

The Trouble with Nigeria revisited

Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe is the father of the African novel and one of the continent's leading intellectuals. His generation inherited the post-colonial African state. Through his works of fiction (Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease, Arrow of God, Man of the People, and Anthills of the Savannah) he has explored how Africans moved from their pre-colonial societies, to being dominated by the colonial order; and then to managing the various states of freedom that came with independence.

Watching, with growing anger, the never-ending crises – political instability and a coup in 1966, the Biafran war a year later, followed by rampant corruption in the 1970s – he offered his fellow countrymen a trenchant analysis of their condition in the short but pithy 1983 essay, The Trouble with Nigeria. The book identified a number of issues that had prevented a country with vast potential from becoming the African superpower that Achebe saw as its destiny. In Achebe's view, Nigeria had already lost its way in the 20th century because of the evils of corruption, tribalism, social injustice, indiscipline, arrogance, mediocrity, lack of patriotism, lack of national purpose, and, above all – and linking all of these – a lack of leadership.

Onyekachi Wambu met him 23 years later, in upstate New York where Achebe lives and works, to reflect on these issues and the wider conundrum of leadership in post-colonial Africa.

Onyekachi Wambu

In 1983 you wrote *The Trouble with Nigeria*. I wanted to see, after 23 years reflecting on it, whether some of the main problems you had identified that underpinned poor leadership were still pertinent. You talked about the

group of people that led Nigeria to independence – and identified at least two of them, the nationalist leaders – Nnamdi Azikiwe ('Zik of Africa') and Obafemi Awolowo – as being 'self-centred and pedestrian'. You talked about them possessing a 'pious materialistic woolliness' at a time Nigeria needed 'intellectual rigour and objectivity' in her leaders. Do you still think that that was one of the major problems regarding Nigeria's current lack of development – that the people who led us into independence were not of the right calibre?

Chinua Achebe

We have been victims of a history that we did not make – the history of colonisation and the merging of peoples that was not at their own initiative. It was the initiative of the coloniser to make things easier for himself. It was a coloniser who was quite greedy – who wanted their colony to grow as big as possible – as big as India. So we got Nigeria, and we can't just get up one morning and say we don't want this any more. We are stuck with it.

There are so many things that have happened that we cannot change.

One of the most fundamental is that age no longer confers any authority on anybody. It took our people quite a while to get used to this: that young people have inherited the power of leadership. In one of my novels it is hinted at – or perhaps even more clearly than hinted at – it is mentioned that things are now done not in the name of the father, but in the name of the son who goes to school. So the time was foreseen when the old people would become irrelevant and would learn to seek permission from their sons. There is nowhere that I know where people deliberately created such a system for themselves. This was imposed by the demand of colonisation – that what counts is whether you speak English, whether you read and write and so on. We have been struggling with that. But how do you select a leader in this context? The next thing they gave us were elections which produced the Ziks and the Awolowos.

Now, what I am suggesting is that the basis for this selection was flawed. How do you select the best person for this rather confusing situation that we were in – there is real confusion. This is not something that has a simple answer that I can get up and say the answer is one, two, three and that would be it. A people's whole lifestyle has been changed over their heads and they find themselves ruled by people they did not really choose. Just standing in line somewhere and putting paper in a box is a system that is, of course, very easily corrupted – and it produced the people we have to this day. So what we are struggling to achieve is how to make this acceptable, because we can't achieve the optimum, the best in this kind of situation. How can we find a way to be managing this very difficult situation so that it does not get completely out of control?

