

LEADERSHIP ACCOUNTABILITY AND SOCIAL CONTRACT WITH IJAW NATION

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First, thanks to the PILOT that has organized this dialogue. Hopefully, this is however modest a milestone in the emergent clarion call within the Ijaw nationality for Self-Examination.

Some context is necessary. The quest of the Ijaw People for Self Determination predates Nigeria. In fact, it was part of why Britain's colonial crown felt compelled to take direct control of that part of its trading sphere of influence that mutated into Nigeria. Before the country was roughly and hurriedly welded into being, Ijaw sovereigns like King Frederick William Koko of Nembe and King Jaja of Opobo already embodied the resolve of the various kingdoms in Ijaw territory to be the masters of their destiny, by stoutly resisting the stealthy incursion of the foreign 'trading' power, both kings and their supporting consortiums doing so at the risk of their crowns and lives. The majestic Harold Dappa-Biriye and his class of Ijaw leaders, Major Isaac Adaka (*Tiger*) Boro, the 1998 Kaiama Declaration of Ijaw Youths (led by the Orontos, Tuodolos, Pattersons and Isaac 'Sankara' Osuokas), and the strident advocacy of Annkio Briggs are just some of the numerous successive incarnations of that resolve throughout Nigeria's history so far.

So the Ijaw quest for Self Determination needs no introduction. However, what is becoming clear so fast but is still too far from being imbibed is that Self Determination will not, CANNOT, be feasible without a similar sounding imperative: Self-Examination.

The truth is not pretty. The failure of the Ijaw leadership class of 1999 till date is gross. That is the nicest way to put. At all levels: state, national, political, militant, traditional/community, civil and (maybe) cultural. In all ramifications too: economic, environmental, infrastructural, moral and social. I underline 'moral'.

Despite the existential injustice continually imposed by external interests, Ijawland has handled *humongously* higher financial resources and political authority since 1999 than it ever did. Yet, Ijaw people, communities and territory are more marginalized, polluted, deeply divided, underdeveloped, militarized (and *militantized*), inflamed and radicalized, unsafe, jobless, drugs-and-cult-infested, divested of their dignity, gravely disillusioned and countless poorer than they were pre-1999. Classical paradox of plenty.

Oil Canvas: 'Want a little illustration of contemporary Ijaw leadership outcomes? Ijaw environment is now steadily the worst oil-polluted part of the planet. Google it. No clean-up in sight, unlike Ogoniland whose clean-up has at least lazily and lousily sputtered to a start. Over ten full oil blocs (not marginal fields) – OMLs 18, 29, 42, 52, 53, 55, 83, 85, 86, 88, etc - in our territory have been divested to new owners in the last 2-10 years, without as much as a peppercorn value of equity

vested in the savagely ravaged host communities. Every version of the celebrated Petroleum Industry Bill has *further* watered down the insertion of an incentive for host communities from the originally broached 10% equity to 5% of net profits to 2.5% of net profits to now 2.5% of operating expenses. This oil canvas was painted under the supervision of at least three succeeding Ijaw-speaking Ministers of Petroleum Resources. All the while, the Ijaw chorus of *Resource Control and Self Determination at All Costs Necessary* was on song, except for a long and curious interval during the tenure of an Ijaw-speaking President. And, besides a plethora of Ijaw political *Honourables* and *Excellencies*, we had our umbrella Ijaw National Congress (INC), whose leaders presumably had access to these kinsmen superintending the oil industry at the times being – until the INC itself started spinning from crisis to crisis.

Whodunnit? Ijaw leadership, more than anyone else *dunnit*. There is a gaping qualitative and moral deficit in leadership. This is why increased financial and political capital has resulted in degraded dividends. Ijawland remains a wasteland with hardly a single industrial presence besides the destructive extractives.

The world, including climate-denying Big Oil, is embarking on an energy transition that has seen some Ivy League universities change their related curricula from ‘Petroleum Sciences’ to ‘Energy Sciences’ in preparation for an oncoming climate-compliant global economy. Nigeria is tottering on the precipice, its *National Stupidity Index* blinking red in all departments apart from the musical genius of its youths. A global pandemic has disrupted settled norms but is force-forwarding an already accelerant digital and knowledge economy that may hopelessly widen global inequality. N1000 to a dollar is no longer a crazy forecast. Insecurity has gone haywire, manifesting in different strains and names, depending on its location. Nigeria is so uncertain.

How do we find voice between and betwixt these headwinds? How do we build preparedness, resilience, productivity and competitiveness in a time like this? Quality leadership is indispensable at the best of times. But what we need now, even beyond that, is superior and strategic leadership to steer us through and above the vortex of crises, local and global.

Without self-appraisal and testing for the times, we cannot find the right leadership. Yet, we are a people usually averse to leadership appraisal. There is possibly on record zero strategic appraisal of the impact of INC or of militancy or of NDDC, the Niger Delta Amnesty Programme, the Nigerian Content Programme, or even of political hegemony on peace, stability and socioeconomic development of Ijawland.

