

TEXT OF KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY

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AT THE CONVERSATION AFRICA SERIES 2021

COURTESY OF LEGACY YOUTH FELLOWSHIP

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VENUE: THE CITADEL,

30, KUDIRAT ABIOLA WAY, OREGUN, IKEJA,

LAGOS, NIGERIA.

THEME: POINTING THE WAY FORWARD: IF IT IS

TO BE, IT IS UP TO ME

Protocols

I welcome you all to the inaugural event of The Conversation Africa (TCA) series. It is fitting that it is holding at The Citadel, home to the consummate nation builders of the Citadel Global Community Church (CGCC), and I commend the Legacy Youth Fellowship, torchbearers of the New Nigeria, for their contributions towards enriching the national discourse in the quest to build a great nation.

I recall that this programme was earlier slated for November 2020, on the heels of the awakening of our nation by an unprecedented rallying of Nigerian youth around the #EndSARS protests, but had to be rescheduled due to emergent

circumstances. Let me, therefore, use this opportunity to once again salute young Nigerians, male and female, who took it upon themselves to demand an end to police brutality and to spearhead a rejection of the systems of oppression encapsulated in the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Again, I commiserate with the families of those Nigerian youth whose patriotism was met with brutality and who lost their lives in that historic demonstration of youth advance. I also empathise with the families of the members of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) and other law enforcement agencies who were killed by the misguided elements that hijacked the #EndSARS protests, thereby precipitating the unfortunate anti-climax of a worthy cause. As patriots, we have a responsibility to ensure that the nation that these Nigerians died for does not go down the drain.

You may recall that, as these events unfolded, we took a stand amidst other voices of reason and changed the SARS narrative from a State-Aided Robbery Squad (SARS) to a Strategic Agenda for a Restructured State (SARS).¹ While condemning the descent into violence and the senseless attacks on security outposts by enraged Nigerians, we took the side of the Nigerian people and spoke in defence of the Nigerian youth because the signs were indicative that our nation was on the brink of a state of emergency.

Seven months later, as our nation is confronted with a cocktail of delicate issues that border on the survival and destiny of the

Nigerian state, and as divergent opinions saturate the civic space, it has become all the more pertinent to create platforms of reasoning, with a view to distilling ideas and magnifying solutions-based perspectives. This is why I commend the Legacy Youth Fellowship on this occasion of the flag-off of The Conversation Africa series.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the present condition of our nation is a paradox of gargantuan proportions. We have the 8th largest proportion of arable land in the world with about 34 million hectares of land available for agriculture,² yet we are 98th out of 107 countries on the Global Hunger Index.³ We have the 11th largest proven oil reserves in the world⁴ and, at a point, Nigeria was the world's 6th largest oil producer,⁵ yet we rely on imported refined petroleum products as our domestic refineries continue to attempt to fly with one wing. With a median age of 18.1,⁶ our country has one of the most youthful populations in the world and a potentially vibrant productive workforce; yet, we also have one of the highest rates of unemployment in the world at 33%.⁷ We have “over 34 commercially viable solid minerals deposits”⁸ with each state of the federation endowed with diverse mineral resources;⁹ yet, every month, the 36 states of the federation go to Abuja to receive “pocket money,” technically known as allocations from the federation account, without which they cannot survive. We are one of the most religious countries in the world, yet we are

among the frontrunners in negative indices, from the Corruption Perceptions Index¹⁰ to the Misery Index.¹¹

At Independence, Nigeria was considered Africa's beacon of hope, a nation that would bring stability and peace to Africa; yet, six decades later, our nation is breakdancing on the tightrope of faulty foundations. The Nigerian landscape is overrun by criminal gangs; we eat news of cold-blooded murder for breakfast, woes of homegrown terrorism for lunch, and tales of moonlight abductions for dinner. Students of secondary and tertiary institutions have become targets in an audacious criminal enterprise even as secessionists launch daring attacks on institutions of state and as swathes of Nigerian territory fall into the hands of terrorists. Yet, in the midst of these gloomy indices, I am reminded of the words of Sir Winston Churchill: "The price of greatness is responsibility."¹² The alarming state of our nation calls for the concerted efforts of patriots, young and old, who must take responsibility for the destiny of Nigeria.

