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Collapse Thesis and The Nigerian Dilemma

BY WALE ADEBANWI

IT is a peculiar rendering of a syllogism which bends or subverts one rule of logic in its conclusion: first, a house divided against itself cannot stand. Then: Nigeria is a house divided against itself. Therefore: Nigeria (*This House*) has fallen.

Ordinarily following the rules of deductive logic, the conclusion ought to be that Nigeria (or *This House*) cannot stand. But the author follows a particularly Nigerian path — which he chronicles in this book — to bring home his point in a poignant manner, he bends the rules! Therefore, a house that ought to be declared incapable of standing is (prematurely?!) deemed to have collapsed. But what is Karl Maier's fault in giving this title to his *midnightish* narrative on the enduring puzzle called Nigeria? Is this not only a restatement of a fitting description by one of the country's most distinguished personalities and wordsmith, Chinua Achebe? And are Achebe's books' titles not some of the most popular, most fitting, epithets on the Nigerian dilemma?

What Maier attempts to do with elegant prose in this lacerating narrative of political and social venality, is to transcend the painful

difficulty of presenting a coherent picture of Nigeria—about which the eminent Nigerianist scholar, Thomas Hodgkin, had alerted us on. Even though the book competently captures the dynamics of an "unfinished state" in which the state is characterized by instabilities and uncertainties, the slightly exaggerated title captures Nigeria as a "finished" state waiting for its obsequies at dusk. But so do many Nigerians, that is the significant few which the author met, believe. The book consequently collocates between the fears of these Nigerians (represented by Achebe and Bashir Kurfi in the opening epigraphs), the hope of others (represented by Bola Ige, also in the opening epigraphs), and the cold facts of the horrid, sordid and tragic contradictions which has made Nigeria — in terms of her potentials — arguably the sorriest state on the globe.

You can read *This House* as political journalism; you can read it as elementary, but useful history; you can read it as informed social commentary; you can even read it as a tolerable, sympathetic subversion of the Nigerian conceit. Take a few narrative vignettes: "No one is prepared to think of the future," he laughed regretfully, "Nigeria", he said, "is the land of no tomorrow." "Another: 'To most outsiders, the very name Nigeria conjures up images of chaos and confusion, military coups, repression, drug trafficking, and business fraud. It remains a mystery to all but a handful of academics and diplomats... Nigeria does not present a cut-and-dried moralistic tale of the South African type.' Yet another, '(W)e, the outside world, ignore Nigeria at our peril, from almost any point of view, Nigeria truly matters. However deep it has sunk into a mire of corruption, repression and economic dilapidation, Nigeria remains one of the world's strategic nations. It is the pivot on which the continent turns.' And yet another: 'The Niger Delta...resemble(s) a giant crack in managing (a) windshield that (is) recently fanning outward because nobody had made the effort to repair the initial modest damage'.

This chaos, which a semi-literate politician who has passed-on

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Karl Maier.
THIS HOUSE HAS
FALLEN: MIDNIGHT
IN NIGERIA.
Public Affairs,
New York, 2000, 327pp.



Karl Maier

<< onomatopoeically pronounced as "Shauus", integral to Nigeria and also the residual oasis of hope in the polity are captured in the preface of this book. All these feed into the instructive encounter the author had at the airport when he arrived Nigeria to begin work as a foreign correspondent. In one fell swoop he encounters the simultaneous immodesty and warmth of Nigerians, the collapse of public utilities, extortion and corruption.

The book is divided into ten chapters with an epilogue that wraps up the narratives. Chapter one provides a perspectival history to the emergence of the now deceased dwarfy military general, Sani Abacha, whose infernal desire was to reduce Nigeria to his physical and mental limitations. Abacha's expiration, which led to the emergence of Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar, is described by an unnamed Nigerian businessman as "a coup from heaven", the title of the chapter. Maier also describes the inauguration of a civilian president on May 29, 1999, pointing out that against the backdrop of the history of Nigeria and her recent experience in the hands of martial brigands, two statements made at the occasion would seem to hold much significance. First, when the military jet did a spectacular steep climb at the venue of the handover, to signify the end of military rule, the master of ceremonies bellowed out to Abubakar, "God be with you until we meet again!" The second was the new President, Olusegun Obasanjo's prayer in his speech at the same occasion, "May the Almighty help us."

