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“**THE NIGERIAN NATION & HER CENTENARY:**
Past, Present, Future”

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The Nigerian Nation and Her Centenary: *Past, Present, Future*

Lecture delivered by **Professor Dele Layiwola, FNAL**
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I. Preamble

It is customary, in a lecture which is intended for both the general public, the media and students of culture and society to make preliminary comments on methodology and style. It is imperative when such a lecture contents with judgments of facts and value over a terrain which is diverse and a frame which is telescopic: a very, very long century. This invokes history and its historicist other: memory. After all, the traditional maxim by Hippocrates is still true in the context of history and memory: *'Ars longa, vita brevis'* meaning 'time is short but art is long'. But I shall like to play the moderate iconoclast: 'Time is indeed long but the art of it is in short supply' why did I sound so pessimistic? In spite of our relative affluence and what might be termed the modernization of poverty, why should anyone be so skeptical of a century that is still as pregnant as a cloud at the end of a dry season? Time is indeed short but its memory is long!

I must warn you that I am not a millenarian nor do I enjoy millennium studies because a millenarian must be interested in the building of empires: their rise and fall, and the fate of men and women who rise and fall with them. In the context of twentieth century Africa, it is difficult to write 'A brief history of Time' without making presumptions.

It is difficult to discuss the 1914 amalgamation of the protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria without making reference to the larger African Context of the colonial enterprise. Essentially, this involves a larger picture of the 20th century and the inevitable blurring of boundaries between that century and her preceding century. It was really at the Berlin conference of 1884 that European powers divided Africa as a spoil of war. The territories were uneven because Africans were not on the negotiating table. That absence made Africa a victim in real and virtual terms. The size and definition of each nation state was a *fait accompli*, non-negotiable and fixed. They actually became nation states by proxy and by legislative

fiat; nations without historical and cultural self-determination. Prior to that 1884 conference, Egypt had been occupied by the British from 1882-1914, approximately for a generation. As British colonialism ended in Egypt, it began in Nigeria with the Amalgamation which now marks the centenary that is being recalled. In a sense, Bill Freund (2006:94) is right in suggesting that the period from 1914 is a 'post-colonial' phase rather than a fundamentally new era on its own. It is also true that the colonial intervention by which we now define our history and our coming of age is significant for what it is worth. Freund describes it thus:

I continue to believe that the colonial period does represent, on the whole, a big historical break that changed material life progressively and substantially caused the integration of Africa into the wider world. Indeed until this point, it is strongly arguable that Africa was only a geographical expression. It did acquire a kind of unity and its articulate elites acquire some sense of communality in the world, precisely through the colonial experience and what followed. (2006:95).

It is logical to affirm that the colonial intervention and act of amalgamation is the basis for Nigeria's centenary. Indeed, this is contrapuntal because the amalgamation marks Nigeria's historical century as much as its reminder of self-denial and abnegation.

Both Michael Crowder (1978) and Tekena Tamuno (2013) have reiterated that Nigeria's population is not only highest on the African continent but that her natural resources are equally vast-crude oil, natural gas, palm oil and other agrobased assets. They equally echoed the fact that Flora Shaw, who later became Lord Lugard's wife first suggested in a newspaper article that the hosts of British protectorates on the River Niger be collectively known as Nigeria. It is patent that, as a people – whether as a historical, geographical or anthropological expression – we have always existed on and around the banks or creeks and estuary of the Niger river and that our peculiar identity or name was invented by a British lady whose country then colonized us and directed our affairs for nearly half a century. But, in a preceding era, we have always had our empires and kingdoms: Ife, Oyo, Benin, Nupe, Kanem-Bornu etc. There had been other city states of the Niger Delta and the

politically decentralized Igbo speaking peoples of the Southeast. In size and aspiration, each of these subgroups have recorded quantifiable achievements in art, culture, technology and heritage. Outside of this natural creation, colonialism invented, by artificial means, a country and sovereign nation state thereafter named into existence by the word of a British woman.

The centuries which preceded the invention of Nigeria showed that the kingdoms and city states traded internally and also across the Sahara desert. Contact with Europeans had been largely through Arab traders who acted as middle men.

II. Exploratory Beginnings

Herodotus kept records that Phoenician Seamen successfully navigated the African continent returning by the Pillars of Hercules about 612 B.C. He also recorded that ancient Carthage traded in Gold with West Africa. It is also further known that the two great Hannos in Carthaginian history had made references to Africa. Hanno, the great, the Carthaginian statesman who lived in the third century B.C. and a contemporary of Hannibal had opposed Hannibal in his wars with Rome. Instead he advocated peace with Rome and for a Carthaginian empire in Africa. Equally, Hanno, the Carthaginian navigator explored the Atlantic Coast of Africa and went as far as Sierra Leone in 500 BC. These are of historical interest but trade in hinterland West Africa and the Maghreb went on between West Africans and Arabs who were the middle men between Africans and Europeans (Bovill, 1955). These were all before the fifteenth century.