A transgenerational conversation around pathways to national redemption has become all the more necessary because the #EndSARS protests energised the political consciousness of a generation, such that critical questions are now being asked without fear or favour. I am referring to the "Sòrò sókè" phenomenon typified by a breed of audacious young Nigerians primed to challenge the status quo.

Young Nigerians are asking why a country so rich wears the inglorious badge of the poverty capital of the world.¹³ They are asking why a country whose citizens are being appointed to lead at the highest levels in other countries has failed to produce the right kind of leaders for itself. Young Nigerians are asking why they have to be subjected to a system that stifles innovation in the 21st century when the world is fast embracing a digital economy. They are asking why they have to queue for days and weeks at the offices of the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC) to obtain their National Identification Number (NIN), and why several aspects of our national life are still stubbornly technology averse when, from the comfort of their homes and internet-enabled devices, they conduct sensitive financial transactions across the globe, initiate the process of raising millions of dollars for their Fintech start-ups, participate in global stock markets, enrol in international programmes, and rally the world around noble causes.

The young people of this nation have also been asking why a country with a predominantly youthful population, with over 65 per cent under 25 years old,¹⁴ has a cabinet where the average age of a minister is 61 years old¹⁵ and there is no cabinet minister below 35 years old.¹⁶ They are angered by the fact that, by the time their clamour for inclusion of younger

Nigerians in the cabinet seemed to be heeded, they were handed one with the baggage of “Pantamism.”¹⁷

Indeed, since the #EndSARS protests, young Nigerians have continued to challenge the status quo from a generational perspective. They are asking why they have a president who is nearly 80 years old when youth form the bulk of the voting population. They point to the Emmanuel Macron phenomenon that saw the emergence of a 39-year-old president in France. They remind us of Oleksiy Honcharuk who became prime minister of Ukraine at 35 and who was appointed by then 41-year-old President Volodymyr Zelensky. They remind us of El Salvador’s Nayib Bukele who became president of his country at 37; of Carlos Quesada who became president of Costa Rica at 38; of Leo Varadkar who became prime minister of Ireland at 38; and of Jacinda Ardern, a woman, who was voted prime minister of New Zealand in 2017 at the age of 37. Consequently, we have seen determined young Nigerians fired up and ready to take their country back from the so-called gerontocrats. From talks of a youth party¹⁸ to agitations for a young person as president,¹⁹ the Nigerian youth seem convinced about the way forward for Nigeria. As I have said in the past, this awakening of socio-political consciousness among the youth is a positive development.

However, even as our nation is confronted with renewed agitations for youth participation from the cohort we may refer

to as “Youth 1,” we also hear the drum beats of war coming from “Youth 2,” a distressed, discontented and indebted cohort of young Nigerians, many of whom do not have the privilege of education or exposure as do the first cohort. The members of the “Youth 2” cohort are not too keen on seminars and conversations and, as such, you will not find them at events such as this. Incidentally, they are the ones who have decided the outcomes of your elections. It was this cohort that, in effect, ended the #EndSARS protests on an anti-climactic note. Some of them are behind the chaos on the streets and in communities across Nigeria.

In the North, the “Youth 2” cohort are the almajiris who have roamed the streets for decades without a guarantee of survival. Some of them have taken to banditry, while others have found a leader in Abubakar Shekau, the cat with nine lives who has reportedly been killed nine times, and have become foot soldiers for Boko Haram. In the South-East, some of them have trooped after the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). They have found a leader in Nnamdi Kanu, enrolled in the Eastern Security Network (ESN), and are unleashing mayhem on state institutions. In the South-West where you call them “Area Boys,” some of them have found leadership in the likes of MC Oluomo. More recently, some of them have trooped after Sunday Adeyemo, also known as Sunday Igboho. While some of you among the “Youth 1” cohort are talking about a youth

party and a young president for Nigeria, the leading voices in the “Youth 2” cohort have warned that elections will not hold in their domains.²⁰ Meanwhile, some in the same “Youth 2” cohort have pledged allegiance to political godfathers ahead of the next elections.²¹