OW

There is a sense in which we are all disappointed with progress in Nigeria. But the ambition of trying to pull Nigeria together is a huge, huge job. In fact every day that Nigeria stays together is a miracle. So I have become a little bit more humble about the enormity of what is going on. In the UK at the moment, I think two to four per cent of the population are Muslims, and the place is nearly going mad trying to hold things together – trying to find a consensus that everybody can live under. In Nigeria, with about a 50/50 split between Christians and Muslims, there are different ways of organising communities – in the north the Caliphate system, in the west the Yoruba system, in the mid west the Benin system, in the middle north the Tiv, and in the east the Igbo system, plus many others – and one is trying to bring all this together to find a common system for selecting and electing leadership. Is this period of transition itself really the reason for the frustrations and the disappointment? Or is the real failure that of leadership, perhaps because somebody with sufficient vision has not come along and knitted all of these peoples together and articulated a way forward?

CA

It is a miracle to get any kind of stability from the mixture that is Nigeria. Nigerians are not alone, though, in getting credit for this. Senegal has 90 per cent or more Muslims. And yet the first President Léopold Senghor, a highly educated man, a poet, was able to lead it into independence. He was a Roman Catholic who left the seminary at the last moment. He was French, virtually. And yet he was able to keep Senegal together to achieve independence from France. So we can ask ourselves why it is possible there, and why Nigeria is not as marvellous as Senegal? Senghor did not get there by rigged elections but simply by making the Senegalese feel safe and not threatened by religion or by ethnicity. He came from a tiny protectorate of the French – a kingdom apart from the big population of Senegal. Those are examples we can use.

This is why the story of Nigeria did not stay as impressive as it ought to have been. Since the achievement of independence, given the wealth, human resources, the country of great potential – why don't we move to the next stage? We seem to be stuck. Nigeria should not be regarded today in terms of Third-World, bottom-of-the-line in anything – whether it is democracy or whatever. We have had enough experience to have taken one or two steps you can count on. I thought we could count on stable transitions from regime to regime – I thought we had got there. But what is going on today (ahead of the 2007 presidential elections) is a clearly planned intention to make the concept of stability of transition a myth just as (the military dictator) Babangida had done in 1993.

OW

You talked about Senghor – yes, he did remove people’s fears concerning religion. Yes, he did create some kind of stability – and he stayed in power for a long time – but eventually he went, so the transition was possible. But the other thing he seemed to have was a vision for Senegal. How important was that? At one point in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, you talked about Nigeria being a providential state: Here’s what you said: ‘[There are] individuals as well as nations, who on account of peculiar gifts and circumstances, are commandeered by history to facilitate mankind’s advancement. Nigeria is such a nation.’ You talked about Nigeria in that sense. But none of the leaders that have emerged from Nigeria seem to have had a sense of that purpose.

CA

That’s my anger. That is what I am complaining about. That is why I mentioned Senghor. I can give a thousand reasons why he didn’t do the right thing at different points and so on but you do need this one central vision of ‘*my people*’ – these are *my people* – no matter whether Christians or Muslims, these are *my people*, no matter whether they are Yoruba, Hausa, or Ibibio – someone who will come out and declare that stand and be credible. Everybody declares it – which is another problem – but we don’t speak the truth about this. It is hard and difficult to run a place like Nigeria. It is hard – but you must begin from the conviction that these are *my people* – that they have lived together as neighbours, even though they were not called Nigerians, for thousands of years. We are not told that they were fighting wars every single day in that area known as Nigeria today. So they were neighbours. We lack that vision. It is part of the lack of knowledge of the youth – because they took over from the old people. The vision that they should have brought from their education seems not to be there.

OW

But if they went to mission schools (or the modern schools), who was going to give them that vision? One of the interesting things that we got from you, those of us who read you and for whom you have provided an incredible example, is that even though you went to the mission school – you also looked at the traditional structures. And most of us only understand the traditional structures through your work. And I don’t mean what we usually see in our villages – a group of men and women carrying out unfathomable rituals – but you allowed us to understand the deeper meaning behind the rituals. Being able to look at that space as a real political space – not just that your uncle is dressed up and chanting endless proverbs – but that he is somebody who is doing something very important. However, these other

young people they went into the mission schools or other schools influenced by the philosophy of the mission, but didn't seem to come out with a sense that their own communities were important – that these should have been the very foundation or template. You never see that understanding translated into reality – certainly not with the military leaders who ruled Nigeria. You never get that sense of this deeper community.