By the fifteenth century, however, Europeans were eager to gain direct access to the source of supply so that they could avoid the use of Arab middlemen (Crowder, 1978: 48). The curiosity was more in countries like Portugal and Spain who would also like to avoid trade with India through Arab middlemen. They would, therefore, explore the coast of West Africa in the bid to find a route to India. Prince Henry of Portugal, better known as Henry the Navigator, was the champion of this new enthusiasm. He equipped himself to undertake voyages along the west coast of Africa in the hope to make both maritime discoveries and economic gains. In addition, he hoped that he might find a Christian king in tropical Africa who could be his ally in his struggles against Islam and the control of the trade from the East. He succeeded to a

large extent because by 1462, a large chunk of the West Coast from Senegal to Sierra Leone had opened up to trade directly with Europeans. His death in 1462 brought a lull and there was no immediate successor to his dreams and enthusiasm. It was not until 1469 that a Portuguese trader from Lisbon called Fernao Gomes secured the sole rights for coastal exploration for a period of six years. This was, however, on the condition that he would explore 100 leagues (a distance of 400 miles) of the coast in any one year. By 1471, the gold trade along the West African coast had opened up again and it was in late 1472 and early 1473 that Messrs Fernao do Po and Pero de Cintra first navigated the Bights of Bonny and Benin (Crowder, 49). A decade after this, about 1481, the booming trade caused rivalry between John II of Portugal and Edward IV of England over trade rights and monopoly in West Africa, particularly around the Atlantic coast of present day Nigeria and her Niger delta and creeks. Thereafter began the notorious expropriation of labour and human cargoes known as the Slave trade.

The point I seek to emphasize here is that trade, travel and exploration had discovered the peoples of Nigeria either on the coast from the Atlantic sea or from the Sahara desert with Arabs as middle men. The direct and indirect contacts with Europeans started with trade as articles of production and labour. The various cultures and civilizations that are now re-invented, and identified as Nigeria have always been in existence under separate forms of organization and governance. From available data and evidence, those nations evolved social structures and networks which guaranteed their survival. There was evidence of internal trade, conquests and colonization but it was the eventual opening to the outside world that gave rise to the development of the idea of a corporate nation invented as a country called Nigeria four and a half centuries after the Spanish and Portuguese traders first began frequenting the coast of West Africa.

As early as 1483 John II of Portugal declared himself Lord of Guinea even though that country did not exist at the time and his treaties were signed with local chieftains along the coast. The Portuguese merely established strategic posts and settlements along the coast. For instance Portugal had a small settlement on the Island of Sao Tomé, which had no indigenous population. It was from there that it traded with the kingdom of Benin from about 1485. Apart from the trade in pepper from Benin, the Portuguese outsourced labour from there to work the plantations in

Sao Tomé. The Portuguese effectively colonized the Island and the Benin labourers were joined by deported Portuguese Jews, exiles and convicts. This instance of slave trade was second to a first phase when African slaves were first sighted in Lisbon in 1441.

Ewuare 'the Great', as he was known, might have been the first indigenous monarch to encounter an European explorer, Ruy de Sequiera, when the latter arrived in Benin in 1472, but there are other accounts which claimed that Joao Affonso d'Aveiro was the first Portuguese explorer to reach Benin in 1486. Whichever is correct, the entry of Europeans hinterland marked a major turning point in Nigeria's history and politics. Hitherto Benin, Ife and Oyo had always traded among the various ethnicities indigenous to Nigeria away from the Atlantic coast. External trade came from across the great Sahara desert. The homelands of Ife, Benin and Oyo were the last depots for the caravans across the Sahara and the Sahel regions of Northern Nigeria. The Portuguese arrival in Benin and the national and economic resources they saw encouraged further adventure hinterland along the river to the creeks of the Niger Delta. This robust trade eventually led to the establishment of British Protectorate over Northern Nigeria between 1900 and 1906. This marked the end of the trans-Saharan trade and the beginning of export of goods by road and rail to the Atlantic Coast. That was the real birth of Nigeria and the background to the nation state now known as Nigeria and whose history and centenary begs our attention and contemplation.

