

BOOK REVIEW

TITLE: *MY BELOVED COUNTRY: THOUGHTS ON HEALING AND PRESERVING NIGERIA*
AUTHOR: MINAIBIM HARRY
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INTRODUCTION

One of the ways by which literary men express deep issues of love and passion is the use of a persona to make a direct address to the object of that love. The literary landscape is replete with poems and letters addressed to lovers, subjects of unrequited love, and even inanimate and abstract objects. Love letters or poems do not proceed on the platform of objective analysis of contemporary and historical events. In *My Beloved Country: Thoughts on Healing and Preserving Nigeria*, Minaibim Harry adopts a rare code of engaging a lover: switching between two contradictory codes of direct address and cold analysis. The effect is that we cannot accuse him of being emotional; neither can we say he is too cold or detached to affect the deeper cords of passion.

My Beloved Country (unlike Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*) is not a fictional work depicting the racial tension in apartheid South Africa. As the sub-title *Thoughts on Healing and Preserving Nigeria* suggests, it is an attempt to give back to the Nigerian his dignity and humanity. It is an appeal to all shades of Nigerians to participate in social, economic, cultural and political renaissance. It is potpourri of logic and emotional appeal to accomplish this task. As the author says on page 5, "... we have been very terribly devalued for so long that we are now accustomed to the perennial disdain ... to accept the abnormal situation as normal."

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

My Beloved Country is composed of nine chapters. Each chapter is metaphorically an academic research, an experiment in which the author arrives at the same values. Consequently, the publication is the outcome of incontrovertible findings. The first chapter appropriately entitled "State of the Nation" is a mirror of the general state of affairs in the Nigerian nation. It employs anecdotes and statistical facts to present an overview of the Nigerian social and infrastructural environment. The health sector, employment, shelter and housing, roads, power, potable water, education, safety and security are presented. Although the picture which emerges is dismal, the author rules that we must change or break.

The second chapter is entitled “The Nigerian Dream” but could as well have been entitled “My Dream for Nigeria”. It is a vision held by the author and, presumably other well-meaning Nigerians with an irrevocable love for the country, irrespective of party affiliation. He captures this in a vision statement on page 20:

*We are the citizens of a **great nation** with **unlimited opportunities for prosperity** where **supremacy of life** is entrenched and everyone is given **equal opportunities** to pursue and attain their personal dreams, in a society governed by the **rule of law** and which guarantees **freedom and justice** for everyone*
(emphasis by author)

This ultimate picture is buttressed by the fictional depiction of two foreigners discussing how to immigrate to Nigeria (in much the same way that most of the world scrambles to go to America).

Harry presents six cardinal pillars of the Nigerian dream as comprising:

1. A great people whose diversity is harmonized to form a strong nation with a great ethos;
2. A nation of unlimited opportunities for prosperity where hard work is rewarded and laziness censured;
3. A nation where human life is so valued that both government and citizens will do everything to save citizens' lives and even wage war against any nation that takes a Nigerian life;
4. A nation where the system of rewarding merit will ensure that only the best attain leadership and responsibility, irrespective of circumstances of birth;
5. A nation where citizens will demand and abide by the rule of law through the strengthening of institutions rather than persons;
6. A nation where citizens will be ready to forgo some of their freedom in order attain a higher, ultimate freedom; and where justice will exalt her.

He believes that compulsive patriotism, economic boom (from reversed brain drain and foreign direct investment), peace and security, continental and global leadership, tourist attraction and immigrant appeal would be our benefits if the Nigerian dream is realized. He suggests that the symbol of the Nigerian dream should be a “Statue of Fairness” similar to the American Statue of Liberty. However, he does not suggest a specific design for the Statue of Fairness. Harry recommends a “Sovereign Declaration”, a pledge to be made to Nigerians just as Nigerians recite the National Pledge. It reads:

The Federal Republic of Nigeria makes the following irrevocable pledge to: Be a great nation all Nigerians will be proud of, Provide Nigerians with unlimited opportunities for prosperity and wealth, Guarantee the supremacy of life for all Nigerians, Provide all Nigerians with equal access to opportunities, Make every

action of the federal government subject to the rule of law, Guarantee freedom and justice for every Nigerian (p.38)

