

OF NATIONAL MYTHS, MYTHICAL NATIONS AND THE
NARRATIVISATION OF NIGERIA AS A POSTCOLONIAL STATE

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Abstract

As an oral form of cultural expression, myth occupies a contested and contestable site in cultural studies. Dominant and totalizing epistememes whose derivation is from the Western philosophical and scribal tradition have sought to locate myth and the mythic in the archives of prehistoric memory. The usual, received argument has been that myth issues from, and goes into, an oral, pre-scientific culture. In this regard, conscious, ideological efforts have always been made, especially by some in the Western academy, to constitute myth as a fixed, monumentalised cultural event without apportioning to it any agency in contemporaneity. In this paper, I engage myth as a dynamic, living tissue which participates in the contingencies and currents of modernity. I argue that myth even anticipates or prefigures the future. In this regard, I avow that it is rewarding to appropriate the avian trope of the ageless eagle which constantly renews its youth and strength as a fitting metaphor for myth. This is significant because though with its provenance deeply rooted in ancient tradition, myth constantly rediscovers and renews itself in concert with the motions of culture and post/modernity. Allied to this concern is my intention to negotiate myth as an oral form which intersects with, and enriches, writing. Myth, therefore, enjoys an enduring life-span whose diachronic possibilities necessitates its immanent presence and cultural energies in time past, time present and time future. It is, therefore, not merely incidental that myths are implicated in national formation and invention as they are constitutive sites for social, cultural, and political becoming. Nations weave themselves into existence through myths just like myths also weave nations into being. But the paper problematises the issue of nationhood as myth. Even though it recognizes myth as critical to the fabrication of nationhood, it enters a caveat that the myth-nation dialectic can only be necessitated by cultures and peoples and their shared experiences since myth is culture-specific and species-particular. In this case, the paper examines the representations of Nigeria in the national media and observes that more than anything, Nigeria emerges as an allegory, a mythical creation more than a cohesive, united entity thus making the very idea of her nationhood mythical.

The idea that nations are invented has become more widely recognised...literary myth too has been complicit in the creation of nations—above all, through the genre that accompanied the rise of the European vernaculars, their institution as language of state after 1820 and the separation of literature into various 'national' literatures by the German Romantics at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Nations, then, are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role (Brennan 49).

It is the mark of the ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy—and an apparatus of power—that it produces a continual slippage into analogous, even metonymic categories, like the people, minorities or 'cultural difference' that continually overlap in the act of writing the nation. What is displayed in this displacement and repetition of terms is the nation as the measure of the liminality of cultural modernity (Bhabha 292).

Introduction

In negotiating Nigeria as a nation, a mythical nation which has been constituted in turn by national myths, it is compelling to begin with two defining anecdotes. These anecdotes definitively underwrite her contingent and uncertain destiny as an imagined community, as a myth. The first anecdote relives a seemingly ambiguous dialogic encounter between Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's first president and Sir Ahmadu Bello, the premier of the Northern Region during the London constitutional talks leading to independence in 1960. Zik was believed to have, in a conciliatory and states-manly manner, appealed to the Sardauna to forget the inherent differences that threatened to pull them apart as nationalist leaders and founding fathers of the nation. He rationalised that the congealed differences in turn had spiralling, untoward repercussions on Nigeria and her national cohesion. As such, they should rather focus on those things that possessed the potentials to foster mutual understanding and unity rather than those that pulled them apart.¹

The Sardauna, in a measured response to Zik's perspective, told his interlocutor that it was imperative for them to understand their differences rather than forget them. In his estimation, Bello argued that to understand would be a more efficacious and productive way to build a nation-state with a heterogeneous character like Nigeria. To forget would be convenient but only for a moment. Sooner than later, the limits of the forgetfulness would manifest and call for a rethink on the political expedience of remembrance. On the other hand, to remember and understand would not necessarily and mechanically translate to a harmony of positions on how best to steer the imagined community called Nigeria to the desired destination. Indeed, to remember could also invite discomfiting and divisive tendencies with disastrous

repercussions. The two perspectives were simultaneously persuasive and repellent, constituting an oppositional discursive binary.