In the womb of these two statements, as Maier points out, but fails to elaborate, is the expression of the fears of what the future holds in store for the base-born (Nigeria) that has refused to think comprehensively, so as to fundamentally re-make itself. This chapter, against this backdrop, can be discursively linked with the epilogue which attempts to confront what is to be done. By wondering, even at his inauguration, whether Obasanjo would play the role of an African Mikhail Gorbachev, "who, while trying to reform a rotten system, oversaw its dismemberment", Maier strikes a chord which has become a defining note of the Nigerian 'symphony' in the Obasanjo era. And it should be conceded that this is quite insightful. Many doubting people had in the early months of the Obasanjo experiment abandoned their skepticism, and even cynicism, in the new hope of national renewal, if not redemption. The year 2000 was to bring home to them that the Soviet-path is not totally remote, given the Gorbachev logic that is emblematic of Obasanjo's rule: don't continue with the

old order, don't change completely to a new one!

While "Voting Day" (chapter two) emphasizes the crucial issue of dissatisfaction with the long years of military rule and the aversion for its ruinous traditions, it more importantly reflects on the almost complete erosion of civic virtues in Nigeria. The question that this chapter raises are as many as they are crucial: what hope is there for a democracy that is based on every other thing but democratic ethos? Ayetoro village, as captured by this chapter on election day, provides a prism through which this question could be answered. Can those who have symbolized the most entrenched interests against democracy become the agents of its consolidation? A respondent (a student) in Ayetoro tells Maier on election day: "All the students in Nigeria are against Obasanjo. When he was in power, he repressed us and dismissed some university officials." While this might only be a tip of what is yet to be seen, it provides a glimpse into the malaise of the past which are inherent in the present. Another respondent says: "May be, now that Obasanjo is a civilian, he can do something. But frankly, I am not optimistic. Those generals who brought him to power don't want him to rule on behalf of the common man. They want him there to protect their interests". Hope is suppressed by despair, which raises the next set of questions: Is a bloodless clean break with the past possible? Can democracy be leveraged by its old enemies? Where this happens, can the old enemies, now converted democrats, carry the banner across the bridge?

"In many ways Abiola was the human embodiment of the profound contradictions that continue to haunt Nigeria," Maier seems to answer the questions. "His was a quintessential rags-to-riches story... When the explosion of the oil wealth was transforming Nigeria's military rulers into very rich men, Abiola was perfectly placed to join them... (F)or many, Abiola symbolized the civilian elite's ruinous complicity with Western capitalism and military rule." It was for Abiola (and Obasanjo, as Maier fails to add) that Fela Anikulapo-Kuti composed the popular hit "ITT-International Thief Thief". Slightly more than a decade after, the symbolism changed and ITT became *Hope '93*, though some of the most rapacious elements of the old order still hung on his neck. What then were the possibilities of national survival and redemption? Was Abiola a wrong symbol? No doubt, he carried his historical burden with much dignity and unexpected resolve. For Maier, "his (Abiola's) presidency might have been a mess that many predicted it would

be, but surely it would have been interesting." What is in fact more interesting is that silently, the chapter again raises the question of the impossibility of neat boundaries and neat solutions: the election that ended many years of military rule and was supposed to end several years of incompetent domination, was an emphatic travesty of all the hallowed rules of democratic election.

The book considers why the election could not have been otherwise in chapter three ("Army Arrangement"). This is a chapter that uses Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida's (IBB) rule as an interesting example of the damage that martial rule in general has done to Nigeria. The metaphors he employs here are as rich as they are reflective of the different metaphors and analytic perspectives which scholars have employed in understanding state-civil society relations in Africa.

