

## The Nigerian Masquerade

The death this February of the comic actor Mr James Iroha, a.k.a Gringory, of my favourite Nigerian sitcom “New Masquerade” marked the passing of a great era. This was soap opera production that really encapsulated the spirit of One Nigeria with its delightful mix of the bombast of Chief Zebrudaya “alias 4.30” with the ambitious duplicity of Chief Jegede Sokoya, “the young millionaire and shon-of-the-soil”.

With the passing in quick succession onto the great beyond of its leading stars, Christy Essien Igbokwe a.k.a. Apena; Claude Eke who played the part of Jegede Sokoya; and now James Iroha who created the programme, the curtains have truly fallen for the last time on that Masquerade which we all grew up to love. Now we are left with the old masquerade which runs without rival in the comedy and entertainment stakes. I speak of the political masquerade, that long-running sitcom that plays out every day in the National Assembly.

Just like Chief Zebrudaya & Co, the political masquerade is pure theatre and bombast intended for entertainment value only and never to be taken too seriously. In this soap opera the actors play out the script of “Democracy, Federalism and Development”. At the end of each episode they leave us, the audience, either in tears or in stitches but with scant else to show for the attention that we give them.

There can be no doubting their theatrical skills though as they play at setting up political parties, complete with party logos and other political paraphernalia, although devoid of any meaningful agenda or ideology. This is not of itself a fault in their eyes as it allows their members to switch from playing a cameo role in one party to a major role in another party as smoothly as a customer moves from one hawker in Alaba market to another.

These masters of the guild of actors even produced a document which they proclaim to be a Constitution. Although drafted in Nollywood, our own land of make believe, the document comes complete with a solemn declaration “We the people” even though the people knew nothing about the document before it was proclaimed.

Like any good film production, the Nollywood Constitution gives the members of the political parties a script that they must memorize and recite as if they really meant every word of their recitation. Any party that fluffs its lines will not be allowed to appear on the political stage. Thus the Nollywood Constitution requires each and every party to have a ‘national’ outlook and to demonstrate its commitment to the ‘One Nigeria’ storyline by having offices in at least 24 of the 36 States of the Federation. Any party that says that it is tired of pretending and just wants to be real and true by restricting its campaign to those areas of the country that it is really committed to serving, and which its policies are designed to appeal to, cannot be given a role in this old masquerade.

This is make-believe of a different order because the people are made to believe in the performance not so much because of the quality of acting but under duress. Thus although Nigeria did not exist in 1899, the people are bullied and badgered into believing that it has always been. But the tears of the clown will eventually wash away the happy make-up and of tears and sorrow there have been much too much of late.

This has been the work of the murderous and cowardly terrorist group which now goes by the name of Boko Haram but which has been operating under many guises since the bloody mayhem that it triggered when Nigeria tried to host the Miss World Contest in 2002. More recent instalments of its evil harvest have been the slaughter of the Youth Corp innocents in April 2011 down to the recent Christmas Day massacres in Abuja and the most recent being the one this Easter Sunday in Kaduna. If it wasn't obvious before it is clear beyond argument now that this group has issued a fatwa against the political masquerade and now there is open talk of Northern Governors' Forum, South-South Governors Forum, and there is speak of a Development Agenda for Western Nigeria.

The tragedy is that it has taken this catalogue of evil for the political class to put their play acting on hold and to begin to face the realities on ground because there were many still small voices who have been ringing the alarm bells all along. Even now that the political class are hurriedly playing catch-up with the people's realities, the Nollywood Constitution continues to enjoin them to play the charade of national appeal.

But let us fast-forward to the next elections in 2015 and tell me if it is realistic to expect political parties from the South, led by Western-educated elites, to establish offices in Maiduguri, Borno, Kano and Kaduna and invite Boko Haram to their opening ceremonies. Are such party offices likely to fare any better than the churches that are being bombed to smitherings on a weekly basis? Who is it that will go out and campaign for votes in these Boko Haram-declared no go areas for those who like western education?

The important lesson which the governing elite have yet to grasp is that governance is not supposed to be a fire service only geared up to respond to emergencies; it is supposed to be forward looking and forward thinking.

The irony is that it was exactly 10 years ago in 2002, about the same time as Boko Haram was putting together its destructive agenda for Nigeria, that the Movement for National Reformation (MNR) was working on a constructive alternative for Nigerians. That alternative was a constitutional framework which would allow the diverse ethnic groups that were thrown together, without care or concern for their compatibility, to live together within their new shared identity on a more respectful basis. Under the leadership of the late Chief Anthony Enahoro, MNR called a press conference in Benin to launch the alternative Constitution that it had put together in place of the winner-takes-all one that had been produced in Nollywood. It was a forward-looking document produced by a forward-thinking organisation. The Preamble said it all:

*We the nationalities and peoples of Nigeria having cohabited as a country under arrangements conceived and imposed by colonial powers in their interests, wishing to continue our cohabitation as one country on the basis of our common consent in our own interest and with a view to encouraging peaceful, respectful and supportive relations between our nationalities and peoples, so as to advance our common interests, do through our freely chosen representatives, adopt this constitution for our Union of Nigeria.*

It is a sad indictment of the governing elite that although Chief Enahoro personally delivered a copy of that alternative Constitution to the then tenant of Aso Rock, Olusegun Obasanjo, it was ignored. The leader who was supposed to be thinking ahead, instead made it his duty to drown out the loud

calls for a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) that was being made by those who could hear the cracks in the African Titanic.

Even so the old sage Anthony Enahoro did his best to get popular buy in to the visionary document by opening its ownership from just MNR to the broader platform of all organisations who were “pro” National Conference (PRONACO). If he were watching the tragedy that is unfolding before us, he would perhaps lament over the fact that so many of our people have their eyes at the back of their heads such that we fail to see problems early enough but he would draw some consolation from the fact that in the MNR Constitution for Nigeria he left us another way for Nigeria.

*Dele Ogun is the Chairman of the Genesis Project a think tank on Nigerian affairs He was Chief Enahoro’s principal legal draftsman for the MNR Constitution for Nigeria which was first published in 2002 and can be found at [www.genesisnigeria.com](http://www.genesisnigeria.com).*