These are some of the reasons it is crucial to do a deep introspection, set high standards for leadership recruitment, x-ray candidates for various roles, get them to sign a social contract and hold them accountable to the people for performance of that contract.

Social Contract and Leadership Accountability: Fallacy or Fantasy?

Whilst it may sound merely semantic, it is useful to state that the logical sequence is for the construct of a social contract to be in place before we can expect leadership accountability. But

both concepts are to be respectively worked out and worked for, not assumed or wished for. Or else, our idea of a social contract may remain a fallacy and our desire for accountability a fantasy.

This is where active citizenship, civil society consciousness and critical self-examination all come in. Our collective failure to strenuously work out terms of leadership engagement and representation through constant, frank expression of our aspirations, values and minimum expectations of performance leaves us with only the shadow and not the substance of a social contract that we can expect our governors, lawmakers, *amanyanabos*, INC executives, INC as an organization, and our other representatives to perform. In the situation, the contract is distantly abstract because there is no breathing organic construct between us and our leaders and representative organizations. There is then not just a disconnect but a wide gulf between the principal, “*we the People*”, and the agent leaders.

The same way we shout ourselves hoarse about the need for a legitimate constitution, i.e. a constitutive agreement, for Nigeria freely entered into by its People or Peoples is the same way we must ensure that the INC – first of all as a representative organization, its Constitution and working documents, and its organs and officers are actually rooted with our people, truly autochthonous. This way it is incapable of annihilation or wholesale manipulation by external oppressors or by one capricious Ijaw governor after another, as we have seen in recent years. This is what will lay the very foundation for a living social contract and afterwards leadership accountability within the context of the INC. At the moment, despite all that INC may have achieved before it went into a state-leveraged limbo, INC does not appear to be adequately rooted across the entire Ijawland, the way perhaps MOSOP was or is in Ogoniland.

The selection or election process is of course crucial to any prospects for accountability. We have seen what the delegates system of political party primaries has done for our political leadership recruitment and public governance, not just in terms of limiting the space to money bags and draining public coffers through all sorts of slush funds, but equally in terms of limiting the critical audience for selling political aspirants to an exclusive number of delegates instead of the entire party base. Delegates selection is therefore preceded by all manner of machinations and the victorious delegates can start to count their millions. It is an open secret that in the last governorship primaries season in Bayelsa State, many delegates became Naira millionaires after collecting payouts from multiple frontline aspirants. What social contract do you expect to result from that? Is the INC delegates system free of the same plague? That question needs to be interrogated, if not for these immediate elections then at least for subsequent ones.

Intrinsic to leadership selection, representative engagement, accountability and overall qualitative leadership outcomes is vision. Vision! Without it, there is no need to discuss leadership. Yet, in Bayelsa State for example, there has been no sign of leadership vision for at least the last twenty years, between 3 to 4 state administrations. Governance has been at random, spontaneous, whimsical, capricious. Anything but visionary and methodical. The state remains a sprawling slum after two decades and several trillions of Naira in state revenues. But for the just commissioned 17-storey NCDMB head office, its infrastructural monuments are a long abandoned and suspect high-rise carcass of the proposed state-owned Tower Hotel, a reportedly N70 billion airport that

is not functional, an atrociously cratered passage passing off as a road from Yenagoa to Ogbia and a gargantuan but ugly state-built Ecumenical Centre. Public leadership in this state example of Bayelsa has been nothing but a disgrace, except we are averse to truth telling. It is hardly any different in the rest of Ijawland and the Niger Delta region in general, allowing for one or two exceptions.

No vision. No standards. Therefore, no leadership. Vision is what leadership aspirants must offer to the constituency they want to lead. Organizations such as INC must also have their institutional vision. When this is clearly articulated, presented and negotiated with the constituency at large, along with minimum goals and standards for delivery, the result is a proper social contract or what in the lexicon of contemporary performance management is known as a service level agreement (SLA).

Just to round off on visionary leadership, it bears stating that what Ijaw Nation needs now via INC are transformational and transcendental leaders, not the kind of transactional leaders we are tired of. The times call for leaders who will be to us what Mandela, Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Ayatollah Khomeini, Yasser Arafat, Lee Kuan Yew, Zayyad, Makhtoum, Ken Saro Wiwa and Yitzak Rabin were to their people. No less. We need Ijaw leaders that will finally put us on the world map, whether or not Nigeria wants to continue crawling and creeping sluggardly.

That is merely an aspiration though. To bring it to pass, we must monitor and enforce the social contract that would have emerged from the visioning and social negotiation process. We already have excellent working documents for the Ijaw vision and social contract, for further consideration and reaffirmation if necessary, and for concerted enforcement: the Kaiama Declaration, and lately the Ijaw Charter and Ijaw Nation Code of Ethics, Leadership and Governance prepared through rigorous rounds of consultations, retreats, harmonization and articulation led by platforms such as the Ijaw Elders Forum, Ijaw Nation Forum, Ijaw Professionals Association, Ijaw Women Connect and Embasara Foundation.