Superficially, what can be gleaned from this encounter gestures towards the politics of convenient forgetfulness, on the one hand, and the politics of uncomfortable remembering, on the other. While Zik chose the option of cautiously picking the way strewn with thorns and thistles towards coherent nationhood, Bello advocated an energetic discursive passage through the weeds. However, lurking beyond the surface can be identified the tensions resident in the political perspectives nourished by the two politicians as to how to engineer the Nigerian polity at that moment in history. The national imperative to forget or to remember, to be silent or to discuss with all its political significations still haunts the nation more than half a century after its incarnation as a postcolonial nation-state. The current debate on the desirability or otherwise of a national conference, sovereign or not, is reminiscent of the discursive skirmish between Zik and Bello.

It will seem that relationally, the pendulum of native wisdom swings in both directions and this perhaps resolves the paradox which settles in the positions by the two nationalist politicians. Zik was obviously involved in a political discourse whose narrative centre congealed around the well-known centrifugal tendencies which haunted the young Nigeria still ensconced in politically vulnerable swaddling clothes. These ruinous tendencies ranged from ethnic loyalties, regional affiliations, religious/cultural differences and political allegiances. Added to these were the pathological fears and animosities nursed by each of the so-called nationalist leaders against one another based on their political ambitions and the spectre of hegemonic domination by their respective ethnic configurations: the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba.

While Zik was willing to tactically avoid treading the political landscape cleverly planted with landmines and other dangerous explosives by the retreating British colonialists, the Sardauna felt that walking gingerly on the terrain was a wise lesson in statecraft and national definition. To forget, therefore, suggested that the portents would be silently contained. To remember meant to get to the core of the national conundrum and impose convenient limits to potential crevices that could threaten the national boulder. A more philosophical turn would have been to remember the not-too-uncomfortable and to conveniently forget the too uncomfortable. But as it was to be, the differences of the two leading 'founding fathers' became foregrounded sooner than expected.

But let me also focus on the second anecdote which is no less gripping and perhaps richly portentous too. In an apparent reflection on the contingent condition of Nigeria's imperial invention as a nation by the British, Obafemi Awolowo, the premier of the Western Region was believed to have announced that Nigeria was not a nation but a mere geographic expression and that he was first a Yoruba before a Nigerian.² Awo was merely expressing his fundamental freedom and right to comment with courageous conviction on the nation's state of affairs at that moment

in history, an opinion he was entitled to as his inalienable right to free expression. And he did it with forthrightness and sincerity.

This, however, instituted a national discourse whose politics of signification resonated widely. The pronouncement lent itself to a plethora of interpretive possibilities in a politically signifying sense. The main interpretation gravitated to what was perceived to be the subversive content and character of the words. To many observers, these positions gave him out as an ethnic jingoist, a defender of his Yoruba nation against national interests, and a purported nationalist who never nursed any pan-Nigerian feelings. These interpretations were largely uncharitable and as ethnocentric as any other in themselves. To profess fidelity to one's ethnicity as a marker of primary cultural identity does not putatively translate to an undermining one's faith in one's nation. It is, I should think, to be realistic and down-to-earth. And for this Awo can be spared the charge of national betrayal.

By referring to Nigeria as a mere cartographic manipulation, Awo was also underscoring the imperial cobbling of Nigeria by the British through the wilful construction of artificial and mechanical boundaries which failed to recognise the cultural peculiarities and social sensibilities of the disparate peoples. Geography and colonial fiat more than mutual consent and the will to coexist as a united entity dictated the imperial need for Nigerianness. This in itself negated one of the cardinal verities for national invention: communal consent, mutual willingness. In the end the politics of national resistance and the liberationist ethos it hoped to foster became undermined by the politics of ethnicity and regionalism which frustrated the aspirations for national cohesion and coherence. Indeed, he was to also comment on the notoriety of forging a united nationhood when he observed that "West and East Nigeria are as different as Ireland from Germany. The North is as different from either as China." (Quoted in Gunther, 773) These thoughts may well represent the opinion of a credible nationalist ruminating on the true state of a nation-state like Nigeria.

