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What wealthy Nigerians owe their nation (1)

The phone rang.

“Hello!”

“Good morning, Mr O. J.”

“What time is it?”

“6 o’clock.”

“Naija man, why so early?”

“You always wake up at 6.”

“Yeah, but not today.”

“Today you wan sleep oyibo-man sleep? Foul.”

“My friend, to every rule there’s an exception.”

“Not this time. I mean, the air is alive with issues of moment . .

.”

“Yeah, I know. There’s a National Conference going on . . .”

“And Naija economy has just been re-based . . .”

“I didn’t ask for that.”

“Makes no difference. Nigeria has overtaken South Africa in the global marathon. The hostility has thickened. Nigerians in South Africa are running for cover.”

“You don’t mean it. Naija must go . . . ?”

“See why you must wake up. Stand up and be counted.”

I struggled out of bed. Silence.

“Are you still there?”

“I’m standing up. Start counting.”

“That’s more like it.”

More silence.

“Now, you didn’t phone me at 6 in the morning for chit-chat, did you?”

“Yeah, well . . . I just wanted to say . . . I just re-read ‘Peter Pan’ Enahoro’s hilarious classic *How to Be a Nigerian*”

“You woke me up at 6 o’clock to tell me how to be a Nigerian? What sort of joke is that?”

“Nigeria is no joke. . . A tragic joke, maybe. Is there such a thing as a tragic joke, Mr O. J.?”

“I don’t know. Let me consult my *Dictionary of Unnatural Causes*. . . . Here . . . tra . . . gic joke: ‘a basketful of lost opportunities.

Something so bizarre it makes you laugh till tears run down your pants’.”

“Na wah for you, Mr O. J.! What did you call that dictionary?”

“Actually, to tell the truth, Mr Naija-Man, I like Peter Enahoro’s book. It is healthier than the sour-faced dissections of the nation by the professional psycho-pathologists. I mean . . . Nigeria is so extreme if you don’t know how to laugh you will murder yourself or somebody else over it.”

“Now you’re talking, Mr O. J. I have observed that your own public pronouncements—your articles—are sometimes dead serious and sometimes playful, even frivolous.”

“Got to obey the wind But look, I’m in no mood for chit-chat today.”

“This is one of your serious days, abi?”

“All I want to hear is two things: *What is the matter? And what is to be done about it?*”

“OK. The matter is this: Rich Nigerians are idle. Decadent . . .”

“That’s no news.”

“They have so much money they don’t know what to do with it.”

“Well, their patron saint said money is no longer a problem, just how to spend it.”

“I mean, money should always be spent wisely”

“Spending money wisely assumes that you worked hard to get it. It assumes that money is hard to get.”

“You mean as in *Money Hard*, a song and dance of the old days?”

“That’s right. Except for royals and aristocrats who inherited their wealth, everyone with any serious money worked hard to make it.”

Naija-Man laughed a dry laugh.

“Most wealthy Nigerians today did not work hard for their money.”

“They may disagree. Anyway, in the private sector they must have worked hard”

“A minority of them did,” said Naija-Man, “but the majority got wealthy through political connections, special concessions, government subsidies, and 419.”

“But the public sector”

“Those who got wealthy in the public sector did so by outright fraud.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean by pen robbery?”

“*Pen robbery!?*”

“Wealth that issued like ink from the tip of a pen.”

“Wealth from the tip of a pen? That would be a miracle, wouldn't it?”

“It is. I mean by swearing falsely, saying that something is so when it isn't so. Declaring false figures. Making wrongful claims. Accepting huge bribes in exchange for signing documents claiming that work was done which was never even engaged in, or that work was completed when it was never completed, or that work was done well when in fact it was done shoddily. Pen robbery means accepting huge bribes to defraud government by signing documents claiming that supplies (vehicles, machinery, computers, office equipment, etc.) were delivered as ordered and paid for when in fact only a fraction or none at all was delivered.”

Naija-Man had become quite worked up.

“I am confused,” I said, trying to calm him down. “What category of public sector persons could you possibly be referring to?”

“Senior public officers. Permsecs. Directors. Ministers. Commissioners. Board chairmen. Politicians.”

“Are governors included?”

“Governors are the worst. In fact, any person who served in the public sector, from office clerk to president, state assemblyman to National Assembly reps and senators—*anyone who came out of public service wealthy*, incontrovertibly is guilty of *pen robbery*: embezzlement, stealing, looting of the public treasury.”

“What of persons who came out of public service not wealthy?”

“Such persons are rare. And you know them by the fact that everyone whispers about them and laughs. They are a laughingstock in their village. Even newspaper columnists sometimes make cruel jokes about them.”

