

Nigeria at the Crossroads: Religion, Education, and Nation-Building

I deeply appreciate the invitation you extended to me to address this august audience. It is not in my character to reject such an invitation from my people. I congratulate the founding leaders of this University, the Council, the Vice Chancellor, Senate, and Faculty. Most importantly, I congratulate our students for their accomplishments and the parents for raising such bright young minds. Thank you for the financial sacrifice you have made to see your students through higher education. My talk will focus on the ways the Nigerian populace, both citizens and their leaders, can begin to approach nation-building through a focus on religion and education. I believe that those of us who have benefited generously from our nation's educational resources, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, when the independent nation was willing to invest in education, need to give something back. The concept of "giving and showing gratitude" has its roots in our various religious practices of tithing, *zakat* and moral sacrifice. The beneficiaries of the nation's investment in education have the obligation to see the education they received as a form of patrimony, an inheritance for which an appropriate responsive attitude is gratitude to the nation. Gratitude is not just a psychological attitude, but a rich concept rooted in religious tradition, which arises out of the understanding that the relationship between the giver (the nation) and the recipient (past graduates of our educational institutions) is a moral relationship. One can argue that the present decay in our national life is partly due to the failure of our national elite, politicians and others, to understand their relationship to the nation in this moral organic sense. Religion is central to the lives and social values of Nigerians. Therefore, we should respond to the needs of our nation and help develop the educational, social, political, and

cultural systems of our country. If there is a time that we need to rise to these challenges, it is now.

I hope to fulfill my own tithes to the Nigerian nation by beginning this conversation on the ways in which religion and education can assist with nation-building in Nigeria. My position as a professor and representative of the premier institution for an education centered on religious pluralism, the Harvard Divinity School, affords me a unique perspective on these issues. The Divinity School was the first school established at Harvard and has since cultivated a faculty and student body committed to public service and education based on core community values found in all the world's religious traditions. We should develop such socially conscious religious institutions in Nigeria, and I hope we can benefit from the recent conversations between Harvard faculty and the Nigerian Delegation on Education concerning educational reform in our great country. I am convinced that while we are giving God his due, we should also endeavor to collectively give our tithes to our native land. As former American president, John F. Kennedy said, "we should not ask what our country can do for us, but what we can do for our country."

The Nigerian government appears to have lost all credibility as an agent of law and order. But even in this difficult situation, it is important to move forward, to stand on high moral ground, for the sake of our nation's future. All of us must recognize the central role we are called to play in the restructuring of Nigeria, and in the current democratization process. I have had the benefit of seeing how democracy can work in America. America is not necessarily a perfect democracy and I myself wonder at times if the U.S.A. has the moral authority to preach about the virtues of democracy to other nations. But when all is said and done, the U.S. is a nation where the basic rights of individuals are fairly respected. It is a nation where patriotism

thrives and where the words of the national anthem are not just recited but internalized. So we have a lot to borrow from the United States' experiment in nation-building.

The writers of the Nigerian modern constitution deliberately chose the American presidential system over the failed parliamentary system that was put in place in 1960. It was the recognition of American pluralism (cultural, religious, and social) that propelled government leaders to adopt the presidential system of democracy. This plurality also characterizes Nigeria, a nation of about 250 diverse ethnic groups. What the American system ensures is that although the center of government is strong, it doesn't stifle local or regional development or the different strata of identity. One of our main concerns in the Nigerian case is that while we have borrowed some of these lofty ideals, the way and manner they are practiced is very different. Nigerians need to go back to the spirit of our constitution to remind ourselves why the ideals of equality, justice and peaceful co-existence were adopted in the first place.

My second comment relates to the role of youths in the development of Nigeria. Currently, the majority of Nigerian youth no longer believe in themselves, nor in the nation that gave birth to them and rightly so. Uncontrolled unemployment and lopsided educational and social policies have resulted in the devaluation of the quality of life, culture and self worth. For example, unemployment has led to serious social crisis, armed robbery, religious violence, political thuggery, total insecurity of lives and property, and cultism in our institutions of learning. The increasing rate of corruption throughout all cadres of local, state and national levels of our governments and even in the private sector reveals that things are getting out of hand. This troubling, and seemingly hopeless, situation continues to suggest that Nigeria can no longer function meaningfully and productively. We should keep in mind that anticorruption bureaus such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt

Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) came about as a response to the lack of the effectiveness of the Nigerian Police. Even the judiciary and the free press, the last hopes of the common citizen, are tainted. Despite all efforts to improve its image by changing its name and uniform, constant change in its leadership and review of their salary, the Nigerian police appear not to be forthcoming. It is the case of the proverbial “leopard that cannot change its color.” The populace has stopped believing in the Nigerian government’s ability to keep and enforce law and order. It is untenable for Nigerians to think that they are hopeless, or that there is nothing they can do to fight injustice and corruption.