Theorising Nationhood

Theoretical elaborations on the notion of the nation are variegated and sometimes contentious. Etymologically, the word "nation" is a derivative of the Latin "natio" and the French "nacion" which signifies what has been born (Harper online). The idea of "birth" or being "born" is of symbolic significance to the nation. It constitutes the nation, in an ontological sense, as a living cell, a soul with a lived experience which is specific to it. If a nation is a soul because it is a living cell, it also implies that it possesses a spiritual dimension to its essence. This is in radical contradistinction to a soulless, cadaverous entity which lacks an animating presence. It also foregrounds the necessarily contingent, historically particular and culturally specific nature of the nation. In other words, nations are born in history, are products of history and have a cultural quality and value to them.

Teleologically, therefore, if nations are born, it translates that they possess the capacity to exist like human beings. Like human beings, they enjoy their youth, reach their majority and perhaps cease to exist by disintegrating in the ashes of

history or rising from the ashes to be born again like the proverbial phoenix. This much has received historical validation from the disintegration of many city states in Europe and empires/kingdoms in Africa and Asia. Many of these city states, empires and kingdoms have undergone the alchemic process of transformation through the kiln of history to become modern "nations" or "nation-states" today. What, however, remains intrinsic to them are that their births have been over-determined by the exigencies of particular histories within particular cultures and particular geographies.

But to return to the idea of the nation as a living soul which is crucial to our understanding of it, Ernest Renan corroborates this knowledge schema by postulating that the nation houses a spiritual principle, a sacred lever thereby underscoring the sacred quality with which nations are endowed. As he contemplates,

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are one, constitute this spiritual soul. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form... (19)

More valuable by far than common customs, posts and frontiers conforming to strategic ideas is the fact of sharing, in the past, a glorious heritage of regrets and of having in the future, (a shared) programme to put into effect or the fact of having suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together. These are the kinds of things that can be understood in spite of differences of race and language... Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of the more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort (19).

Resident in Renan's crystallisation of nationhood is its spirituality which is moored in its past historicity and present reality both pointing determinedly to future un/certainty. The soulfulness and spirituality of the nation assumes concrete materiality in its fusion in the temporalities of the past and present based on the fecund fund of memories and re-memories, and the sense of urgency to transmit the memories to engage the present realities and challenges posed by modernity and the voluntary commitment to a communal existence. All of these memories of the past and the willingness of the present to consensually perpetuate the values and heritages of the past converge to invent the nation.

In coming to terms with the presence of the past and the present as well as the future as complementarities rather than oppositional binaries in the fabrication of nationhood, Brennan initiates a discourse concerning the distinction between the nation as a product of (post)modernity and ancientness. He states with a definite sense of historicity:

As for the 'nation', it is both historically determined and general. As a term, it refers both to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous – the 'natio' – a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging. The distinction is often obscured by nationalists who seek to place their own country in an 'immemorial past' where its arbitrariness cannot be questioned (45).

Brennan implicates history in the idea of the nation but also gestures specifically at its ancient character as something consistent with immemorialness and as quintessential of modernity.

It is this same idea of the 'natio' that Raymond Williams (1983) mobilises in his reification of the nation:

'Nation' as a term is radically connected with 'native'. We are *born* into relationships which are typically settled in a place. This form of primary and 'placeable' bonding is of quite fundamental human and natural importance. Yet the jump from that to anything like the modern nation-state is entirely artificial (12, original emphasis).

Though Raymond's perspective on the original beingness of the nation gravitates precariously to what can be said to be its *folk* character, it teleologically establishes and accentuates the tension between the negotiation of the nation in its historical sense and the artificial fabrication of modern nations contemporaneous with eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe which also impacted positively or negatively on other marginal spaces during the defining moment of the colonialist and imperialist encounter. According to Paul Ricoeur (1965), indigenous colonised peoples massed in the 'natio' need to "forge a national spirit, and unfurl this spiritual and cultural revendication before the colonialist's personality". He further observes: "But in order to take part in modern civilisation, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandonment of a whole cultural past" (276-277). In the formerly colonised world, this appears to be the grand paradox of nationhood and national becoming, particularly in Africa.