CA

Well this is why we are where we are. I am not sure what the magic was or should be for making education really important – it is not merely to acquire the ability to read and write but to move to the next stage – of humane and progressive awareness of what makes a civilised society work. There is a sense in which a mission school can kill somebody – kill because it can give a sense of righteousness, you know – we are the good people, the people of God and the others, as my people say, are the people of nothing. '*Ndi Nkiti*', that's what we called them, the Heathen. That is the danger spot. If education does not address that issue – then having children take over from their fathers will be a real disaster. Because their fathers didn't quite have that vision but they had an equivalent vision of *my people* based on kinship – blood is sacred! They had things like that they would almost – and I hate to quote Conrad – '*bow down to*'. This is why you feel you have to blame somebody – the person who offers himself as a leader. How do you accept such a person, what conditions are necessary? What does he or she have to fulfil before you say be my leader, be my ruler? All that for us is quite chaotic today.

OW

In your novel *Arrow of God*, which I have always loved and found incredibly profound, there is a moment when the six villages that form the universe of the novel are menaced by the Abam head-hunters. In the face of this new menace the villages come together and actually create a new political community, and they create a new leader, essentially the priest at the centre of the novel. But they deliberately select this priest from the weakest village.

CA

Which is interesting because look at the leaders in Africa who come from the smallest group – we talked about Senghor. Nyerere is another, in Tanzania, from the small ethnic group that does not threaten anybody – it is the same thing those in Umuaro (the new enlarged community in *Arrow of God*) were doing – let's give it to those who are not going to swallow us.

OW

So we have always been able, through peaceful means, to create these larger political communities and economies – in that instance in *Arrow of God* (and I know it was fictional) it seemed to work until they were threatened by the arrival of an even bigger menace – the British. However, lots of societies and bigger Igbo towns were created in a similar way – through consensus, while facing a threat. At that moment of creation in *Arrow of God* I thought there was also something magical. I am not sure what it was that they swore on or ‘bowed down to’ as Conrad put it – but it seems to me that what happens is that a new spirit, *Ulu*, emerges in the land – and literally speaking the priest is the custodian of this new *Ulu* spirit. Everyone bows down before it. How important is that in the context of Nigeria? The flag came down, but there was never a spiritual sense of how you create this new entity which was bigger than everybody. It was never magical in that sense. I don’t know whether you know what I mean?

CA

I think I do. I don’t know what the answer is. My suspicion is that there was something wrong – that wasn’t quite genuine in the making of Nigeria. I felt I was physically there when Ghana achieved its independence in 1957 – the night that the Union Jack came down and the Black Star went up. Nkrumah was shedding tears when they played their national anthem. I was in Lagos then – I remember we stayed up until 1 a.m. – which was something you didn’t do – in order to hear Ghana’s independence on the radio. It was as if everybody in Lagos was staying up to listen to the moment. I don’t know whether Nigerians watched their own independence with the same zeal. There was something magical about Nkrumah’s rise to power and his suffering for it, and his strength and conviction. He did make mistakes, as we know. But in Nigeria, the process seemed to have been wangled.

OW

It is interesting that you should mention that again. Look at the similarities between Nkrumah and Senghor, here again was a man with great vision, somebody who wrestled with the big issues of the day and tried to make sense of them in his writing. Nkrumah also came from a small group within Ghana, but inside was this vision. He takes the name Ghana – he has a real idea of history in the context of West Africa, whereas with Nigeria you get the sense that when it was being put together it was pedestrian, as you say. In London people used to be critical and passionless about Prime Minister Blair because initially he ruled through all these focus groups. Nigeria seems to have been put together by focus groups – for example the national

anthem decided as a result of a competition, the name suggested by [the former colonial Governor] Lugard's, girlfriend [later wife] Flora Shaw. It does seem to be a space, beyond individual survival, that nobody cares passionately about.