You can better understand, for instance, this sentence, "Babangida's residence sat prominently on the crest of a shoulder of hills above downtown Minna," (p. 45) when set against Celestine Monga's argument about the "paramountcy of the State" in post colonial Africa, where the State protrudes upwards like a veritable Kilimanjaro with the civil society constituting the open plains at the feet of the mountaneous state. Also, the short narratives in this chapter which seek to capture the various dimensions of the corrosive regime of Ibrahim Babangida, give vent to the dynamics that have been captured by scholars who describe the State in much of Africa either as a rentier or rogue State. Even though he argues that after Abacha's five harsh years in power, "Babangida's method's seemed rather benign", Maier is schooled by an M.D. Yusufu, who argues that "I think Babangida was even worse than Abacha. Babangida went all out to corrupt society. Abacha was intimidating people with fear. With him gone now, you can recover. But this corruption remains, and it is very corrosive to society".

The interview with Babangida around which this chapter is constructed is its major strength. Maier asks questions from Babangida in ways in which the man's famed nimble mind could not but betray the wide distance between the truth and his answers. Nigerian journalists in their interviews with IBB are either too patronizing or too antagonistic, too interested, to pose the kind of penetrating questions that the author asked which trapped Babangida in his own pretensions and prevarications. The author says: "If comfortable with his subject, Babangida could be self-assured, eloquent, and witty, but when he was not, he seemed fragile and had trouble completing a sentence. When I asked what happened to Dele Giwa, Babangida stumbled

for an answer" (p.63). Haruna Mohammed, the editor of *Citizen*, a defunct news magazine, who facilitated Maier's interview with Babangida, turns out, in his eagerness to help Babangida's cause, as his (IBB's) nemesis. When IBB mentions that there was a report on the murder of Giwa, he (Muhammed) quickly jumps in to ask about the report "which he, rather implausibly given his knowledge of the government, had never heard of" (p.64). "Babangida seemed lost", reports the author. Then he (IBB) says: "Yes... It was all blown out in this frenzy by you guys (in) the media... A lot of vital links and vital information were lost. So the report was not conclusive. They were almost getting there. But they wouldn't allow the police because they said the police...the government, Akilu killed him". Rather than wonder about the kind of "frenzy" that could have "blown out" the report compiled by the maximum security apparatus headed by Halilu Akilu, it is better to add an exclamation mark, as loud as thunderclap, to Babangida's answer and move on to other things. But we must acknowledge the author's skill in forcing out this answer and the other answer concerning the loathsome, apartheid-supporting former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, whom Babangida claimed, asked him to change into civilian clothes and run for president. What is there to say to Thatcher when Abiola rears his head again here, as Babangida charges, as the first person to ask for this transformation? In the end, Babangida describes himself as a victim of "a grand media and intellectual conspiracy", as if any group could be more tragically conspiratorial than the clique which he has helped impose on his fatherland. As the author attests, "he bears a major - many Nigerian say the largest - responsibility for the crisis Nigeria finds itself in". (P73).

"The Ogoni Wars" (chapter four) presents the plight of a minority group (the Ogoni of the Niger Delta) as symbolic of the plight of minority groups in Nigeria, particularly those from the oil-bearing areas. The author, as one of those who reported the crises in the area, delves into "forbidden" areas of discourse which opposing elements and the crusading media had screened out of view. Given the passionate opposition of these elements to military rule and the symbolic dimension of the Ogoni struggles in the larger fight against military-regional domination, many of the contradictions inherent in the struggle were either not properly interrogated or were off-handedly dismissed as manifestations of official manipulation. For instance, Saro-Wiwa's virulent opposition to Kobani and

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Leton's membership of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) on the basis of the fact that engaging in party politics would undermine the Ogoni struggle, the author points out, contradicts Saro-Wiwa's earlier statement that, "we must support the progression to democratic rule, as it is only through democratic action that we can re-establish our rights. The duty of party politicians among us is to represent Ogoni, their constituencies; to push the Ogoni agenda within their parties" (p.98).