Attempts at figuring out what a nation is and is not will continue to structure academic researches. But from the discursive trajectory above, a rhizome of ideas about the nation have been identified as important coefficients of a nation. These include the corporeality of a people, community life and participation, culture, historical legacies and the elemental will to live together, amongst others. We can, therefore, extrapolate a definition or a set of definitions. A *nation* may be a community of people who share a common language, culture, ethnicity, ancestry, or history and who see or imagine themselves as such. This idea of the nation is voluntaristic: without any form of violence, imposition or coercion. A *nation* in this perspective need not have any physical borders or defined, sacrosanct boundaries.

On the other hand, a nation can also refer to people who share a common, defined territory and sovereign government irrespective of their ethnic or racial configuration. This definition is closely allied to idea of the modern nation better understood as the "nation-state" as opposed to the more traditional and ancient

“natio”. Benedict Anderson’s theorisation of the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson 11) finds clear attributions in this concept of the nation. An imagined community may be seen as a nation because it is historically constituted, it is a stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture, and those who belong to it politically imagine themselves as one people. But lurking beneath this seeming homogeneity can be found an arrangement which is a product of hegemonic fiat, imperial domination, political violence, economic exploitation and social oppression. In many situations, these are the conditions that define the modern nation-state. For the avoidance of contradiction, it does not mean that the “nation” as an ancient arrangement is immune to such contradictions but these are minimal. It is, therefore, difficult to contemplate the nation in present history without thinking of modernity, particularly Euro-American modernity, with its political, economic, social and cultural institutions like governmentality, the law, the military and police, a civil service, diplomatic corps, an official language, amongst others.

Many African states - certainly not nations - lack this spiritual principle, the desire, the consent and the will to co-exist as Renan prescribes. And this explains why they are perpetually enmeshed in a sticky and inextricable web as they continue in an ever-receding, never-ending journey in the political wilderness in search of a centre and true nationhood. The result is that they continue to sink in the ever-deepening quagmire of the realities of their postcolonial existential vagaries. But this is not inexplicable. The idea of the nation largely hardly exists in modern Africa in a conventional sense. The mass of nations that populate the continent are historical mishaps and testaments of rites of violence. They are products of the vast, internal, external and, perhaps, eternal conspiracies of History all of which found eruption in the colonialist and imperialist project of Europe.

When the pure idea of a nation is applied to Africa, it is almost impossible to find a nation in its purity in modern Africa. Nationhood in Africa is as such notoriously difficult to define. It makes meaning only when sieved through the perfidies of history and narratives of violence scripted in monuments of blood by the colonising enterprise and empire-building project of European nations. Through this violence of history and history of violence, what has been aptly called the “curse of Berlin” (Adekeye 3), Europe erected artificial borders on the continent through its mindless and brutal scramble for and partition of Africa. Through the instrumentality of fraudulent treaties, treachery and what Fanon calls an array of bayonets and gunpowder,

Nigeria as Myth

One persistent substrating myth which defines Nigeria as a British creation is that it is a nation. Clearly, Nigeria’s nationhood is a myth when subjected to the normative principles and definitional proprieties of the nation. A nation is a group, community or people with a common genealogical line, cultural belonging, shared experiences, linguistic affinities and national aspirations and interests. Indeed, a nation is a soul

with a spiritual principle which animates it, endows it with cultural energies and galvanises it on the path of social and political be/longing. One propelling force in the constitution of nations is the capacity to weave myths and other narratives which mediate the nation and bring it into concrete existence. These myths become veritable communal property shared by the people as a unified cultural category. Usually, there is a central, exemplary figure who embodies the social, political and cultural institutions which bind together the people as a group or nation.