Just as one wonders who should be the directing mind and will of this pledge, the author states in bold print on page 39 that “It is an impeachable offence for any president who violates any part of this Sovereign Declaration”. Consequently, the president is also bound by “The President’s Pledge” as follows:

As the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, I pledge that I shall: Build Nigeria into a great nation which all Nigerians will be proud of, Provide Nigerians with unlimited opportunities for prosperity and wealth, Guarantee the supremacy of life for all Nigerians, Provide all Nigerians with equal access to opportunities, Make every action of my government subject to the rule of law, And guarantee freedom and justice for every Nigerian. So help me God. (p.39)

The president agrees that “I recognize that I stand impeachable if I violate any part of this Sovereign Declaration” (p. 39).

Responsibility for publicizing the Nigerian dream and its components is placed upon the media, human rights groups, students, and citizens generally.

The author suggests that driving the Nigerian dream would entail the declaration of 10 National Development Goals (NDGs) between 2015 and 2020, using the acronym APPEARANCE. We find this on page 41 as follows:

1. Achieve uninterrupted electricity/power supply
2. Promote agriculture and guarantee food security
3. Provide first class health care
4. Eradicate terrorism, kidnapping and armed robbery, etc
5. Attain full employment
6. Refine crude oil locally and stop fuel importation
7. Achieve compulsory education
8. Nurture true federalism and the rule of law
9. Combat and defeat official corruption
10. Ensure, free, fair and credible elections

In fairness to the author, between pages 42 and 77, he supplies the methodology for attaining these National Development Goals.

Leadership is an important component of the Nigerian dream. Harry repeatedly refers to Nigeria’s political leaders as “rulers” because pursuant to the Nigerian dream there is a “desperate need for genuine leaders” (p. 77). Using the late Nelson Mandela as a model he proposes that genuine leaders exhibit vision; character; self-sacrifice; integrity/authenticity; compassion and empathy; problem solving skills; command voluntary followership rather than “forced loyalty” (p. 83); and empower others.

His vision for Nigeria after 2020 is like a prophetic utterance not different from the components of the 10 NDGs. It culminates in a new acronym for Nigeria, namely: “New International Giant Emerging Rapidly in Africa” (p. 88).

The “Nigerian Dream” is the most elaborate chapter of the book. It takes on many issues which could easily have been broken down into different chapters. The treatment of many “dream” items in one chapter makes it seem like “burying answers in an examination script”

In the third chapter, Harry addresses himself to a topic that seems parochial yet with implications for Nigerians generally. It is couched in the form of a question; “Should President Jonathan Contest in 2015?” The author attempts to answer this question by asserting that 2015 is a defining year for Nigeria and for President Goodluck Jonathan. He recalls that previous rulers of Nigeria had defining years that either made them heroes or villains in the estimation of history. The significance of 2015 is also underscored by the prediction by the National Intelligence Council of the United States of America that Nigeria would disintegrate in 2015.

Harry makes an analysis of the arguments for and against President Jonathan contesting in 2015 and advises that “Elections should not be won by threat; they should be won through the ballot” (p. 99). He laments that “the root causes of the dangerous fight for Aso Rock” may be summarized as follows:

- The Nigerian presidency is the most lucrative business in Africa;
- It is the most powerful office in the world;
- Nigerians trust only candidates from their zones (in his words “... our rulers ... have not been able to earn the respectable status of statesmen. They have failed to rise above ... glorified tribal representatives or party advocates”) [p. 102].

The author goes ahead to answer the question of whether President Jonathan should contest in 2015 by adducing constitutional and moral arguments. Constitutionally, the president is entitled to contest by the provisions of Sections 135 and 137 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended. Nevertheless, he suggests that the president might choose to sacrifice his constitutional right to contest (in the interest of national peace and unity) or contest (and possibly win) then resign by May 2018 after he would have served eight years from the time he took the Oath of Office as Acting President. Interestingly, Harry advises President Jonathan to search his conscience and “choose the heroic way out!” (p. 118).

