. So is General Obasanjo who became Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters (second only to the head of state) following the Murtala Muhammed coup of 1975 that ousted him (Gowon). Obasanjo wasn't the leader of that coup, but he was one of its significant, trusted supporters, which is why he was appointed number two man after its execution. There's more. Obasanjo's administration also implicated Gowon in the botched 1976 coup that resulted in Muhammed's murder and requested, though unsuccessfully, that the former head of state be extradited to Nigeria from Britain, his new home, to answer the charges. What are the chances that Obasanjo can sincerely work as a reliable partner with Gowon, the man that he helped to overthrow? What are the chances that

he can see eye to eye with the man that his government charged as accessory to treason and murder?

The plot thickens. Babangida did not only topple Buhari; he detained him for approximately three years following the takeover. Looking at their history, are we to believe that both men are genuine allies in the Council of State? That's not all. Alhaji Shehu Shagari is also a member of the body and each time they meet and deliberate on whatever they deliberate on, he has to encounter Buhari and Babangida, both of whom participated in his overthrow. With the amount of masked antagonism that must be circulating amongst these members of the Council, what is it that they could possibly achieve in the interest of the nation? General Abacha, who many Nigerians claim to hate with a passion because they cite him as the evilest of all evil leaders, would have been a member of the body if he were alive. We have to be thankful that he is not alive; otherwise, the aura of resentment and ill-feeling in the Council would be even more sweeping and intense. After all, he participated in the overthrow of Shagari, Buhari and Chief Ernest Shonekan, and at some point detained Obasanjo and the late General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua. Imagine if Shehu Yar'Adua's younger brother, Umaru Yar'Adua, who later became president, didn't die. Imagine, also, if Abacha didn't die. Umaru Yar'Adua would be serving on the Council alongside the man responsible for his brother's death. What we have here is a warped system that simultaneously celebrates villain and hero, bloodied hunter and mutilated quarry.

This tradition of honoring both predator and prey, as absurd as it is, is symbolic of a larger problem of inventing sacred individuals who will never have to answer for their atrocities. One way or the other, we will find a way to excuse their duplicity even as we rant against them (usually behind their backs and on social media with fake identities). It is an outright, barefaced insult to the Nigerian people that their tax-funded Council of State is partially populated, not just by criminal ex-dictators, but by individuals whose veiled bitterness towards one another cannot generate anything that would augur well for national development. But rather than confront this fact, we prefer to turn a blind eye to the ambiguity. After all, if these deodorized and rather flashy outlaws do not belong to our families, ethnicities or circle of friends, they possess the influence and wealth to redirect our personal material lives. We therefore cannot afford to offend them.