The solution, I believe, is clear. Nigerians must continue to emphasize the political, social, religious, and economic benefits of pluralism. The current dispensation that resembles a single-party state allows no healthy competition and productive rivalry among our talented and diverse people. As a result, development and progress are stifled. On both the national and state levels funds meant for social development and education are lost to the greed of government officials. It is a well known fact that once resources are allocated and sent to local and state governments, the first order of business is to distribute these funds to corrupt individuals. In order to avoid this crisis in administration, Nigerians must adopt a sound value system which places emphasis on the sharing of resources in order to promote common welfare. The notion of allocating funds equally for the benefit of society finds its basis in the religious practices of tithing and *zakat* described earlier. Therefore, it is important to focus on the central role of religious practice and ideology in the nation-building process.

In deciphering the status of religion in our present discussion, permit me to explore the relationship between what a Nigerian writer, Peter Ekeh, called the primordial public and the civic public. My aim is to relate these two publics to the national crisis of corruption and lack of

discipline. Here, I am primarily concerned with how religion manifests itself in our civil society and how it can be useful in the project of nation-building. Its influence extends to governance, democratization, and the political crises of our time. It affects issues plaguing the environment, healthcare, medical treatment, sexuality, education, and youth culture.

In his seminal article, “Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement,”¹ Peter Ekeh argues that the *primordial public* and the *civic public* exemplify two separate and conflicting epochs of African historical life. The former authenticates its cultural context while the latter emerged and developed out of colonial political structures. *Primordial public* refers to a realm in which “primordial groupings, ties, and sentiments influence and determine the individual’s public behavior. [...It is] moral and operates on the same moral imperatives as the private realm.”² In contrast, the *Civic public* is “amoral and lacks the generalized moral imperatives operative in the private realm and in the primordial public.”³ The author further defines the civic public as a “realm which has become identified with popular politics in post-colonial Africa. It is based on civil structures: the military, the civil service, the police, etc.”⁴ This model characterizes the modern public in contemporary African nations, including Nigeria. By placing emphasis on the primordial public based on traditional values, I believe we as a nation can transform the amorality Ekeh identifies in the civic public. Key to this transformation is the adoption of social welfare principles inherent in our religious traditions.

¹ Peter Ekeh, “Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17, no. 1 (1975): 91-112.

² *Ibid.*, 92.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

The crisis of corruption in Nigeria's public life requires that we re-examine the role of religion and morality in that realm. All available statistics indicate that public profession of faith has increased tremendously in Africa, with new churches and mosques springing up weekly everywhere. Furthermore, the already large numbers of Christians and Muslims going on pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Mecca respectively continue to double yearly. But conversion to Islam and Christianity, and an increase in public professions of spirituality, seem not to have succeeded in structuring public life and citizens' obligations to their community. Why are so many Nigerian civil servants who have taken oaths of office on the Bible or the Quran still involved in corruption? We can assume that unlike the ancestors and gods of the primordial public, who are strict guardians of morality and who quickly address 'sins' committed against the community, the gods of the new public are invisible and silent, suspending judgment of the sinner until the next world. Although it is impossible to completely return to the state of the primordial public, it is clear that we Africans need a new social ethic derived from both indigenous faiths and the new faiths Africans have taken pains to convert to.

In the Nigerian context, religion and public life are intimately intertwined. Public ethics, value systems, and political and economic structures combine as national concerns, and are rationalized and viewed with the same urgency as religious faith. We strive to understand the Nigerian adoption and use of the scriptures as a resource for constructing a theology that can guide us in our day-to-day life—encompassing the construction of ritual practices and sacred narratives as well as moral and ethical ideologies. For Nigerians, religion is a way of life, not just a collection of doctrines, documents, and belief systems.

Ideally, living according to scriptures is an everyday affair. Opportunities for interaction with religious traditions are available throughout political, economic and cultural realms. But we

must ask to what extent have these scriptural traditions influenced the public sector? Has religious tradition been a contradictory force to oppressive government? What role has it played in the democratization of Nigeria? I argue that religious traditions play a crucial role in the organizing of Nigerian civil society. Civil society refers to organized groups at any level, able to redistribute resources and social services while operating without direct affiliation to the state. As part of this civil society, religious institutions have a fundamental advantage, since they inherently contain sources of legitimacy, truth, and authority independent of the state. Because of this, the churches and mosques may act as catalysts for opposition, reform, and resistance by advocating for social change in adherence to their faith traditions. In the face of national conflicts and violence, religious institutions provide much-needed sources of social assistance and mediation, mitigating the effects of chronic conflict.