(877 words)

• *To be continued*

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What wealthy Nigerians owe their nation (2)

I was rather shocked by Naija-Man's claim that "*anyone who came out of public service wealthy, incontrovertibly is guilty of pen robbery: embezzlement, stealing, looting of the public treasury.*"

"Your statements are rather broad," I told him. "In any case, I don't recall anyone ever being convicted or imprisoned for pen robbery"

"Or executed"

"You're talking of execution. You think you're in China?" I chided him. "But now I do recall one political party chieftain who served two years in jail . . ."

"And now he is out and about, back in full swing, wielding power and influence as if nothing happened."

"Has EFCC ever jailed anyone?" I asked.

"Not that I know of. Even if \$20 billion is missing from public coffers, no one is taken to court, let alone convicted. All you find is full page newspaper advertisements calling for the public official to resign—which the callers consider to be 'punishment enough'."

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Mr Naija-Man, you’re a very funny guy. Are you a comedian? Do you write your own lines or do you have a team that writes funny lines for you?”

“You see, no one pays those adverts any mind. Not the Big Boss who appointed the public official, nor the Attorney-General, nor the Courts. If the matter ever gets to court, it makes headlines for about two weeks, then it disappears. When hard-digging journalists try to exhume it they are told it is *sub judice*, untouchable by Constitution and Law. And the matter ends there.”

“But some wrongdoers have been convicted abroad . . .”

“Some do escape abroad instead of staying home and bribing their way through like their colleagues. In any case, whatever happens abroad they can usually arrange a pardon back home, and soon enough they stage a triumphal return home.”

“Na wah for you, Naija-Man! . . . Anyway, you’ve told me how you think many wealthy Nigerians made their money. You also say they are idle and decadent. Why do you say that?”

“I mean that all they see to do with their money is consume it: build mansions, buy expensive cars and private jets, dress extravagantly, over-eat, sing and dance and celebrate.”

“Well, really, what does one do with money, especially if you didn’t work for it?”

“That’s just the point.”

“What do they celebrate?”

“Everything possible. Their birthday and that of each of their many children each and every year.”

“You mean if there are eight children, there will be eight plus two birthdays each year?”

“And each birthday is a huge bash costing N15 to N20 million.”

“I hear you.”

“Then add marriage celebrations: two huge bashes for every marriage.”

“Two?”

“First is the ‘traditional wedding,’ then comes the ‘white or church wedding.’

“But why two weddings?”

“For people who have money to throw away, one wedding is not enough.”

“And I suppose when the children start coming, every child will be celebrated in an extravagant child dedication or naming ceremony?”

“Exactly. But wait, the worst is yet to come. The extravaganza to end all extravaganzas is the funeral or burial. Numerous full page newspaper adverts at half a million naira a page. Obituaries on television at even higher rates. Airfare and hotel rooms for visitors from out of town. Four live bands. Seven troupes of traditional dancers. Gospel singers, twenty preachers, speakers-in-tongues and prayer warriors. Praise singers with talking drums. A troupe of *onuku* clowns. Expensive *aso ebi* designer outfits for family and friends. Eat and drink to quench. Everyone to take home costly souvenirs imprinted, embroidered or glazed with the likeness of the deceased and a summary of his/her exaggerated achievements. The bill may be N100 million or more.”

I was dazed by this recital. But I had to admit that I have seen even the poor throw huge and expensive funeral celebrations.

“Oh yes,” said Naija-Man. “The poor try to compete with the rich. They will construct an emergency modern mansion ‘befitting’ the corpse of their father, mother or uncle who died in a mud hut.

They will spend N3 million to bury him when they wouldn't scrape money together to pay his N50,000 hospital bill and the doctor detained their relative in the hospital for two weeks until they paid."

"That's crazy, man! That's crazy! So what's the meaning of it all?"

"Show-off! Ostentation! Vanity! Guilty conscience! Stupidity!"

"So the rich are stupid and the poor too are stupid?"

"You have to understand that these wealthy Nigerians were poor until just yesterday morning. And they didn't work for their money. They got rich overnight. So their psychology is the same as their cousins who have remained poor. Together, they all want to ape the old style wealthy of Europe. Pomposity. Self-indulgence. Empty rhetoric. Meaningless titles. Pomp and circumstance in everything. Every burial is like a state funeral styled for royalty. Every perfectly ordinary citizen and ex-peasant must be dispatched to the after-world in extravagant and stately style."

"Or he might come back to haunt the living?"

"The extravagant funeral is, among other things, a bribe to buy off the anger of the deceased for the way his children or relatives neglected him in life."