It is necessary to point out at this juncture that much as exploration leads to trade and prosperity, wealth and riches generate the invention of crime, kidnapping and brigandage. I shall like to cite an instance of very early incidence of kidnapping of expatriates before alien traders began cultural and material expropriation of which the Benin expedition was a prime example. In 1830 Richard and John Lander, the successors to Mungo Park, who had earlier met his death in Bussa in 1806 trekked from Badagary to Bussa. Mungo Park and his contingent tried to trace the course of River Niger to the Sea. This would eventually open up the country for access and trade. The Lander Brothers arrived to continue with his work. At Bussa, they secured two canoes. They sailed down via Lokoja through to Asaba. When they arrived in Asaba, they were kidnapped by local Igbo vigilantes. They later negotiated to deliver them to the master of an English boat anchored at Brass on the estuary of River Niger

(See Crowder, 1978:10)

Their indigenous captors took them downstream to Brass where they were happy that they had at last discovered the mouth of the Niger river. Here the captors released only Richard Lander to go on board the British boat to negotiate the payment of a ransom after which John Lander would be released. Thomas Lake, the captain of the ship, hesitated to pay up the ransom. The Igbo men held on to John Lander as hostage. Later, he agreed to pay only on John's release. He tricked the local captors. As soon as he secured John Lander's release, he set sail without paying the promised ransom. The kidnappers had thus suffered a double jeopardy because they not only helped the British to navigate the Niger from Asaba to Brass, they lost out on their expected dividend of an illegitimate trade by barter. This unusual trade became an epidemic in the lives of Nigerians nearly two centuries later. We all know what the governors of Edo and Imo states have recently done to stem the tide of that menace called kidnapping. My strong point here is that the menace had emerged as a game and a pastime feature of trade in the Niger Delta a long time ago. What we are now witnessing in the Niger delta and Southeastern Nigeria is a recurrence of the trade game invented in the 1830 encounter with British explorers.

The discovery of the connecting route of the Niger from the hinterland to the Sea thus opened up awareness for access and trade – legitimate and otherwise. I should emphasize that it also led to the conquest of Nigeria and her re-invention as a nation rather than as a mere natural and geographical expression. This has not only led to greater interaction with traders across continents, it has also begun a process of consensus building as a comity of nationalities within a pluralist nation. In other words, a profound interaction of cultures especially through trade, linguistic interaction and renegotiation of mores, in a historically verifiable and a geographically diverse space. In the last one hundred years – a long century indeed – the trial period is, and must be over, so that national growth may translate to national development. I shall now proceed to articulate what I have referred to as a game feature through a well known mathematical dictum – the appreciation of game theory. Increasingly at this point also, I shall talk more about Nigerians than about Europeans who have left us to govern ourselves from about 1960.

III. Game Theory and the Nigerian Paradigm

Nigeria as a nation has lived for a century, at least half of it, under the rulership of her own citizens and indigenous wards. By all standards, a century old man or woman is a very old person indeed. But in the lives of nation states, a hundred years is not quite as long, though it is considered long enough to give a demographic, fiscal or historical account. Hence in a December 13, 2013 edition of *The Punch* the columnist, Ayo Olukotun, taking a cue from the 2013 Human Development Index (HDI) reports as follows: that though Nigeria's growth rate of 6.5 per cent surpasses the global growth rate of 3.2 per cent, we have not made any impressive strides in terms of human development. In fact, this report rates Nigeria below hitherto embattled nations such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This indicates that in spite of the quantum growth of the economy and our natural resources, human and infrastructural development is almost nil. Some other global league tables such as the Failed States Index (published annually by the Fund for Peace) and the Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International have rated Nigeria as a failed state. Nigeria continues to witness reports of widespread cases of kidnapping and insurgency. In spite of the long century it has witnessed, it has emerged as a weak state and an unfulfilled nation. It is the only nation of its size on earth (about 170 million persons according to the 2013 issue of the Population Reference Bureau) with such a history of dismal performance and dysfunctional statistics. The logical question is: what do we do to achieve a better performance index?

From the critique and analyses in the Press and in the social media, two basic principles are discernible. The first is that there is a basic disconnect between the principle of leading and leadership in Nigeria. That is, there is neither concrete agreement or social contract between the leaders and the led, if we assume that we already have the right calibre of leaders. The second is that the component of the resources belonging to both strata of society is so badly managed that the two parties in the game of governance live in great poverty even as they wallow in riches. The one in material poverty, the other in the poverty of mind and spirit. This is a paradox which has led to what Game theorists refer to as a zero sum game. According to the *Encyclopedia of Information Systems* (2002), a Zero sum game 'is a game where the

payoffs in an outcome to all players is zero. I justify a recourse to Game Theory because the art of governance, leadership and service is like a game as they both involve interaction and interactive sessions. Let us adopt two representative definitions:

Game theory is the study of the ways in which strategic interactions among economic agents produce outcomes with respect to the preferences (or utilities) of those agents, where the outcomes in question might have been intended by none of the agents (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2010).

From the Encyclopedia of Information Systems:

Game theory is the formal study of decision-making where several players must make choices that potentially affect the interests of the other players.