All three of Nigeria's religious traditions should be involved in the construction of public life, particularly in the building of the nation and national identity. Indeed, in Nigeria, indigenous faith traditions help to construct a collective identity, bridging the gaps between distinctive religious affiliations and ethnic traditions. Nigeria's triple religious heritage of Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religion has helped to develop relationships among various ethnic cultures that are rooted in common myths, rituals, and symbols. Much of the religious intolerance that exists today between Christianity and Islam comes from the balkanization of African religious experiences. In the process of nation-building indigenous religions were delegitimized as the emerging nationalistic focus emphasized rationality, modernity, and secularism. Traditional society's acceptance of and tolerance for multiple faiths vanished. Instead, the "modern" nationalistic political culture fought to declare its preference for one monotheistic faith over another. Individuals and intellectual Christians responded to the ensuing

conflicts over political control and economic dominance by holding fast to biblical faith, while their Muslim antagonists invoked Islam as a way of life and the Qu'ran as the most perfect source of revelation and as a guide for daily living.

Religion and nation-building

Religion is often seen as the cause of violence and instability in Nigeria as the country's Northern and Southern regions are equally divided along religious fault lines. However, the Southwestern religious demographic makes this simple geographical division more complex. There are two schools of thought about the issue of religion and conflict in Nigeria. The first school asserts that religious conflict is a political, economic, and social phenomenon. In this view, the root of Nigeria's problems lie in its power struggles, not in religion itself. As Iheanyi Enwerem (1995) writes, religion, like any other ideology can function as either "a place or a tool."⁵ As a place, religion is a battle ground for power struggle, and whoever wins the battle can use the land for his own interest. As a tool, "religion becomes a means to an end."⁶ Enwerem argues that in Nigeria, this has both an economic dimension and a socio-political foundation. Politicians and leaders may capitalize on religious discourse to advance specific political agendas, creating a monopoly on social thought and economic systems.

The second school of thought sees religious conflict as a problem of religion qua religion. Our notion of religion as Nigerians and Africans tends towards a puritanist ideal that sees

⁵Enwerem, Iheanyi. *A Dangerous Awakening: the Politicalization of Religion in Nigeria*. (Ibadan: IFRA, 1995), 202.

⁶ Ibid., 202

religion as an objectification of the sacred. We always tend to look at religion as sacred, not as secular or profane. Religion is never seen as a critical, human, social and cultural phenomenon. Beyond this purely academic exercise of understanding the intersection of religion and society is the larger question of nation-building. We cannot solve the Nigerian crisis if we do not look at the full picture. The crisis of religion is not different from the crises that we see in other sectors such as education, energy, health, and law and order. In its intensity, unpredictability, and violence, religion is more daunting than these other crises. Furthermore, it is no secret that Nigerian political leaders have almost total impunity for mass corruption and sponsoring political violence. The sordid activities of security forces are largely unaddressed by government authorities despite the fact that the police are implicated in numerous killings of people in custody. If you remember, on July 30th, 2009 police in Maiduguri shamelessly murdered the Boko Haram leader Mohammed Yusuf while he was in police custody. Human Rights Watch reports that, the following day, Mr. Yusuf's father-in-law and a former government official were also killed in police custody. Not only do Nigeria's politicians turn a blind eye to this malconduct of security forces but they continue to manipulate ethnic and religious tensions to advance personal political agendas.⁷

I would argue that while religion is implicated in Nigeria's problems, it can also be seen as a solution to these problems if approached carefully. Nigeria badly needs visionary leadership that could galvanize the nation around a central ideology propelling change and development. In a sense, what we need is a national orientation that recognizes or creates an invisible national faith or, to use the language of religion, a form of civil religion. This religion would provide an

⁷ Human Rights Watch, *World Report Nigeria - 2010*

overarching sacred space for political and social action. Civil religion, if I may explain, is understood by sociologist Robert Bellah, as the sacred principle and central anchor without which societies cannot function. Civil religion is the incorporation of common myths, values and symbols that relate to a society's sense of collective identity. It is this common sensibility and ethos that is absent from the concept of nation-building in Nigerian society today. Responses to development in the country are ad-hoc fire brigade-like interventions and we are in desperate need of a leader that can galvanize the nation to a more positive reorientation, national purpose and goals. What our leaders should not fail to do is to take the bull of the nation by its horns and prosecute bold and far-reaching innovative programs that would bring Nigeria to great heights. Leaders must be imaginative and creative.