“OK. Enough of *what is the matter*. Now tell me, *what is to be done about it?*”

(891 words)

- ***To be continued***

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What wealthy Nigerians owe their nation (3)

I said to my early morning caller: “Mr Naija-Man, what do you say is to be done about the wasteful extravagance and lack of direction of Nigerians with money?”

“Well, I do wish the wealthy of Nigeria, no matter how they acquired their wealth, would not just consume their wealth with these extravagances. I wish they would have a bit more ambition, more vanity, more class. Then they would want to immortalize their name, leave behind them something of lasting value, some institution by which they can be remembered when they die.”

“Who’s talking of dying?” I said. “If they got their wealth just yesterday morning, as you say, then they are hauling the sack of money on their shoulders as they run to hide from the local or international police”

“Don’t you wish!” Naija-Man retorted. “Truth is, nobody is chasing them. The ‘local police’ are nowhere. The high-placed guardians take their share of the loot. The low-placed footsoldiers dare not open their mouths. Everybody, I mean EVERYBODY knows

exactly what is going on but no one dares say a word. As for the ‘international police,’ aren’t they the receivers of the stolen money? Isn’t all the money laundered, dry cleaned and neatly stowed away in the bank vaults of the prim and proper anti-corruption-certified ‘international community’? Give me a break, Mr O. J.!”

We had run round a big circle. Before me was a familiar-looking stone wall. I felt foolish. Embarrassed. What to say

“So . . . *what is to be done?*”

Naija-Man took a deep breath that reverberated through every particle of the handset.

“Nothing—except to try and persuade the wealthy of Nigeria to look abroad for models of what the rich can accomplish by leveraging their cash, credit, political influence, business skills and goodwill. What might have been home-grown models were stunted or stonewalled out of existence by the chaos that has reigned at the top for 50 years.”

“Doesn’t it matter how they acquired their wealth?”

“I already said that most of that money is bad money. Stolen money . . .”

“Can bad money do good work?”

“It most certainly can—if the person manipulating it knows what he is doing and applies the money to positive ends.”

“Can a thief and embezzler direct his loot to positive ends?”

“Already we see fledgling samples of it right here in Naija. Oyibo-land is full of it. The inescapable requirement is to love your country so deeply that although you once defrauded it, you would now devote half of your ill-gotten fortune to help transform it from a ‘failed postcolonial state’ to a ‘modern industrial state’.”

“Another miracle? How is that to be achieved?”

“Study the process in those countries that achieved a comparable transformation, copy what they did and adapt it to suit Nigerian conditions.”

“You mean as in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea?”

“Exactly. Those Four Asian Tigers industrialized in approximately two decades. Earlier, Japan did it (their second time around, recovering from the devastation of World War II) in three decades. By slow and steady application, India did it in five decades. And hidden behind their ‘bamboo curtain’, China not only industrialized in five decades but emerged as the world’s second

largest economy and the global manufacturer of choice. These miracles were not achieved through prayers in churches, mosques or temples—and certainly not through extravagant consumption and waste—but by clearly articulated goals, detailed and careful planning, determination to stay on task, relentless application of resources to achieve measurable targets, prolonged hours of work, sweat.”

I was overwhelmed. “But these were programs of the state, the powers that be. What did they have to do with the rich of those places?”

“Well, you must know that everywhere in the world, the wealthy class and the political class work hand in hand—if in fact they are not the same. Rarely do they work at cross-purposes. They make the laws to favour their individual as well as group interests. And whatever economic policies and programs are initiated, they make sure they get the lion’s share in investments and profits. They plough their wealth, whether honestly or dishonestly acquired, into ventures that would multiply their wealth while at the same time providing products and services for the general populace and tax revenue for the state.”

“So you think the wealthy of Nigeria should do the same?”

“Yes. Industrializing Nigeria, transforming it into modernity, is their particular responsibility. Working individually or in teams, the rich should invest their wealth in agriculture and food processing, and in manufacturing. This alone will create millions of jobs. The workers will require decent housing, efficient public transportation on a network of good roads and railways, clean drinking water, good medical care to stay healthy and work hard, and relaxing entertainment and leisure. All these necessary services will be provided at affordable rates by the wealthy entrepreneurs.”

“Isn’t it government that normally provides such social services?”

“Government is just a name,” said Naija-Man. “Remember, government and the wealthy class are two sides of the same coin. Government is controlled and driven by the wealthy class.”

“So, government can get the wealthy class to pay for these services through taxes levied on their profits?”

“Supplemented by taxes paid by workers in those business ventures”

(897 words)