CA

It's a pity. I blame it on the colonialist because I don't think it was at all accidental. You see, when I say wangling I think there was something about the arrangement of Nigeria that was deceitful. People like Sir James Robertson who was flown in from Sudan to be Governor General for the last couple of years – these were people who were very proficient in manoeuvring people leading to where Sudan is today – virtually handing power to the Arabs and sidelining the Africans. This was the man who was sent to fix Nigeria. Britain was constantly comparing Nigeria and Sudan – these were the two critical countries in Africa. So what came out of it, all that manoeuvring, was a country that didn't inspire too much confidence; a country that was inclined to go for the third rate; where we don't really need brilliant philosophers; where anybody can do.

OW

Reading Chinweizu's contribution to this book, one of the concepts he meditates upon is this idea that leaders need to be trying to carry out *something*. They need a purpose. If the state itself has no purpose – then the leaders have no purpose. And according to Chinweizu, even so long ago, the ancient Egyptians were clear about what the purpose of their state was about – *Maat*. I was quite interested in some of the ideas you touched upon in *The Trouble with Nigeria* when you discussed the purpose of leadership. The three main virtues you mentioned were truthfulness, peace and social justice – these are almost the Maatian ideals of the Egyptian state. And the Egyptians also had the notion of the Pharaoh as embodying and carrying out God's law, and these three values were the essence of God's law. I was wondering why after 4,000 years we are still wrestling in Africa with pretty fundamental things. For instance between 4,000 and 5,000 years ago administrator and philosopher Ptahhotep said: 'Be not evil, it is good to be kindly. Cause thy monument to endure through love of thee. Then men thank God on thine account, men praise thy goodness and pray for thine health. Honour the great and prosper thy people; good is it to work for the future.'

We all know this – and we know why there is chaos in Nigeria. You highlight the issues in *The Trouble with Nigeria* – corruption, indiscipline, etc. – but why has this message not been absorbed in terms of the leadership class? Before you answer – the other point that Chinweizu raises is that to ensure *Maat*, there was a need to train the civil servants and the bureaucracy – as

the Chinese would have done in terms of the principles of Confucianism. So there was a deliberate policy that in order to produce *Maat* you had to undergo education in *Maat*. I was wondering whether the two things are linked in Nigeria?

CA

They are linked. You have already said so in terms of the vision. Where there is no vision – people don't survive. So 5,000 years ago our people knew about it – it doesn't mean that today 5,000 years later everybody knows – 'knows' – in quotes, underlined. It is one thing to hear about something – it is something else to 'know'. *To know is really to believe*. It is not something you say to be acceptable. That's not knowledge. If you really know this, if the leaders really knew this – they would believe that social justice and maintenance of peace are linked, and if there is no justice, then peace is out of the window. Our ancestors simplified those things, and made them look easy.

OW

One Nigerian leader you spoke about with real affection in *The Trouble with Nigeria* was Aminu Kano, the radical politician from the North. What qualities made him such an exemplary leader for you?

CA

Aminu Kano's vision of politics and leadership was the promise to empower the common people. Although he was himself of the ruling class in northern Nigeria, his political career was one long struggle against the powerful on behalf of the weak. The Prime Minister of Nigeria, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa once made a comment – half joke and half exasperation – that if Aminu Kano became Prime Minister he would be found the next day leading a demonstration against the government.

Aminu Kano was uncomfortable sitting on the same side of the table as authority. The image of him that I treasure above all others was his appearance at the Kampala Peace Talks, one of the abortive efforts to end the Biafran war. Aminu Kano was on the Federal Government delegation. Or perhaps I should say that his body was on the Federal Government side. I was a member of the Biafran delegation. The two delegations sat staring stonily at each other across the room, while the two leaders held a fruitless debating contest. The leader of the Federal Government delegation was a well-known, rather showy politician, eloquent and condescending. He declared at one point that Biafrans were not a state but a state of mind. The leader of the Biafran delegation was a Chief Justice, a highly respected jurist, careful in his language and restrained in his delivery.