Nigeria clearly lacks the soul, the spiritual principle which should qualify it as a nation. As an imperial creation of the British, Nigeria lacks some of the constitutive habits of nations. It is rather a nation of nations with a complex of heterogeneous cultures, ethnic diversities, linguistic and ethnic identities. Thus, where a nation should install homogeneity in its cultural and social frontiers, Nigeria constitutes itself as a mosaic of cultures and ethnicities and linguistic backgrounds, something synonymous with a carnivalesque spectacle, the plural, multi-colouredness of the rainbow. Each of the over 200 ethnicities with different identities is from a different cultural background with hardly any similitude in institutional realities. Though in some exceptional cases like the United States America where such hybrid origins have become an asset and an elemental energy for national becoming, in Nigeria, such hybrid origins have become a disabling liability, a nightmare the country is struggling to wake from and transcend.

Against this trajectory of a multiple heritage which renders nationhood notoriously difficult to achieve, Nigeria also presents another mythic quality which is the absence of a coherent, determinate and stable national ethos which should define and give it a concrete and distinct identity. Rather, what Nigeria radiates is a contradictory, chaotic and nondescript ethos which is characteristically at variance with a national community. This absence is necessitated largely by another absence: the lack of a rich legacy of shared historical and cultural experiences which should serve as the cultural morphology and the grammar of values that inspire communal sentiments and the urgent aspirations for be/longing. The absence of such historical nodes and social networks which should constitute the dynamic for meaningful cultural transactions and strengthen the bonds of nationhood compromise the willingness to yield loyalty to the nation and encourage ethnic zealotry.

Naming strategies are critical to national formation. In Africa, the politics of national naming has become central to postcolonial engineering as many African countries asserted their political autonomy from their metropolitan overlords by renewing themselves through the symbolic process of self-renaming. Gold Coast, for instance, became Ghana. Rhodesia became Zimbabwe. Upper Volta, became Burkina Faso, Tanganyika was christened Tanzania, etc. Curiously, Nigeria was to be named Songhai in the tradition of the earliest Western Sudanese empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai as two modern nation-states, Ghana and Mali took the names of the other empires leaving Songhai to be appropriated by Nigeria (Achebe 7). These were not empty political mantras or cultural rituals. The renaming processes were rites of self-initiation announcing the arrival of the countries on the global map as independent and autonomous players in world politics. This conferred on them the

requisite political capital, the agency and subjectivity to determine their future destinies away from the colonial hegemony of Europe.

The case of Nigeria is somewhat difficult to discern in the political economy of naming on the continent. The myth in Nigeria's naming inheres in the fact that the country is believed to have been named by Flora Shaw, mistress and later wife of the first Governor-general, Lord Frederick Lugard. The name is believed to be a conflation or blending of the two words, "Niger Area", a fusion which produced Nigeria. It will seem these words were reposing peacefully somewhere, waiting to be roused from their somnolence or hibernation so that they can be affixed to the country following the ceremonial rites by Flora. This argument derives its assumed strength and cogency from the historical reality of the presence of the Niger River, one of the main reliefs that define the country's geography. But where is the Benue? This is another river which is also central to the divination and definition of the fate and making of the country. It spatially also forms a quintessential aspect of its relief and cartography.

Indeed, in the schematic reality of this myth is embedded the politics of European selective glamorisation of particular geographies, spaces and cultures as an insidious process of divide and rule. After all, the official British colonial administrative policy in Africa was the indirect rule system. The myth in this British naming system is that it never captured the topographical essence of the country in the first place and succeeded in creating an absence. The Niger and Benue Rivers are both locked together as they form a confluence in Lokoja after following their lone, snaky ways. It is little wonder that this city was once a capital of Nigeria. The Y-shaped confluence represents in masterful watery strokes the intended unity of the nation by Nature's design and any British permutation or manipulation to ignore one of them through wilful imperial arrogance is but a mythical contraption. Symbolically, however, this initial deliberate rite of omission through the imperial design of Britain laid the rubric for future omissions which have proved destabilising and centrifugal in the country's struggles to achieve authentic nationhood.