The title of the fourth chapter, “The Dog and the Baboon in Blood” is taken from a statement credited to General Muhammadu Buhari (a chieftain of the All Progressives Congress, APC) predicting unpleasant consequences if the 2015 general elections are rigged. The author uses the opportunity to affirm that election rigging demeans us. He advises political parties, especially the ruling party not to rig elections. He also

expresses the opinion that political parties should develop capacity to collect evidence of electoral malpractice so as to succeed in overturning flawed elections in court. He suggests that political parties may draw upon the resources of international observer groups to obtain such evidence where their resources are limited. Harry argues that it is less expensive and more reasonable to prevent election rigging than to quell violence afterwards.

In line with his problem solving style, the author suggests that electoral violence and rigging could be prevented in 2015 if security personnel, electoral personnel and party agents are not compromised, and if voters do not sell their votes. He proposes that while it is our duty to defend our votes, we need not do so violently. Consequently, he advises General Buhari and President Jonathan to cooperate with and to “Love Nigeria more than your party ... Remember that good luck is a gift from God but it has to be retained by wisdom” (p. 135). He also appeals to Professor Attahiru Jega (INEC Chairman) to conduct “... a free, fair and credible election ...” (p. 137). Harry concludes that “... there could be serious consequences if the 2015 elections were mismanaged” (p. 138).

It is instructive that he used “mismanaged” rather than “rigged”. This suggests that the conduct of credible elections is a collective responsibility. Little wonder he had earlier called on all to “... pray for the peace of our country because only in the peace of Nigeria will we also have peace to carry on with our lives and businesses” (p. 137).

In the fifth chapter entitled “State of Emergency and Election in the North East”, Harry addresses the thinking in some quarters that elections may not hold in the North East States of Nigeria in 2015. His view is that elections must hold in the North East so as to give the elections credibility and legitimacy. Furthermore, failure to hold elections in the North East may encourage an incumbent government to misapply its power by declaring a “State of Emergency” to prevent or cancel elections in States where it is not popular. Ultimately, it would also create the impression that terrorists have subdued the government in the battle for supremacy in those areas.

The author is of the opinion that the battle against terror could be won through improved military capacity, winning the hearts and souls of the victims of insurgency (including potential recruits), an innovative indigenous policing (as against the more vociferous calls for “State Police”), the tracking of movement of funds, greater vigilance by the Immigration and Customs Services, change of military uniform, a soft approach through diplomatic shuttle, exhibition of love and forgiveness to the insurgents, and compliance with rules of engagement.

Medium and long term solutions to insurgency proposed by the author include indigenous weapons manufacturing, fencing our borders and surveillance, strategic master plan of sustained development of the North East region, national military service programme to modify the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) programme, and the inculcation of a culture of patriotism and national security, using the school system, the

media, the National Orientation Agency (NOA), and the movie industry. He appeals to the insurgency fighters and their sponsors to repent.

He concludes that elections should hold in Yobe, Adamawa, and Borno States.

In the sixth chapter entitled “The Major Problem with Nigeria”, Minaibim Harry sees politics as the “major” problem with Nigeria. He affirms that the conduct of political rulers, within the parties and across political parties is causing distress to the masses. The author censures the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) for such events as the abduction of Chris Ngige (when he was governor of Anambra State); the unlawful impeachments of Rasheed Ladoja (former governor of Oyo State) and Joshua Dariye (former governor of Plateau State); the substitution of the name of (Chibuike) Amaechi with that of (Celestine) Omehia without cogent and verifiable reasons in the 2007 governorship elections in Rivers State; the loss of governorship elections in Anambra, Edo, Osun and Ekiti States through findings of rigging by the courts; the Nigeria Governors’ Forum (NGF) Election at which Governor Amaechi who scored 19 votes was adjudged by the PDP to have lost to Governor Jonah Jang who scored 16 votes; the division within the Rivers PDP, the suspension of Governor Amaechi, the attempt to impeach the Speaker with five members in a 32-member house, and the suspicion that the impeachment of the Governor was the ultimate objective; the emergence of the New PDP and the subsequent defection of the New PDP members to the APC.