Aminu Kano, who I did not know well, made a very strong impression on me. He was not looking at us, or at anything in the room. He did not seem to be listening to the debate. He was looking outside through a window close to him. He seemed pained and profoundly sad. Quite clearly he was not part of the triumphalist mood of his delegation.

OW

We have focused on political power – but there is a way in which art and artists can influence things by providing vision. Do you think in Nigeria there has been – not a failure perhaps, because I think your generation has done better than mine in terms of thinking, talking or writing about these issues – but do you think that if there is a vision hole in Nigeria, it is perhaps because artists have not projected anything in there?

CA

Yes, well, it is possible for artists to fail in the area of vision. I am not saying we did. I think the artists of my generation did what they were capable of doing – most of them. But it is not something that you do once, it is something which is continuous. In fact I am little suspicious of the generational argument because what is required has not changed – which is that there should be peace, justice, and prosperity in the land. People should be safe.

The easiest failure for the artists is when he begins to say: ‘that is politics – what I am doing is art.’ Once you get into that I don’t really have very much to say to anybody because it seems to me to be a fundamental failure to understand why we are doing what we are doing. Nobody wrote a law to say we should create art – it is something that comes out of us. ‘I have a story, I want to tell it, would you like to hear it?’ This seems to be one of the marks of humanity. We see the world but that is not enough. It’s fine as far as it goes, but we also want to create a world. Or to make this world better. That is another thing Igbo take from their culture – the necessity for continuous development of the world. God did not finish the creation work. He began it but he has been holding conversations with our ancestors when things didn’t quite work. When they couldn’t eat, didn’t find enough food – he gave them yam. He said go and plant it. They planted it and it didn’t work because ‘the earth then was a swamp’, as Eze Duru, still sitting on the anthill, said. And God asked, ‘what is happening, I gave you yam?’ Eze Duru said: ‘the sand is not good’. God said: ‘Then go to the blacksmith in Akwa and let them bring their bellows to work on the soil’. And that is how agriculture came into existence, you see. So, no generation has its work done. If there is no work, you invent work.

OW

That is part of the Igbo creation myth. How much of this lack of vision – I come back to it again perhaps because I am becoming obsessed with it – but how much of it is due to the fact that there isn't really a similar creation myth for Nigeria.

CA

I am sure that if you look at the creation myths that are there you will find equivalents in the other cultures in Nigeria.

OW

No, I mean one that everybody buys into. What we have are regional creation myths?

CA

That's because we didn't get to that point [beyond regionalism to nationhood]. The British sort of took over the show quite a while ago and they are still at it. Even if there are things in the myths of different nations that make up Nigeria, I don't know them and there is nobody in hurry to work along those lines as far as I know. It was not in the interest of Britain when she left to say you must learn about each other, on the contrary.

OW

But hasn't that been evolving anyway? For instance, I remember when the great Afro-beat musician, Fela died, we had a wake in London. Everybody gathered (naturally Yorubas, but there were Igbos, Hausas, lots of different Nigerians) around a Nigerian restaurant in Brixton. It was actually quite moving – there were former members of Fela's band and we sang the songs and you realised that we all shared something. And I suddenly saw the possibilities of somebody – again it was an artist – who could hold everybody together inside his own story. And I am not suggesting that Fela is this person, but it seems to me that something has been quietly happening over the last 46 years and some of those stories – the Biafran war, the Niger Delta tragedy, the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa, in 1993, and the cancelling of the elections by President Babaginda – mean something to those of us who are Nigerian. We are creating a common Nigerian story but there is a sense in which it is still fragmentary – one doesn't feel it is yet tangible.