This leads to a short narrative on the dilemma of the Ijaws which, in turn, gives an insight into the centrality of oil — this time palm oil — in the lead-up to the scramble for and partition of Africa by Europeans in Berlin. Thus began "The Journey of a Thousand Miles..." (The fourth chapter), which leads from George Goldie Taubman's Akassa, "the beach head of British colonial occupation" (p.120), to Olusegun Obasanjo's Odi — where soldiers "razed... with mortars and heavy-caliber machine guns" (p.142). This chapter ends beautifully by linking the crises in the Niger Delta with the identity crisis that had gripped the Nigerian Union in the 1980s and 1990s, while pointing out that perhaps the United Africa Company (UAC) that preceded formal colonialism did a better job in the geographies leading up to Nigeria than what the independence Nigerian government has done so far (p.130).

The next four chapters (interrupted only by chapter 9), "The Faithful", "Children of Ham", "The Spirit of Oduduwa", and "A Glass Cage", focus on the Hausa-Fulani north, the Middle Belt, the Yoruba West and the Igbo East respectively. From the Islamic Jihad through the dominance of the Northern Region's earlier premier, Sardauna Ahmadu Bello, to recent religious fanaticism and riots, Maier reconsiders the myth of the "all powerful northern monolith". But while he does not overlook its contradictions, he unwittingly underwrites the functional nature of the "myth".

Relating to this, he points out that Sardauna Bello's mother was a slave (p.157), and that until Obasanjo took office, Islam was the religion of power in Nigeria (p. 154). While the first may serve an important route to understanding Bello's *persona* and why he was prevented from becoming a Sultan, it is worth wondering whether the other does not attest to the functionality of a "myth"? The pertinent question is: if something is real in its consequences, does it still remain a myth? If some grand interests did (and does) not coalesce around the monolith (the North), what then explains why the threesome of General Muhammadu Buhari, who upstaged

President Shehu Shagari, and who was in turn upstaged by Babangida collectively defend the hegemony that produced them (even till date)? A "myth", or if you like, a "falsehood" which has united a people for so long around an organizing idea, must constitute their own "truth". Identity can define truth. If Abacha were alive today, one could make a safe guess that he will be in the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF). Yet, Babangida and Abacha stopped Shehu Musa Yar'Adua on his journey to the presidency (the latter even killed him), and Abacha deposed the symbol of Northern hegemony, Sultan Ibrahim Dasuki, etc. The author fails to explore these contradictions as they express themselves in domination and hegemony.

However, the excellent journalist in Maier comes to light again in his treatment of the antecedence of the *Sharia* exponent, Zamfara State Governor, Ahmed Yerima Sani. The author shows how, if Sani's means of financial comfort were brought before an *alkali* court, he might not be found fit to sit atop his Islamic enclave (pp.184-187). Sani, for the author, "indicated how lucrative it can be in Nigeria to be simultaneously a public servant and a businessman" (p.186).

The chapters on the Yoruba West and Igbo East examine the struggle of these parts against northern domination and the rivalries of the two "enlightened" nationalities to gain advantage over each other. While an off-duty carpenter, Gani Adams, has become, regrettably, one of the spokespersons for the most educationally advanced area of the country, the "glass cage" in which the Igbos are caught up forces Emeka Ojukwu, not only to carry on the tradition of Igbo-Yoruba rivalry, but to somewhat exclaim that "the very circumstances of Nigeria only permits an idiot to be 'detrified'".

"So Nigeria stands at a crossroads with three probable scenarios in front of it". The author concludes his narrative by looking at these scenarios, two of which he claims would produce severe consequences. The first scenario would demand addressing the systemic rot in Nigeria and initiating a talkshop to engineer a systemic change. If this fails, then the status quo can be perpetuated with its attendant crises and contradictions. The third will be the failure of the Obasanjo regime to arrest the drift, leading to a return to military rule and consequently, the shout of "To thy tents O Israel!"