Some African leaders including Julius Nyerere had the right attitude to governance and nation building. By promoting the unifying ideology of *ujamaa* in the 1967 Arusha Declaration, Nyerere demonstrated the potential for citizens of the nation of Tanzania to galvanize around one, indigenous ideology. The pronoun of *ujamaa*, *mjamaa*, was coined to represent the model citizen. Every Tanzanian was expected to aspire to the status of *mjamaa*. The *mjamaa* was expected to follow closely the principles of *ujamaa*, adherence to this ideology was essential to the nation building process. According to Laurenti Magesa, this quasi-socialist process sought economic transformation by promoting a keen sense of national consciousness, converting exclusionary mentalities to one national consciousness based on the principles of “equality and dignity, justice and peace.”⁸ The aim was to develop a Tanzanian culture, which would pull together the best aspects of the country's indigenous belief systems such as the ethics of

⁸ Laurenti Magesa, “Nyerere on Ujamaa and Christianity as Transforming Forces in Society” in *Religion and Poverty: Pan African Perspectives*, ed. Peter J. Paris (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 257.

brotherhood and communal cooperation in realizing a better society. Initially, this scheme garnered significant success, committing to economic development and Tanzanian national control, equality, a participatory democracy and free and compulsory education for all Tanzanians.⁹ This movement resonated with Tanzanians because it rejected the colonial legacy and adopted an African intellectual identity.

Tanzania managed to use indigenous culture and social values to galvanize people around the goal of nation-building. Its example suggests that pride in one's indigenous heritage does not represent a step backwards on the road to modernity, but rather allows one to define modernity in one's own terms. In Nigeria, on the other hand, there is a misunderstanding of modernity and the meaning of a secular nation-state. We assume that modernity must be defined in terms of Western value systems and culture. Although I do not completely reject the Western liberal model of development, it may be inappropriate for the Nigerian context if it is taken hook, line, and sinker and forcibly excludes the religious experience so central to Nigerian identity. Not only does Western secularism exclude religion, but it also provokes extremism by working against a Nigerian affinity for open religious expression. Religion and public life are closely intertwined in the Nigerian context.

The golden period of peaceful coexistence of religions in Nigeria was the era when indigenized Islam and Christianity dominated our public life. It was a time when Muslim brotherhoods such as the Tijaniyya and Quadriyya enjoyed private and public influence in Nigeria. This was also a time when the independent African churches, also called the Aladura, wielded great influence in Christian circles. At that time these two monotheistic faiths were

⁹ Cranford Pratt, "Julius Nyerere: Reflections on the Legacy of his Socialism," *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 33, No. 1(1999): 139-148.

domesticated by Nigerian culture and tradition, but radical doctrinal forms of religion were abhorred. The encroachment of radical fundamentalism soon dissolved those peaceful forms of Christianity and Islam. This evolution of radical forms of tradition should be contextualized.

In many ways, Nigeria presents a paradox; on the one hand, if what the BBC report says is true, we are the most religious people in the world. Almost every day a new church appears on the horizon. In addition, Nigerians have somehow managed to transport abroad Nigerian Christianity and Islam as well as traditional Nigerian religions. Our country has one of the largest numbers of pilgrims visiting the holy lands Mecca, Jerusalem, and Rome. This religious tourism has become central to the economies of many countries. On the other hand, we find ourselves embedded in an intricate and persistent web of conflict and corruption. The issue is not that there is something inherently flawed in our religious traditions, but rather that people often mistake the relationship between different religions as a contentious one. We deal with an extreme form of Islam versus an extreme form of Christianity. I am talking about the people who believe that there is no salvation outside the church and the umma. The extremist forms these monotheistic faiths take when they encounter African indigenous traditions can be seen as a quest for religious purity.

Religious extremists employ various forms of violence, including physical, rhetorical, and what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would call symbolic violence, a clever use of force which aims to convince people that one's own religious affiliation holds the key to salvation. Symbolic form of violence is a legacy left from Western and Arab missionaries who sought to superimpose their religion on indigenous African traditions and subsequent Africanized forms of Islam and Christianity. Symbolic violence is employed so that foreign forms of capital can triumph over indigenous ones. I believe that Nigeria's best hope for responding to religious

violence exists in indigenous and indigenized forms of religion. Though I do not suggest that every Christian and Muslim in the nation adopt indigenous religion, I do believe we should approach the nation building process from an African worldview that is deeply influenced by indigenous social practice. Among these practices is the concern for communalism, peaceful coexistence, and the ethos of live and let live.