There is also another myth which shares kinship with the immediate preceding one. This is the myth of the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 by the same Lord Lugard, the lone antelope with a thousand footprints. Historiographical sources impress on us that the Northern and Southern protectorates were amalgamated to form a united nation in 1914 and Lugard presided over the rites. Native wisdom articulates that the efficacy of the ritual as a therapy can only be enforced by the purity of the votive intention and the sacrificial victim. In the case of the amalgamation, what constituted the intention and who was the victim? Was the amalgamation an act of altruism, political expediency or cultural convenience, or some or all or none of these reasons? How nationally rewarding has this colonial fiat of violently yoking together the heterogeneous peoples of Nigeria been? In other words, how has Nigeria fared since the amalgamation? The deficit in forging a national union appears to be the testament to our reality as a nation of nations. Consequently, the imperatives of British colonial administrative convenience, the mercantilist interests which superficially lurked beneath, profitable markets and investments and cultural

arrogance, not unifying the nation, were the impetus or propelling forces behind the political gerrymandering of the coloniser. The truth is, and still remains, that Nigeria has never been a nation and may never be a nation. This is not a curse. It is partly because of the nature of the nation and the willingness on the part of the constituents units to forge a nation of their dreams. That willingness, in the Nigerian experiment does not exist, at least in present history.

Amalgamation, by its very nature, is an administrative cause sufficient to unify and present a common front. In our case, it was meant to further divide us which is why united nationhood has been illusory and unmaterialistic even since the British departed. The questions which bear testimony to this unrealistic and self-serving amalgamation include the following: was the amalgamation an act of colonial benevolence or an ideological process of deepening British stranglehold on the conquered territory? Why were the “natives” and “heathens” not consulted? Agreed, colonialism imposes on its subjects a culture of silence and subordination but why were some parts of the amalgamated nation privileged over others and accorded greater political valence and voice in the running of the nation? And most crucially, why has the nation refused to cohere since the amalgamation if it was actually intended to unify the component parts?

Perhaps, the most ruinous and deceptive of all the national myths is that of the founding fathers of the nation as if there were no founding mothers. Nigerians are routinely subjected to epistemic assault as codified even in the two stanzas of the national anthem as part of our communal canon that the country had founding fathers. It is, therefore, possible to identify the gaps and absences inherent in the anthem and pledge as markers of our quasi-national identity. A careful negotiation of the anthem and pledge “locates the ambiguities, ambivalences and contradictions within the Nigerian nation-state...which privilege masculinity over femininity” (Tsaaior 36). This engendered political project is executed through the recognition of a patriarchal order and the masculinist politics it espouses to. For after all, Nigeria is a patriarchal society and the patrilineal principle should and must take precedence over the matriarchal in the construction of national symbols, the weaving of myths and the celebration of its iconic figures. Only patriarchs, not matriarchs, exist here. Only heroes, not heroines, have attained canonical status in the narrative tradition of nationalism and patriotism.

The personages - mainly men - identified as our heroes fought for independence and preserved our honour and pride as a people with a history and culture. These founders/heroes are Nnamdi Azikiwe, Tafawa Balewa, Ahmadu Bello, Obafemi Awolowo, Herbert Macaulay, etc. The towering stature and courage of these figures during the nationalist struggle and the politics of resistance against British colonialism and oppression cannot be reasonably denied. There is a consistent myth implied in this selective glorification and deification of old men as fathers of Nigeria. Where are the women who became co-creators of history with their rich legacies of courageous resistance against imperial hegemony? What about the legendary contributions of women like Margaret Ekpo, Fumilayo Kutu, Hajia Sawaba, etc. who were also actively engaged in the anti-colonial resistance movement?

One phallic idea which sticks out is that the nation is almost always constituted as a male creation. This is the reason why in “nationalist discourses, especially in patriarchal discourses, the mother-nation dialectic has been opportunistically employed by the founding fathers of nations to include women as part of the nationalist vanguard only to exclude them soon after freedom has been won (Tsaaior 51). As one critic insightfully posits, bodily fluids like blood, sweat and semen are used as metaphors for masculinity and as markers for national re/invention” (de Almeida 11). In attempting to inscribe Nigerian women into the scroll of the nationalist struggle and thereafter, the commitment of the patriarchal lot to the national aspirations of the anti-colonial ferment needs to be interrogated. For instance, whose particular interests were they protecting: theirs or their ethnicities or the country’s? When subjected to this intense evaluation of their roles as founding fathers, some of these nationalists emerge as pitiable ethnic jingoists, political opportunists, cultural demagogues and religious bigots whose interests in Nigeria were merely selfish, egocentric and self-aggrandising.