One major flaw of this work is that even though the author has a somewhat clear and deep insight into the Nigerian crisis, the insight does not seem deep and penetrating enough, in the end, to produce the panacea

that would match the depth of the crises narrated in the book. Like the present power holders, particularly Obasanjo and his foreign props, Maier over-emphasizes the effect of corruption on the Nigerian crises, as if it were the chief evil. He fails to see that the difference between domination and hegemony, and state decay in Nigeria is often one of inflection. And that pervasive corruption is only a manifestation of state decay which is the result of the capture of the state since independence by a consumptive and incompetent elite coalescing around a particular ethnic group. Because he overemphasizes corruption and over-looks this linkage, he fails therefore to link the above with the dynamics of the disparate ethnic and religious identities contesting for the power matrix. It is this theory of the social composition of interests, which the French writer Michel Foucault speaks to in *The History of Sexuality*; where he describes the kind of power that is "mobile and transitory...producing cleavages in a society that shifts about, fracturing unities and affecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions ... in their ... minds".

It is this "mobile and transitory" power that produced Obasanjo through the construction of a zone of simultaneous engagement and negation that concedes so as to enthrone or revise an ethos. Unless we

look at the organic unity — if not, in fact, solidity — of the systemic rot (of which corruption is only one manifestation), domination and hegemony, clashing identities and the agency of international interests that demand minimal changes in the structure of the Nigerian state, we may not understand why the crumbling house has refused to fall finally.

However, Maier succeeds, in this readable prose, in traversing several social and political registers to capture the sensibilities — from the solemn to the banal — that define contemporary life in Nigeria. The central argument that overhangs his narrative is this: Nigeria is a potentially, in fact, inherently beautiful country that has been made so ugly and is virtually impossible to *beautify* again. But one can challenge this as a counter-factual argument. How long is 40 years in the life of a nation-state? The fact that Nigeria has not matched her manifest destiny in the past does not mean she will not do so in the future.

Perhaps, finally, a simple thing can be said about the paradoxes and contradictions that Maier narrates in this book: The house has not fallen because Nigeria is largely an aspiration. There are few realities that can obliterate an aspiration. Aspirations cling stubbornly to possibilities — even against reason. That is why, even with Maier's clear observations about the "Midnight in Nigeria", the possibilities of dawn are not extinct. GBS

Reconciling The Many Selves

BY ANGELA NWOSU



ALICE Walker's new book, *The Way Forward Is With A Broken Heart*, is not much different from some of her earlier works in terms of subject and expressive mode; she equally does not hide the fact that she has merged fiction and fact. The narrative is largely epistolary: it opens and ends as a letter to her former (first), husband who is Jewish, reminiscing on how

they lived through a ten-year marriage in the "volatile and violent" American deep South state of Mississippi.

As the author states, the narrative continues "with some of the stories that grew out of an era marked by deep-sea changes and transitions, stories that are mostly fiction...but comes out of a singular life." Consequently, the stories, which are of seven broad titles, start with that of her earlier marriage. The other stories act as parallels to this and involve relationships of various forms, especially mixed and broken marriages. What we subsequently find is a fairly complex panorama of American,

particularly black-American, sociology and history.

In itself, the title insinuates an exaggerated feeling of pain through which the stories narrated become a way of gaining maturity and clarity, eventually leading to a state of *feeling*, rather than of that of 'rightness' or 'wrongness'.

Although central to all the stories is love, Walker takes in tandem with this, more 'political' themes including environmental issues such as the depletion of the ozone layer; the race and craze for nuclear weapons; the ever swelling tide of violence in America as well as the continued displacement of peoples, re-presented in the experience of Indians. It would seem she thinks these ethical issues more urgent than "moral" issues such as lesbianism, though throughout the narrative, one overtly gets

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Alice Walker,
THE WAY FORWARD
IS WITH A BROKEN
HEART, Random
House, New York, 2000,
200pp.

Asha Bandele
THE PRISONER'S
WIFE, Pocket Books,
New York, 1999,
219pp.