Amidst this proliferation of voices, I am reminded of a Yoruba proverb: “Bí ọmọdé bá ẹ̀subú, á wo iwájú; bí àgbà bá ẹ̀subú, á wo èyìn” – “When a child falls, he looks forward, but when an elder falls, he looks back.” At the risk of kindling your annoyance, permit me to take you back to our national history and point you to a fact that you may not have taken note of before now – the fact that youth brought us where we are. To buttress this assertion, permit me to refer to excerpts of a keynote address I prepared for the Emerging Political and Economic Leaders’ Summit held on Tuesday, May 8, 2018, at the Yar’Adua Centre, Abuja, with the theme “The Nigeria of Our Dream: Between the Generation That Destroyed Nigeria and the Generation That Will Fix it.” I could not honour that invitation as my mother passed away a few days before, but I was represented by my sister, Dr. Oby Ezekwesili. A portion of that address reads, and I quote:

“The Nigerian dream was etched in creeds written in our founding documents; it was crafted in speeches made by our founding fathers; it was chorused in the lyrics of our founding anthem; it was painted in the

columns of our national flag; it was organized in the design of our coat of arms; it inspired hope; it stirred up patriotism; it gave us the promise of a prosperous nation where no one is oppressed and where, though tribes and tongues may differ, in brotherhood we would stand as one great nation. It gave us a reason to proudly say to Africa and the world, "I am Nigerian." But today, it appears that the dream is dead!

"The apparent death of the dream began with an ailment when some of our founding politicians, some young and some not-so-young, began to drift away from the tenets of that dream through questionable conduct. The ailment became terminal when some young, energetic and revolutionary army officers, mostly in their 20's, gave a death blow to the democratic process. The dream finally died on May 24, 1966, when a 31-year-old Head of State destroyed the foundation of federalism and made Nigeria a unitary system. The dream was placed in a coffin when young vengeful army officers launched a counter coup, killed fellow army officers, paved the way for a pogrom and plunged the nation into civil war.

“The funeral ceremony of the dream was conducted when, once again, young and zealous army generals in their 30’s overthrew the government in the mid-1970’s and, in their bid to sanitize the system, destroyed the institution of a meritorious civil service, expropriated and nationalized multinational corporations without compensation, and destroyed international investor confidence. One of those young generals would go on to impoverish Nigerians with the Land Use Act, bungle the transition process and set a political precedent where the best candidate does not win elections in Nigeria.

“The coffin of the dream was laid in the grave in 1983 when the democratic experiment was again upturned by young revolutionary army generals in their early 40’s. These young men, in a bid to discipline the system, subjected the economy and the people to excessively harsh conditions. The dust was then thrown upon the dream by a smiling army general then in his 40’s. In a bid to reverse the policies of his predecessor, he weakened the naira, wrecked social infrastructure and shattered the educational system. He would eventually annul an election that was considered free and fair. The epitaph was written on the grave of the dream by the

most brutal dictator in Nigeria's history, a 50-year old dark-goggle wearing general who, like his predecessors, had been in the system from his early 20's. All others who came subsequently, including the returnee retired generals, have failed to repair the broken-down structures, and have simply been laying wreaths on the grave."

Young Nigerian patriots, you can see from this brief recourse to history that Nigeria was brought to its current state, not necessarily by gerontocrats, but by mostly young Nigerians, some of whom had been actively involved in governance from their 20's, 30's and 40's, and some of whom are relevant even now. It is why I say that youth, in a sense, brought us here.

However, I am of the considered opinion that youth will also take us out of the present predicament. In stating this, I am reminded of the words of Robert F. Kennedy, then United States Attorney General, at the University of Capetown, South Africa, in 1966:²²

"Our answer is [...] to rely on youth. The cruelties and obstacles of this swiftly changing planet will not yield to obsolete dogmas and outworn slogans. It cannot be moved by those who cling to a present which is already dying, who prefer the illusion of

security to the excitement and danger which comes with even the most peaceful progress.