The Ijaw Charter and the Code, possibly the first dedicated self-examination and accountability code for an ethnic nationality in Nigeria, have thankfully been adopted as part of the new INC Constitution. But these templates for the Ijaw social contract are nothing if we do not animate, promote and implement them together.

The Ijaw Charter is a compact instrument of about 3 pages starting with a concise outline of the ordeal endured by the Ijaw People during the Nigerian Project, then setting out the Ijaw Vision and culminating in the Declaration of the Ijaw Agenda. The Vision statement is simple but encompassing:

“... to attain and maintain an autonomous, contiguous territory in love, unity and prosperity; and living in peace and harmony with its neighbours.”

The Ijaw Agenda section summarizes the collective aspirations to Self Determination, Real Federalism and Natural Resources Ownership, Good Governance (“accountable ... and

participatory ... including traditional governance”), Environmental Justice and Sustainability, and Educational and Technological Advancement.

On the other hand, the Ijaw Nation Code of Ethics, Leadership and Governance sets out a framework for leadership values, governance culture, minimum development standards, accountability mechanisms and ethical citizenship.

Combined with the INC Constitution and numerous other iterations of our collective expectations, these templates provide a roadmap for leadership delivery and accountability. In this context, working with complementary and alternative platforms like PANDEF (Pan Niger Delta Forum) and the ones cited earlier, it would be part of the remit of a serious minded fresh INC leadership to for instance:

- i. connect INC to the grassroots of Ijawland, so it becomes the ANC of Ijaws, rapidly mobilize mass membership and orchestrate independent funding for INC;
- ii. be the global voice and create respectable international visibility for the Ijaw People;
- iii. engage with other nationalities, our state governments and the Nigerian central government to inevitably kickstart the process for reinventing Nigeria, ensuring Self Determination for its federating units and allowing Ijaws to breathe and prosper;
- iv. encourage the governments of all Ijaw-occurring states to articulate and faithfully implement development plans, failing which there will be consequences;
- v. collaborate with our traditional leaders and community governance structures to rethink outmoded community leadership practices in favour of running communities as virile economic models, with metrics for evaluation and productivity enhancement;
- vi. instigate NCDMB to enforce host community content as it does Nigerian content;
- vii. engage and compel the Minister of Petroleum to sanitize the environmental madness of the petroleum industry in Ijawland, which too many Ijaw-speaking Ministers of Petroleum have gleefully allowed unchecked;
- viii. work with other stakeholders to align agencies like NDDC and the Amnesty Programme that have gone completely off tangent almost since their creation;
- ix. engage with the River State Government and other stakeholders to STOP the toxic black soot that is killing the state’s populace in installments and ranking Port Harcourt amongst the worst-air quality cities in the world;
- x. foster a proactive system of conflict resolution (boundaries, chieftaincy, etc) amongst Ijaw communities;

xi. engage with all stakeholders to liberate our communities from the chronic epidemic of self-enrichment by transactional traditional leaders, community strongmen and political overlords who serve as willing tools of external interests (political, etc) and mostly oil companies to compromise community interests and unleash violence, a trend now that may well be the biggest but unstudied threat to our communities' future, and

xii. engineer a realization amongst our people, state governments and kingdoms that the difference between - for example - Dubai and them is in the mind; period!

Progress can only happen through human agency, with the grace of God. The performance of whoever are elected to pilot the affairs of INC may depend on how constructive we all are in motivating them to perform or how vigilant we are in sounding alarm signals once they derail.

To that end, dialogues like this must be regular and widened. Consultation, collaboration and checkmating must be constant. Mass awareness building must be an ongoing project. A high quality private media and communications ecosystem in the region is indispensable. Recall the counterweight role played by the independent media in the United States in the years of *Hurricane Trump*.

What more can we do to achieve these? We can't have all the answers in one sitting. But one thing is sure. There is work to do for every citizen. If we are not willing to do our part, then maybe we were never really serious with the whole outcry about Ijaw struggle.

One last thing. We must also discard the mentality that says "*he is our thief; leave him alone*". Imagine if Israel's leaders have been the way the Ijaw leadership class of 1999-2021 has been. Would there still be an Israel amongst hostile and bigger Arab neighbours? Or if Singapore had rested on the excuse of its *puisne* size.

A people faced with existential challenges on so many fronts as the Ijaws owe it to themselves to maintain higher standards of discipline, productivity, innovation and accountability, regardless if the rest of the manor is ruled by a succession of Ali Baba and their forty thieves. It is the only way they would build the resilience, capacity and competitiveness for survival and prosperity.

We ask our governors and political representatives: why can't you replicate the shining successes of the Alfred Diete-Spiffs, Admiral Sorohs, Melford Okilos, Nabo Graham-Douglasses and Lawrence Ekpebus in their days in government?

At our traditional rulers, we wonder: why has there been no more royal audacity and history making from our creeks since after King Koko and King Jaja over a century ago?

To our INC leadership aspirants, we say: bring back the days of Harold Dappa-Biriye, Denni-Fiberesima and Pa Wekezie.

Congratulations in advance, and may you be held accountable for your service and trust.