It is my reasoned opinion that though these so-called founding fathers mobilised their intellectual and political energies in the anti-colonial struggle to transcend the British, their sense of nationalism/patriotism was waylaid by personal and ethnocentric concerns. Nigeria meant so much to them in deficit, not in reality as the overriding ambition of some of them was to own the country as a personal/regional estate, not in trust for the rest of the component parts. This much became clear when political independence was won and the British retreated. The process of internal colonialism became instituted and entrenched. Regional domination of the country by some of the heroes became a deft political calculation, not the ideals of national becoming and belonging. As Ngugi wa Thiongó, the Kenyan writer aptly argues, many of the nationalists who rode to power following the political independence of their countries were infected with the imperial germ of the big man as their minds were corroded by colonial ideology. What was needed was to decolonise their consciousness so that they would have a progressive vision for their countries as a viable alternative for development (*Decolonising the Mind* 1).

Nigeria’s national situation fell into formulaic streak. Many of the nationalists and founding fathers became overly and inordinately ambitious for the soul of the fledgling country and soon the founding fathers became floundering fathers. They became intent on plunging the nation into a waiting precipice after conducting it like a locomotive without a rudder. Perhaps, they really meant well except that their patriotic energies were not productive enough. Or they walked into the landmines dutifully planted by the British. Or both. But one thing remains obvious. At the centre of Nigeria’s founding was an unarticulated, chaotic and confused mass of interests, ambitions and strategies which produced a tissue of paradoxes that lacked a meaningful and stable national agenda. The fractious character of this hotch potch of ideas about the new nation and what should constitute its soul became obvious when the true interests became manifest.

Conclusion

It is fascinating how these national myths are constructed, how they in turn construct the Nigerian nation and how they circulate freely within national discourses thus validating the crisis of nationhood Nigeria is enmeshed in. In this paper, I have restricted my attention to historiographical sources, autobiographical narratives and other modes of self-telling in their oral and scribal manifestations. But Nigeria's mythical and problematic nationhood is not restricted to these narrative arenas and events alone. The myth of the Nigerian nation can be encountered in the print and electronic media. In particular, national newspapers constitute a viable paradigmatic and analytic category in this regard. National newspapers, it must be stressed, are discursive and representational sites which institute modes of knowledge and interpretive grids which are central to the mythic construction of Nigerian nationhood. Media ownership and the ethnic origin/background of the owners in Nigeria, for instance, is a foremost index of how not to engineer nationhood.

Almost every media organisation in the country springs from an ethnic /regional threshold even though it announces itself as a national publication. Quite often, they nourish vested divisive interests which are sometimes antithetical to the aspirations of the nation. Beginning with *Iwe Iroyin* in the Western Region and *The West African Pilot*, all other succeeding publications have almost always followed the familiar path of championing sectional interests. An average Nigerian newspaper, and by extension, television or radio house, will always purvey a particular ethnic or geopolitical partisanship. In many situations, this partisanship is not progressive in temperament. This in itself would not have been a problematic thing. After all, everything in life is defined by politics and ideology. Indeed, not to have a political position or ideological interest is itself a politics. However, in the Nigerian context, national cohesion is not always the galvanising force in the narrativisation of the nation whether it is in the realms of oral/written accounts, popular cultural expressions or media representations. If anything, in many contexts, our sense of nationhood is actively negated or undermined and subsidiarised to personal, ethnic and religious interests. This throws into relief the idea of a nation whose claims to nationhood is at best a myth, and nothing more than a myth.

Notes

¹ One of the defining discourses on the founding of Nigeria as a nation and its future direction after political independence in 1960 is this encounter between these two leading nationalists and politicians. The discourse was to structure and define Nigeria's future destiny as a nation-state in a state of becoming. For more on this see Ahmadu Bello, *My Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962 and Nnamdi Azikiwe, *My Odyssey: An Autobiography*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1994.

² Much of the political thoughts of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, foremost Nigerian nationalist and politician, can be found in his *Awo: The Autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960.

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