I fear that Nigerians have lost the moral compass for assessing communal relations, detecting problems and finding viable solutions to them. The models of peace and conflict resolution that we do operate are mainly brought in from abroad. For centuries traditional rulers provided the sacred canopy that guaranteed peaceful coexistence of peoples of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds and political affiliations. Several of our rulers have now become pawns in the hands of the government and politicians, and they have thus lost any legitimate claim to moral authority in the hearts and minds of their people. Those who have been able to stand up to these forces are few. What is needed in the Nigerian experiment of modernity is a people concerned with their own political culture, a people that understands the rule and the power of indigenous thought systems. Any nation that fails to take these things into consideration will become a slave to outsiders and outside initiatives.

Nigeria must develop its civil faith and to do this, we must look to our past as a rich source of knowledge about how to govern the future. We need to pull together, as in the *ujamaa* sense, the best aspects of our traditional culture and develop a concrete idea of what it means to be Nigerian. We must look to institutions such as unadulterated African sacred kingship and institutions which for so long provided the sacred canopy under which the entire polity and diverse religious groups functioned. Please understand that by 'sacred kingship' I am not

referring to the new menace in society whereby people are turning to indigenous cults to perpetrate violence. Rather I am referring to an African tradition that recognizes a symbiotic relationship between the rulers and the people. We should understand civil religion not as a necessarily secular phenomenon, but as an opportunity for political and religious leaders in Nigeria, whether Christian, Muslim, or traditional, to reevaluate their relationship with their flock. The place in which to begin to develop the idea of religion as a social actor is in the alleviation of poverty.

Poverty and Religion

Let me explain the ways religion can alleviate poverty. Across the nation, poverty “among plenty” appears to be worsening. The causes of poverty are vast and varied, rooted in natural and human factors such as drought, corruption, globalization, mass migration, war, and genocide. In many instances, though we can praise religious institutions for providing critically needed social services, we can also implicate them in the circumstances that necessitate such services. For instance, churches and mosques have been known to exacerbate poverty by sowing the extremist seeds of protracted religious conflict. Rather than investing in eradicating poverty, many religious organizations promote a false prosperity ethos. A hungry person lacks physical concentration to hear the sermon. It is unconscionable for churches to appeal to parishioners without attempting to ameliorate their pain and suffering. Thus, churches and mosques must address material as well as spiritual needs by cultivating a mindset similar to that of the colonial era “mission church” that sought physical, economic, and spiritual uplift through the Bible. In this sense, Nigerian religions should play a crucial role in eradicating poverty in Nigeria.

Although poverty and affluence have coexisted in African societies for centuries, the responses to economic disparity have changed dramatically. When indigenous religious value systems possessed real and symbolic meaning within society, the protection of women, children, the disadvantaged, and the disabled were deeply ingrained in the Nigerian worldview. This worldview appears in the Yoruba myth of origin. Obatala, the Drunken God, took responsibility for molding humans less fortunate than ordinary beings, such as albinos, those with physical deformities, and the disabled. Highly privileged and regarded as sacred, these imperfect creations were regarded as *Eni Orisa*, votaries of the deity. Through this myth, it could be suggested that Yoruba cosmology and culture instituted indirect ways of providing for the welfare of the disadvantaged. Within a widely globalized society, the myth loses some of its symbolism as a shift occurs away from traditional cosmologies. In previous generations, wealthy individuals assisted the poor, but this traditional support system was undermined by the new industrial capitalist system. The oil boom in oil-producing states of Africa created strife between wealthy elites and a large, frustrated underclass, with the ensuing civil strife only escalating. This unfortunate shift was coupled with the structural adjustment policy (SAP) imposed on the African nations by wealthy financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank. Africa's unsuspecting heads of state, such as President Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida of Nigeria, had a hand in creating an era of human suffering unsurpassed in contemporary African history.

In the modern Nigerian context, religious institutions and state and civil agencies must take a combined approach to alleviating poverty. As participants in civil society, religious institutions foster humanitarian and spiritual values that parallel economic, social, and political development. Using the biblical tradition, Christian denominations instill religious values as moral obligations in faithful adherents. Churches can alleviate poverty in ways that secular

institutions, international development agencies, or local governments may fail. In this sense, the church acts as the prophet familiar from the biblical tradition, finding expression in the discourse of development within legislative and international aid processes. One should also add the significance of several socially engaged NGOs that are concerned with the alleviation of poverty among children, youth and women. These two examples indicate what Nigeria can achieve if the nation follows faith-based initiatives and injunctions akin to tithing and *zakat*.