CA

It has to be that way to begin with. One thing I would advise is that we must not be too impatient. A certain impatience is appropriate – but not when it

moves into despair – at that point it ceases to work. If there is a genuine moment in our history which should be remembered and honoured we should talk about it. Leadership comes into this – because it is not the men in the street who arrange these things. We should celebrate moments of success in this experiment called Nigeria. I don't go as far as some people who have virtually come to the conclusion that Nigeria should be dissolved. I come close now and again but I like to think that we shouldn't really fail because the experiment does not seem so difficult – just respect your next door neighbour, be fair, don't carry the wealth of the nation and send it abroad, outsourcing Nigeria's wealth. Put in place a few fundamentals – we should not give up yet.

OW

There have been a lot of experiments to find ways of selecting/electing the leader. One may cynically call the first coup an experiment of sorts. Then with the return to civilian rule in 1979, we abandoned the British parliamentary system of first past the post, within a regional framework. Now we are trying the American presidential system, within a federal framework of 36 states; we are now talking about a power shift, the rotation of the presidency around – I don't know whether it would be six zones, or two zones (the north and the south) – who knows how many natural zones there really are in the country? The country has been trying different experiments – which of the models do you think might endure?

CA

I think that whatever will remove the almost obsessive hold that power has for the leader. Anything that downgrades the importance of the presidency. It is not the president that is the centre of life in the country, it is the people. Therefore anything that makes the office of the president less attractive, I welcome. I know I am putting it badly but all I am trying to emphasise is, can we just elect a president and move on to other things.

OW

How much is this model of a weak president to do with your own Igbo background and the system of a council of elders where the king or chief is not seen as particularly important, but is sort of a first among elders?

CA

It probably is to do with it – but it's part of the human experience. And if it is helpful to anybody, anywhere, they should use it. Don't be obsessed by the power of the presidency, and the way to achieve that is to spread out the power. The

president doesn't have to be minister of oil. He does not have to control the treasury, it is not his money. There are so many other people and institutions that can handle other areas of our need. That to me is what to look for. And this, of course, is what everybody who wants to be president wants to keep, so that he can become a dictator; even if he is going around calling himself a democrat. Democracy is really important. It is important – it is not a joke.

As for the Igbos they looked at size, the size of the community. They did not look for an empire. They did not even admire kingdoms that much. They wanted something they could handle. They came to the conclusion that the optimum size was the size of the village as they constructed it throughout Igbo land.. I don't know how many there are, but the size of the village is not something huge. They knew about huge places – they knew about the neighbouring Benin Empire, and its soldiers. The villagers did not want soldiers. That is something we should look at. Why did they choose a village?

The Igbo people went far in establishing the uniqueness of the village. Each village was created by God. It is not related to the next one. I was absolutely staggered when I realised that – that God went around creating village after village. In my town, God created one man, Ezechupuağa, 'the king that drives away war'. And then he went further. He walked some distance and created another man – the man who founded the town of Ukwelē – novelist Cyprian Ekwensi's people, *Ukwelē Uzumaaka*. So the man who God created there was *Uzuma aka*. Then God created the river Nkisi between them as a boundary. So the planning of the world in the view of the Igbos is not on a vast scale, but on a small scale. They know about kings – they probably played around with kings sometime in their history. But they found the best arrangement was this one, where you knew everybody, and you could have direct democracy, where you meet all the time. Even if you don't call it a meeting there is a conversation going on all the time. If we can capture that idea of making everybody count in Nigeria – because that is what it amounts to – then it would be good. When the meeting is on everybody can go. It is not a secret affair, what is discussed is of importance to everybody.

OW

A lot of our talk about leadership has been about men. How important is it to bring women into leadership in Africa? I know you have talked and written about this quite a lot recently. How important would having a female leader change the dynamics of these issues?