The definitions are pretty clear especially as we know that we are dealing with strategic situations which would benefit from intense thought, alternatives and profound interactive sessions, sometimes over an unusually short space of time. This is why Game theory is also known as interactive decision theory. It is also obvious why the disciplines of mathematics, philosophy and economics have been great beneficiaries of this theory. However, it is not unusual that history and literature should apply it. Let us borrow three test cases.

A. Socrates remembered an episode from the Battle of Delium. A soldier is at the battle front in a battalion waiting to foil an enemy attack. It may occur in his thinking that if the defence would be successful, it is unlikely that his own personal role will be crucial. But if he stays on, he runs the risk of being killed or wounded. On the other hand, however, if the enemy were to win the battle, the probability of his being killed, injured or captured are higher still. Based on this line of reasoning, it is better to desert the war front and run away irrespective of who would win the battle. In addition, if all the soldiers were to reason this way, since their condition is similar, this would certainly translate to a loss or a defeat in the war. The greater the fear, the greater the chance of desertion so that they might come to no harm. If the soldiers reason that the battle will be won (or lost) without the particular, individual

dedication of any one soldier, the less reason for any of them to stay and fight. Should each soldier be allowed to anticipate this type of reasoning on the part of others, the commander will have total defeat on his hands without the enemy firing one shot.

B. Ages ago before the modern accession of game theory in the 1940s, some military leaders had used this kind of systematic reasoning for strategic purposes and to advantage. The Spanish conquistador, Cortez (1485-1547) invaded Mexico in 1519. He arrived with a small fleet which had no chance winning a battle against the numerous Aztecs on their own land. To remove the risk of fear, retreat or desertion, Cortez burned down the ships on which he and his soldiers landed. With retreat having been rendered impossible by his action, the Spanish soldiers had no choice but to stand and fight. Not only to fight, but to do so with the determination to win and rout their enemies. But even more spectacular was the psychological motivation of Cortez. His action had a demoralizing effect on the ranks of the Aztecs. He ensured that the ships were burnt in the full glare of the Aztec soldiers. The contending force then reasoned that any commander who could be so confident as to willfully destroy his own option for retreat must have good reason for his extreme optimism. They thought it cannot be wise to attack an opponent who had good reason to be so determined that he was above defeat. The Aztecs, under their leader Montezuma, quickly retreated into the surrounding hills and Cortez had an easy and bloodless victory.

In the above scenario, we have an interactive process of many individuals (or soldiers), each of which is a rational decision maker, but which has produced a favourable outcome intended by one person (the commander). Most pragmatic armies would try to avoid this problem just as Cortez did by raising the stakes. They may not be able to make physical retreat impossible but they can make it economically impossible by just shooting deserters. In that case, standing and fighting is each soldier's rational course of action and perhaps the only option left. This is because the cost of running away is at least as high as the cost of staying to fight.

C. My final example is taken from William Shakespeare's play, *Henry V*.

Henry reaffirmed British claim to the French throne. During the battle of Agincourt Henry decided to slaughter his French prisoners in the full view of both his own British soldiers and his enemy, the French. This shocked even his own subjects who described it as immoral. The strategic reasons declared by King Henry was that the prisoners might free themselves and undermine his throne. This was a sure possibility given the situation of war and enmity. A game theorist would do a further cost benefit analysis, though equally amoral justification, as follows. His own troops have witnessed the killing of the hapless French soldiers and know that the enemy has observed the same. The only option they then have, in their own interest is to fight to win the war of Agincourt failing which they would suffer a worse fate in the hands of the enemy. As in the previous example, their boats have been burnt down and stakes are higher against retreat or failure.

IV. The Retreat to the Future

If we consider the situation of Nigeria at the tail end of her long century, the solutions implied by our resort to Game theory would not be as extreme as they tend to appear, given the prognosis for the next century when, hopefully, the youngest of us here would have been laid to rest. The resort to balkanization or disintegration is completely ruled out. But before the commencement of the march through the next century, we do owe an obligation to the youths of this country. If we cannot have effective power supply, then they deserve to have it. If we have been denied potable water, then they must have it. If we do not have effective road and rail transportation, then they deserve to have it. If we have lacked effective health delivery, then they must have it. If we have a degenerate and corrupt public service system, they can make do with a much better one. If the educational system has gone to the dogs and the hyenas, then we must humanize it for the tasks ahead.

The future of our youths must be one devoid of kidnapping, insurgency and genocide. The last century was one beleaguered by colonialism, tyranny, civil war, misrule, corruption and crass opportunism. In the spirit of strategic interaction and reasoning, we must enter the new century with all the faith granted by the positive resources that Game theory promises to offer.

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