As poverty affects the most vulnerable members in any society, the status of women and children should be of paramount concern. Gender inequality and unequal access are a serious concern in efforts to sustain development. Since the majority of church members are female, gender equality should be a moral imperative as well as a developmental objective. To support this objective, the church must remove the rigid structures that confine the lives of women, generally the most spirited and devout converts to the Christian and Islamic traditions.

We also see the effects of poverty on youth. As a dysfunctional youth culture emerges across the nation in protest against the state of exploitation and abuse of the larger human population in the country, we see the need for a renewed responsibility on the part of the state to tackle unemployment and poverty. Religious institutions will also need to participate in handling this problem. The spirituality of the youth is a critical variable in public life as the lack of opportunities and systemic individualism breed youth violence and alienation, which can lead to an increased desire to find “community” through gang membership. Our religious institutions can create more avenues to value youthful expressions of religious culture. Our youth can be integrated into the religious and public life as viable contributors to civil society. This contribution begins with a strong education.

Education

Although I recognize that the crisis of our nation extends to other areas such as economic and social life, health, and the power supply, I prefer to focus on education. First, because education is the basis of other development, and second because this important sector has preoccupied me for a long time. It seems to me that our educational system needs radical reform. We do not need another commission of enquiry or probes into what is wrong. We have an abundance of reports in our libraries and archives containing recommendations from some of the best and brightest Nigerians who took part in this serious conversation. What we need is the effective leadership of men and women who will put in place programs and activities that will fundamentally transform the way we train our young people.

In the past few months I have been involved in conversations with Nigerian leaders concerned with the state of our educational system. The former Permanent Secretary of Education (now Head of Service) Professor Dapo Afolaba led delegations to Harvard University to find out what makes an educational system function effectively and what Nigeria can learn from our institution's success. Our most esteemed elder Deacon Gamaliel Onasode was part of the group. I also took part in the summit that President Jonathan called in Abuja to examine what the nation should do to return our educational system to her old glory. As I interacted with the Abuja summit attendees I realized that our problem is not a poverty of ideas, but the political will to make radical changes. Well-meaning Nigerians spoke passionately about reform at this meeting. Some were almost in tears as they explained how our nation's education sector is sliding from its former excellence to its current state, characterized by poor performance and ineffective teaching. Permit me to reflect on the state of our education system and provide some recommendations developed during the Nigerian forum at Harvard.

Currently there are in Nigeria more than 100 federal, state, and private universities, and several polytechnics and colleges of education. Each year over a million candidates apply for admission into these institutions. Fewer than 50 percent are admitted. However, despite this seeming exclusivity, all available statistics show that Nigerian educational systems are in a state of total collapse. Every day we read about the alleged perpetration and involvement by officials of our National Examinations Board and teachers of our secondary schools in massive examination malpractices and examination leakages. Even the Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board (JAMB), which has for decades been responsible to our universities, is no longer trusted. Moreover, cults and violent gangs have taken over some of our polytechnical institutes and universities. In spite of what university councils have been doing to stamp out this development, we continue to see its growth. Several of our private universities are struggling to make ends meet, but parents send their children to these schools because they provide the discipline, security, and peace of mind that have eluded the public schools. Why are we facing these crises, and what can we do to effect needed education reforms?

First, the nation must seriously invest in the training of teachers, lecturers, and professors who will be qualified to function in 21st century universities. In the 1970s, Nigeria embarked on programs to train the manpower of universities and institutions of higher learning. This has virtually stopped. Gross underfunding of the universities and other institutions began during the military era, but responsibility for this state of affairs extends to the civilians as well, who do not seem to understand the extent or seriousness of the problem. With the support of Nigerian diaspora communities, we must set up high quality training institutions in Nigeria and Africa to assist with the task of developing our manpower. We must also be committed to and invest in the

existing universities to promote sound scholarship and training of our youth and future leaders. I hope, Mr. Vice Chancellor, that you are doing precisely this at Caleb University.

The government should also make funds available for the training of Nigerian educational administrators. Several foreign institutions such as the Harvard Graduate School of Education offer multiple-week training sessions in areas such as university administration, financial resource development, and student recruitment and retention. Officials should attend these sessions with the aim of answering the question, “what makes an educated person?” The answers to this question should be used to shape the education of future generations in ways beneficial to the general public. It is of course essential that Nigerian students participate in answering this question. I suggest that an educated person should have the necessary skills and knowledge to function in today’s complex society. He/she should have discipline, honesty and feel respect for others. Furthermore, this person should be creative and innovative, especially in approaching the problems that we as a nation face. These things are essential for maintaining one’s moral ground as a citizen of the nation-state.