“This world demands the qualities of youth; not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the life of ease [...] it is young people who must take the lead. Thus, you, and your young compatriots everywhere, have had thrust upon you a greater burden of responsibility than any generation that has ever lived. ‘There is,’ said an Italian philosopher, ‘nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.’ Yet this is the measure of the task of your generation...”

The state of our nation calls for a radical set of values; values that are radically different from those that created the problems we are faced with today as a nation. It calls for a new set of ideas; superior ideas to the ones that led us to this wilderness. It calls for a new set of competencies; skills and attributes that can tackle the problems associated with building such a diverse nation in the 21st century. This places a demand on our nation to harness the qualities of youth, to prioritise human capital development, to provide a conducive environment for

enterprise capacity building with a focus on vocational skills, to make the economic environment conducive for innovation, to make technology accessible to the generality of Nigerian youth, and to bridge the inclusiveness gap between “Youth 1” and “Youth 2” in order to give every Nigerian a reason to feel included in Project Nigeria. For those of you who have relative privilege, it places a demand on you to imbibe the spirit of social innovation and become champions of positive causes, so that, within your respective spheres of influence, you can give direction to a generation in dire need of leadership.

In preparation for this keynote address, I had the opportunity to exchange thoughts and ideas with a dear cousin of mine, Dr. Funso Apampa, and his analysis of our history and current situation is worth sharing as a frame for analysing our key challenges. He classified the players in our polity into two broad categories, namely, Ants and Termites, and explained the role of each in nation-building.

It takes ants to build, and termites to destroy. For far too long, our leaders have behaved like termite kings, always on the lookout for something to consume. Our people have also adopted this mentality. Secession appears to be the solution because it gives the termites more control over what they can eat and destroy in the short-term, and there is no thought about building a better nation for our grandchildren to enjoy in the long-term.

The answer does not lie in secession – it lies in adopting the ant mentality; in collaborating to build communities of shared resources; in sacrificing some of today’s benefits and pleasures in the interest of bequeathing a nation fit for generations yet unborn. Nation-building requires unity of purpose over a sustained period of time. Is the Nigerian Democracy, as presently constituted, capable of delivering this “unity of purpose over a sustained period”? I think not.

Even if we had this unity of purpose and a leadership structure committed to delivering a consistent focus on nation-building, do we have a viable blueprint to follow? Instead of plucking the low-hanging fruit of secession, this is the time for our leaders and thinkers to answer the following questions:

1. What constitutional foundation would underpin the leadership structure that can deliver “unity of purpose over a sustained period of time”?
2. What blueprint for nation-building should we develop and adopt, that will take us from where we are today to where we would be proud for our grandchildren to be?

This is the time for true leaders to come forward; visionary leaders with an altruistic gaze; leaders who can articulate and communicate a compelling vision to the people, thereby giving the people hope and courage to press on in spite of difficulties;

leaders who can organise the people to take on the most basic and most complex tasks of nation-building.

As we dialogue on the way forward, I say to the young patriots gathered here, and the not-so-young who have come because they, too, have a part in the work of nation-building; I say to you all – we stand at the intersection of the past and a possible future; a future where young Nigerian job seekers are not murdered and discarded in shallow graves; a future defined by equity, justice, security, peace and harmony, not ransoms; where road, power and water supply systems serve, not stifle; where quality schools and hospitals are accessible to every Nigerian on Nigerian soil, not in Accra, Dubai, New Delhi, Toronto or London; where every single Nigerian dream is given the enabling environment to become flesh, not starved into oblivion; where maybe, just maybe, made in Nigeria goods can become the global gold standard of quality and creative ingenuity, not pariah goods to be avoided like the plague.

Is this the generation that will serve Nigeria with all its strength, defend her unity, and uphold her honour and glory as my late aunty, Prof. Felicia Adeyoyin, expressed in the Nigerian Pledge she composed? Is this the generation that will cross the threshold of audacity no other generation before it has crossed and convince the future that there's room for it in the present? Is this the generation that will breathe life into these dry bones and command them to live again? The Nigerian

Dream has been asleep waiting for destiny and courage to kiss;
is this the generation that will strangle it while it sleeps, or is
this the generation that will rouse it awake?

Thank you for listening.

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