He identifies lack of capacity to manage growth and success, impunity, immoral conduct (like the recognition of Jang as NGF Chairman, selective prosecution by the EFCC and impeachment of opponents), lack of foresight and ill-treatment of members, arrogance in speech and conduct, divide and rule, violence and brutality, condoning corruption, and election rigging as the traits of the PDP. He advises that it might change by developing a global vision, managerial capacity, reciprocal respect and loyalty to members, a culture of morality, foresight rather than impunity, a movement from divide and rule to unite and lead, eradication of official corruption, the pursuit of reconciliation and electoral integrity.

Harry recommends that there is a strong need to separate the office of president from the leadership of the party. This is because:

... aggrieved parties either wrongly or rightly perceive both the party and the presidency as one and the same. This weakens the ability of the presidency to resolve the party’s internal crises which then result in break ups ... The presidency must be higher than the PDP, in the interest of the country. The president is not the president of the PDP but the president of the entire country! ... The public respect for the presidency seems to be at its lowest ebb ... Let the PDP act immediately to protect the number one office because it stands to gain a lot from it (p. 214).

This is indeed an empirical observation that the Office of President has descended into the arena of political intrigues to the detriment of good governance and defence of the constitution.

The author continues by advising the APC to forge lasting values and internal democracy; not to proceed on the premise of vengeance against the PDP.

He expresses the need for a special regulatory body for political parties (separate from the INEC). He even names it “Nigerian Parties Regulatory Commission”, although I would prefer to qualify parties with “Political” in order to avoid ambiguity. This proposal is workable as Sierra Leone actually has such a regulatory body for political parties.

Harry would want a second alternative political party to challenge both the PDP and the APC. He also censures the process by which political parties choose their flag bearers, contending that it creates exclusiveness and prevents worthy and capable people from getting into office. He especially considers the huge fees charged for the purchase of nomination forms as deliberately designed to exclude those who cannot afford the fees. Consequently, he proposes a constitutional ceiling for nomination form fees as well as a constitutional amendment to allow independent candidates to contest.

Finally, he stresses the importance of voter education both to politicians and voters as a means of getting out of Nigeria’s “major” problem.

Chapter seven is entitled “An Unusual Kind of Amnesty”. It is a case for the proclamation of political amnesty in favour of all politicians who had stolen public funds – provided they would return all such stolen funds. The author terms it a “Financial Truth and Reconciliation Initiative”. It would provide for anonymous return of funds while the recipients of the amnesty would provide advice on how to plug the loopholes which promote corruption. The programme would sensitize politicians on faithful stewardship, assist the EFCC and the ICPC to recover looted funds more easily, save the nation the cost of litigation, clean up the corruption mess, and provide a fresh start in 2015. This proposal is made responsibly in the conviction that conscience may achieve more than punitive measures, especially when it is considered that apart from those who are corrupt by choice, there are also politicians who are corrupt by association and those who choose not to be corrupt.

Finally, Harry admonishes the corrupt politician to accept amnesty for the redemption of his soul.

Well-meaning advice is intended for the edification of man. However, when advice is rejected or treated with disdain, negative consequences may result. In chapter eight entitled “Four Negative Scenarios Nigeria Must Avoid”, Minaibim Harry, employs the tones of passionate reflection and analysis to throw up a sequence of events that may follow the failure by Nigerians to overcome the “state of the nation” and the proposals presented by him for the edification of the nation.

The first scenario is increase in anarchy caused by Boko Haram insurgency, kidnapping, militancy, the menace of Fulani herdsmen, unpopular impeachment attempts, war among legislators, registration and or deportation of non-indigenes from

some states, politically motivated assassinations, and the disruption of court proceedings in some states.

The second scenario is simply the likelihood of the birth of armed struggle in resistance to an evil government, similar to what happened in apartheid South Africa.

Scenario number three is the possibility of a military coup. Harry appeals to the military not to yield to temptation even if they are invited to intervene. He cites the case of Malawi where the military supported only what was lawful in the public interest. The scenario of military intervention is particularly to be avoided because it might be interpreted as a regional agenda, it could trigger a counter coup, and destroy all the gains in our democratic development. The author suggests ways that could permanently prevent military coup in Nigeria. They include the building of a professional, non-partisan military corps; the stoppage of divisive Court Martial; and the adoption by the military of a nobler, public interest advisory role to the political class.