Secondly, we need to reevaluate the relevance of the curricula and programs that are currently offered in our institutions. What is the purpose of turning our thousands of graduates who cannot find jobs or engage in productive activities? Most of the engineers, agriculturists, and other field-based professionals trained in our universities and polytechnical institutes are carrying files in the ministries rather than rolling up their sleeves to get their hands dirty in practical and innovative professional activities. The Nigerian educational system needs revamping in a way that will produce new graduates who are socially and productively engaged and whose training is relevant to the social and economic progress of the nation. Private and

public universities must create an enabling environment and offer financial support for the new graduates to support them in their work.

Third, Nigerian educational institutions must have autonomy. The governing body should put in place university councils that are empowered to ensure that the universities carry out their mission undisturbed. These councils in turn should wash their hands clean of the politics of our universities. Where the state unnecessarily interferes with educational institutions, the result is that university administrators succumb to political pressure from outside and therefore do not succeed in appointing competent people to head our institutions. Thus, some of these administrators in our universities become party card holders, and the neutrality and academic freedom that are needed to foster the best research and attract the most talented faculty are lacking.

Academic think-tanks based in universities are useful to the general public in their ability to provide people with critical analyses of social and scientific phenomena. However, the reach of public and private universities is not merely theoretical. These institutions also provide real solutions to the socio-economic and religious problems that affect our daily lives as citizens of the nation-state. But to do this, universities must remain independent of government political agendas. They should instead play the role of critic and adviser to government leaders. The governments, in turn, should invite critique from academic institutions and should maintain a system of checks-and-balances that will protect the jobs of university intellectuals who speak out against government malpractice. Let me bring to mind some of our past Vice Chancellors who refused to succumb to pressure from the Military and civilian government and who were bold enough to speak out against repressive government policies. The late Professor Ojetunji Aboyade, of Obafemi Awolwo University (O.A.U.), Ile-Ife, the Vice-Chancellor at O. A. U. at

one time was one of the noted few who maintained his independence and claimed that the government has no business interfering in conversations taking place on campus.

Vice Chancellors of universities should also make extra effort to engage government leaders in the needs and progress of university research, in particular, as relates to the welfare of the general public. A body of representatives, or government-university liaisons should be established on each side that will facilitate ongoing conversation and cooperation between both leading sectors of society. It is interesting that any time a new President is appointed in America, he goes to the Ivy League Universities, especially, Harvard, Stanford, Yale and Princeton, to select the technocrats who will help him shape his policies. I know we are a nation of title lovers. Where else in the world do people introduce themselves as engineer, architect, and Jerusalem Pilgrim? Academics should not go into government because they want to make money or wave the flag of their professorship title, but to contribute to the development of the nation.

Fourth, while I recognize that Nigeria has not reached the stage where education can be completely free, the federal government needs to review the funding structures of the universities. It must invest its resources in the development of Nigerian universities and other educational institutions. Currently, less than 5% of the national budget is spent on education. This is unacceptable. The training of minds should be seen as a high priority for nation building, and must be given necessary support. I suggest that the billions of Naira that the government has recovered from the looters of our treasuries should be put back into education and health services.

Our universities cannot expect to thrive without an endowment adequate to provide for the basic research and personal needs of students and faculty. The quality of a university's

system depends on its ability to hire exceptional faculty and produce outstanding graduates who will, ideally, give back to the institution once established in their respective fields. Such a give-and-take mentality as well as the cultivation of university pride through various alumni social and intellectual events is essential to the long-term financial welfare of the university system. The Nigerian government should also be responsible for providing the university with adequate scholarships and research grants to ensure the intellectual growth of the nation's future generations. Students whose parents cannot afford a university education should be given adequate scholarships and government guaranteed loans to pursue their dreams. Parents and students should not be required to take out extensive government or private loans like some poor parents did in the past, borrowing money from loan sharks who charge exorbitant interest rates. When graduating classes are destined to use their intellectual effort towards paying back overly burdensome student loans, discouraged are others from investing in institutions of higher education. Such financial disenchantment could only serve to further the pervasive corruption that plagues all sectors of society, from the university system to the various cabinets of government. Furthermore, it is imperative that the Federal Government ensure increased funds and compensation for those graduates entering the lower-paying sectors such as teaching, and working in institutions of social welfare and other public services.

