



When you tie two things together, neither of them is free. The mere act of tying them together has robbed them of their individual freedom. When you bind a group of distinct people, with different languages, cultural practices and religion together, the result is akin to the confusion in the Tower of Babel. Nothing that is bound can ever be free and in a paradoxical manner, a prophetic line in the National Anthem shows us where and how some of our problems as a nation began.

“One nation bound in freedom, peace, and unity.”

You take a man without his consent and without prior notice, and you tie his fate to that of another man who is not his brother, who does not understand

what he is saying or the god he is serving. You say to them, “now you are brothers, and the only way any of you can succeed or have a chance at a free life is by remaining brothers”. Then you join all their affairs together, monetary and cultural and expect them not to distrust each other. However, distrust is a natural reaction that fattens the pocket of the person doing the joining. War, tribal and political unrest are all birthed from distrust.

The time of war and national strife is a very profitable time for those responsible for starting and fueling it. It saves them from the opposition because the people are too busy; fighting each other with their different languages and casting spells in the name of their various gods to notice you carting away their gold. They are also hungry because they are too busy fighting to tend to their land and nurture it. They are poor because you are slowly milking them dry of all that was put there to ensure generational wealth. They are too weak to fight because death after death takes a toll on the mind, hunger wearies the body and the war ground is just a marketplace. So you send in Peace Corps, Red Cross and all the aids that can make the people venerate the enemy. This “aid” makes some stronger and they live to fight their adopted brother another day.

This fight goes on in big and small spheres of the society. A common place is on the bus when the driver says something in Igbo after an altercation with a passenger who is not Igbo. Insults may have previously been traded in English, the “unifying language” but the minute the language changes, it becomes a battle of tribes. Shouts of “*Ìwó na ìyá ẹ àti bàbá ẹ lo n báwí,*” rend the air. Whether she is being blessed or cursed by him, she does not care and

sends it back to his unsuspecting family. This also happens in the market, schools, professional settings, religious houses and in highly scholastic and intellectual settings. Yes, a nation bound in unity; unity underscored with constant suspicion.

The use of native Nigerian languages is banned in schools across Nigeria to foster the speaking of the Queen's English and speaking "vernacular" is punishable by the school authority. A slow erasure of indigenous languages and the use of it began because of this. When this initiative began, those who could understand the basics of the English Language were respected by peers; upheld as the model by the authorities and afforded opportunities. This has not changed much. An individual with foreign education and possibly, a foreign accent has access to better professional and even personal opportunities in present-day Nigeria. Native Nigerian accents are in this age, an endless source material for comedy skits and people who naturally have accents are mocked for having accents. Somehow, their opinion sounds inferior and less important to many ears because of their accent. Nigeria for youths is slowly becoming a place where speaking your indigenous language fluently is "cool" (and that is a positive thing) but sounding like you speak your language fluently is not. Speak your language but don't have an accent or better still, have a foreign accent.

This indirectly impinges on the freedom of an individual who has better command of her native language than she does of English. Her freedom of speech is curbed because of the insecurity that stems from not speaking English without making grammatical errors. Also, being mocked for her accent

might result in an inability to confidently voice her opinion about a particular issue in the presence of a diverse Nigerian crowd. In 2015, I volunteered for a leadership development project that required us to teach students in a public school in Ijebu Ode for a week.

On my first day, I felt hopeless because I was not getting through to them in the English language, “the unifying language” so I decided to try a different approach. I was teaching adjectives and I made them describe different nouns in Yoruba, thus teaching them about the attributive quality of adjectives. If this approach of teaching in Native Nigerian languages is researched intently, it can prove to be a solid method of teaching. This can foster understanding and help students relate better to the dynamics present in rather complex subjects and topics. Till date, it is one of the most interesting and impactful classes I have ever taught. I knew basic phrases in Yoruba at the time and it was fun learning new phrases and words from them. They taught me and I taught them and that is what true freedom can bring- friendship and a chance at understanding.

All human beings are born free, free to choose their path in life. It is this ability to exercise our freedom of choice that makes us intellectually different from other animals. Our humanity is directly merged with our freedom. Hence, withholding a person or worse, a nation’s freedom is withdrawing their humanity from them. It is the easiest way to breed a herd of sheep. Over our years as a sovereign state, our freedom as a nation has been curtailed time and time again. From the colonial era to the Civil War, the horrific military regime, recurrent Boko Haram insurgencies, the Chibok girls’ tragedy and the

ever-present dish on the menu, corruption. These incidents alongside other traumatic daily encounters that result from living in Nigeria have made us very accepting of mediocrity. We have been traumatised as a nation so much so that we venerate mediocrity and uphold subpar efforts our government throws at us whenever elections are close at hand.

Trauma has also been embedded in our psyche through the horrific treatment meted out to those who dared to speak out. When the people who replaced the colonialists saw the ground the likes of Fela Kuti, Wole Soyinka, Ken Saro Wiwa and the Ogoni Nine, Kudirat Abiola and others were making with their activism, they proceeded to make examples of them by terrorising them, harassing their families and saddest of all, killing them like common thieves. These incidents make the emphasis on freedom of speech even more necessary. Freedom abounds when we as a people are free to express ourselves and our freedom to communicate through expressiveness in art, literature, technology, science and any other creative and intellectual field we choose.

Until people can make their own choices, (choices that are within the appropriate law) without fear of consequences or prejudice, what we have is the illusion of freedom. Nothing that is free is ever bound. A nation that is free is free because its people are free. Free to speak in the language and accent that is most intelligible for them, free to adopt the English language in the way that suits their lifestyle, free to communicate and get opportunities without the fear of being hindered by their accent or tribe. Free to speak and write true identities for themselves.

To achieve this freedom and not just the illusion of it, we have to acknowledge and forgive the events of the past. The amalgamation was beyond our control and through the horrific civil war, we have realized the downfall that will happen by trying to divide what is already bound. Also, pitching for a separation in a nation where hostility due to tribal differences is a day to day occurrence would necessitate a war that we cannot contain. We need to remember again that war is a marketplace and a booming business for the wrong people. From where we are as citizens, as people who have been wronged and have a right to be angry, we have to forgive the ills done to us, to our parents, our parent's parents, and their parents before them. Forgive, but not forget because to forget would be to erase the historical lessons we ought to learn.

The next step would be to appreciate our diversity. We have to realize that we cannot operate with the freedom necessary in building a prosperous nation without finding the blessing that is diversity. We have to capitalize on our unique qualities as people and as tribes. The fact that Hausa/Fulani people are generally known to be skilled in agriculture needs to be the dominant message over them being beggars and possible Boko Haram members. The fact that Igbo people are very industrious in business and trade needs to be highlighted more than the perception that they are stereotyped as greedy and money hungry. That Edo people are artistically inclined and spiritually connected needs to be more visible than the stereotype that they are diabolical. That Warri people are witty, excellent at sea and "sharp" needs to be highlighted over them being seen as cunning people. That Yoruba people are outspoken

and party-loving needs to be portrayed more than the thought that they are cantankerous and vain.

To overhaul these stereotypes will take a very long time. It would take even longer if we are not consciously trying to do so. Hence, we have to be intentional about portraying each other the way we want to be portrayed, without prejudice or negative stereotypes. It is important to do away with the negative stereotypes because sometimes, people behave negatively because that is what is expected of them. If they see that you do not already like them, why try to live up to positive standards? Since we are already bound, we have to find a way to free each other by building a narrative that is parallel with freedom and it starts with every individual. True freedom has no business with stereotypes and negative connotations that continue to enslave us.

Writer's Bio:



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