The fourth scenario is the ultimate break up of Nigeria. Harry recalls his experience as a little boy during the Nigerian Civil War (sometimes called the Nigeria-Biafra War) in order to demonstrate that war does no one any good. However, in trying to answer the question of whether Nigeria can or should break up, he embarks on an assessment of fallacious popular opinion on why Nigeria cannot break up. The “lies” about Nigeria include:

1. Nigeria was put together by God and so would not break (The amalgamation was done by man);
2. God will not allow Nigeria to break up (Yet God allowed the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia to break up);
3. The unity of Nigeria is non-negotiable (Everything is negotiable. This is particularly offensive to the author who says “... nothing is done to prevent the need for people to break away while everything is done to frustrate people who want to break away” p. 284); and
4. Military might will keep Nigeria together forever (“At some point, something must give”) [p. 290].

Harry addresses himself to whether Nigeria should break up, and answers the question with an “... emphatic NO! I believe in Nigeria ... Let’s fight for Nigeria” (pp. 292-293). He tenders 12 reasons why Nigeria should remain one. The reasons may be summarized into: international respect; the likelihood of further break up or poor leadership; complementary natural resources in different parts of the nation; the disruption of personal and business relationships; and the possibility of war.

Against this background, Minaibim Harry proposes a “Special National Conference” that would help Nigerians achieve consensus and heal anger, bitterness and hatred against the Nigerian State.

The ninth and last chapter of *My Beloved Country* is entitled “Avoiding a Bloody Revolution”. It is essentially a recap of the vision expressed in the second chapter. However, in this chapter the author proposes a different form of revolution - activism in eight critical areas of our national life. They include voter activism, cultural (a values-based) revolution, the entrenchment of the “golden rule” (love) as operational basis for all relationships, spiritual revolution (particularly by the religious class), media activism, the rise of “whistle blowers”, judicial activism, and legislative activism.

CONCLUSION

Minaibim Harry's *My Beloved Country: Thoughts on Healing and Preserving Nigeria* is the response by a genuine patriot to the debate on the issues surrounding our collective existence. Written in free flowing, unpretentious language, the book lays foundation, presents historical evidence, and offers solutions to various national issues. Perhaps one of the most attractive features of the work is the use by the author of “Final Word” at the end of each chapter. This is a mnemonic device that recaps the main points of the chapter and elevates the author beyond the pedestrian apartment of an ordinary critic to the mansion of compassionate philosopher and adviser to citizens and statesmen. The “final word” is also similar to the literary device of parallelism, a repetition with variation that offers the reader another window through which understanding of the issues may be attained.

Furthermore, there is a cyclical thematic harmony in the book. The theme of repentance and the dignity of the Nigerian recur throughout the book. It is an offer to abandon the old, unproductive ways in favour of a regenerate life. For instance, the second chapter “The Nigerian Dream” contrasts with the first chapter “State of the Nation” and sets the tone for the subsequent analytical framework in the rest of the work. The activism proposed in the ninth and last chapter is like a direct address to key players in our socio-economic and political life to play their parts in the realization of the Nigerian dream - the repentance, healing and dignifying of all Nigerians irrespective of background. In the idiom of classical and jazz music, the book is composed in ternary form, comprising identification and analysis of mischief, proposals for curing the mischief, and repeat of solutions as a finale.

The book is well printed on neat, bright bond paper. There are no manifest proof errors in the text. The cover design of predominantly green and white points the reader to the context of the work. The placement of the title in white within a green map of Nigeria douses any ambiguity about the context or subject.

As we remarked earlier, some of the chapters could have been broken into two or more chapters. For instance, the second chapter “The Nigerian Dream” has so many elements that two other chapters could have been formed from it.

Finally, even when the author sounds idealistic (for instance, in his recommendation that amnesty be granted politicians who had looted the treasury) he is motivated by a desire to realize the larger goal of national preservation, reconciliation

and healing. Combining anecdotes that serve as extended metaphors (like the parables of Jesus Christ), historical facts, and logical analysis, Minaibim Harry strikes at the heart, the conscience of his fellow Nigerians. He is both objective and passionate. He is a lover, a philosopher and a guide. The question a cynic might ask is: will this generation of Nigerians act on such profound counsel? Will we adopt the “Nigerian Dream”?

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Thank you.