Fifth, our nation must promote a positive youth culture that encourages all students to pursue education beyond the primary and secondary levels. Any keen observer of Nigerian youth culture today will realize how dramatically different the past is from the present. Unlike the creative intellectual activities of the Nigerian students of the 1960s and 70s, most contemporary Nigerian youths exhibit despondency, exert their efforts on frivolities, and are creatively vibrant primarily in destructive ventures and activities. Among them are found those

termed **Yahooboy**s and **419ers**. The youths of the 60s and 70s explored their vibrancy in challenging bad governance and protesting injustice. They saw themselves as true leaders of the then tomorrow. For instance, graduates and youths of my generation went to the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) with excitement, pride, and honor. This was not because we took the NYSC program as a stepping stone, or a temporary meal ticket as we made our way across the sea of unemployment we accepted. The NYSC was a golden opportunity to go through the national rite of passage, a kind of social training indoctrination into the ideals of nation building. Regretfully, the NYSC is now treated as a program of little or no relevance to nation building.

Our educational reform must begin by engaging the needs of Nigerian students at home and abroad through programs such as the old NYSC. Students have expressed major concerns about the quality of Nigerian universities and the lack of dignity afforded to students, who are often accused of stealing the already scarce material resources of our various campuses. Students must feel comfortable enough to challenge the assumptions and research of their professors. A spoon-fed student body cannot advance Nigerian intellectual creativity. We must strive for a more discursive classroom experience. The Nigerian university commission should develop regional centers that will monitor policies on education more closely. The commission should also send representatives to advise elected officials in both the center and the periphery of governance so that it can become more relevant to the nation as a whole. Finally, universities should develop internship and employment opportunities for all students interested in supplementing their classroom education with real-world experience.

Lastly, as aforementioned, alumni networks are crucial to the sustenance of the university system in Nigeria. Here are a few ways we can develop such networks. First, Nigerian universities must establish an alumni database which tracks the professional and geographical

location of our graduates. This database will also include the contact information of each graduate which can be used to connect past and future students by field of interest. Second, an annual fund should be set up at each university, with donations secured through periodic phone calls soliciting financial support from alumni and wealthy parents of current students. The size of the gift or donation provided by these individuals is not important; however, those making efforts to contribute to the university system should be recognized in a list printed annually in a university publication. Third, major donors should have chairs and professorships established in their names, as this is the ultimate way to express institutional gratitude. Fourth, funds must be used as stipulated by donors. Failures to appropriately allocate university donations should be met with legal consequences.

I laid out these findings and views from our Harvard conversations as a way of letting you know that others who wish Nigeria well are anxious about the Nigerian experiment in higher education and are willing to help us achieve success. Luckily we have a sitting President of Nigeria who was himself a university lecturer, just like his former boss, the late President Yar'Adua. Harvard has sent an open invitation to Nigeria to partner with the U.S. Federal government in the training of our students through the establishment of a Nigerian endowment at Harvard. The checks against brain drain are already written into our proposal, and I hope Nigeria takes up this golden opportunity.

Let me restate that it is important for us as a nation to recognize the importance of the public in articulating a role for public-centered education and the integrative potentials of public schools in pluralistic society like Nigeria. Examples can be drawn from the US and the role that public schools have historically played in this country in forging a 'collective will' and nurturing

patriotic sentiments. In our search for solutions to our present national malaise in Nigeria, one can argue that through a close cooperation and a continuous dialogue among the various religious groups and sects in the country, religious visions can contribute to a kind of formation but that involves not only schooling but also those patterns of social life that built character and inculcate virtue. Efforts must be made to mine both national and religious histories and to search the practices of contemporary communities for elements of an ethos that is required to form new visions of the common weal, those collective convictions about the shape of things to come that unleash incredible strength. But the quest for this kind of education is oriented to public values, to those practices that community or society holds in common would require not just the development of a civil religion/faith, but also interrogation and critique of extant religious sensibilities and practices.

This nation must rethink its values and philosophies. Our nation, especially our leaders must understand the tenets of nation building. They must realize that it involves not only their own commitments and paying more than mere lip service to programs, projects, and activities that support nation building, but it also requires a new imagination and a new vision that will enable them put in place programs and activities that will propel Nigeria to the greatness and international reputation its people deserve. This is the tithe and *zakat* I am urging you to contribute to this country as patriotic Nigerians.

Thank you for the invitation. God bless Nigeria. God bless Caleb University. God bless our youths, at home and abroad. God bless you all.