CA

Women are entitled to become leaders without any reason – they are there. They are more than 50 per cent of the population. So they should be represented accordingly unless they don't want to – I have known women,

especially old woman, who more or else felt about politics – ‘I have something more important to do’. And if you look at the nature of the world, you sometimes think that God intended woman to be more serious than the men. There is a part of Igboland that has a story about how God left the world because he was being bothered. In the first case the trouble he had was being invaded very early in the morning by the community, crying about something they wanted him to do. First, somebody’s cow had died and it was the only cow, and God said OK and brought the cow back to life. The next day it was a chicken. The chicken was the thing that broke the camel’s back. God packed up and left his house in the middle of the village. But before he left, he appointed the village women to look after his shrine. And his shrine was four trees, Ogili seeds, a sacred tree, very slim, not a huge tree, and it is the women he put in charge. Very simple, four trees, not a cathedral.

So, when we say what role will we give women, it is not really up to us to give women any roles. They will take what roles they want. I don’t think we should say every other president must be a woman. It may not work, but we can’t say a woman cannot be president, that is stupid. What they want, they are entitled to have as citizens like everybody else. If this takes them into business or politics, so be it. The example of Liberia [the election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in 2005] is really one that we should treasure. The fact that it happened is really a miracle. Africa, in spite of bad news, occasionally throws up something which is miraculous.

OW

Nigeria is about to relaunch itself. There is a big campaign where the country will rebrand itself as the ‘Heart of Africa’.

CA

I hadn’t heard that . . . but the thing about Nigeria is surviving the good intentions. I will deviate slightly. Occasionally I have had to say to my countrymen that something is a wonderful idea – I hope we can keep it and keep doing it. But there are too many examples where this did not happen. For example when I visited Nigeria in 1999 I was honoured for my contribution to the Arts and given a prize in money, I said in the acceptance speech – ‘I hope this will go on to recognise artists every year’. And the minister said, ‘no, this is not a guarantee – only if there is a good one’. I said there will be a good artist every year to give a prize to. But they never continued. That was the second time – the first time I got the Governor General’s prize for my second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, from Zik, and there was maybe one more Governor General’s prize and that was it. We must learn to stay the course, if we select something and say this is good, let’s try

and remember it. If we do it once a year let's do it. We tend to be full of enthusiasm, but only for a short time.

So, back to the Heart of Africa. Nigeria is big enough to call itself anything it wants. It is no joke to have a quarter of the population of Africa living in one country, no joke to have a country with the traditions and art of Nok alone, the bronzes not only of Ife, but Benin. We can call ourselves Heart of Africa – but let's mean it.

OW

I was just interested in this because I have felt this as a Nigerian – that sometimes you are quite reticent about putting yourself out. I remember I had to do a meeting recently in London and the subject was 'Is Nigeria an obstacle to pan-Africanism?' So I went along and there was this general disappointment with Nigeria. My speech was a conceit, namely that if most Africans in one space are in Nigeria and Nigeria is trying an experiment to bring them together, it cannot be an obstacle to pan-Africanism, it can only be furthering the pan-African vision. I thought I detected some defensiveness from some of the audience. On the one hand other Africans want Nigeria to play a big role, but immediately you take the role of leadership seriously, people get fearful of a 'big Nigeria', which might want to dominate them. So is there a sense that Nigerians themselves get quite timid about projecting the potential of this huge country and the leadership thing is part of this crisis of timidity? I mean somebody stood up and said that the first Nigerian Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa was a traitor to pan-Africanism because he said at independence he would rather concentrate on building Nigeria than the Nkrumahist vision of uniting the continent.

CA

There was that problem. That is part of what I was thinking about when I said this thing was fixed. Britain was very much behind the separation of Ghana and Nigeria. Ghana was too troublesome. People like Balewa were just right for Britain. It took strikes and marches by students at the University of Ibadan to get rid of a British Permanent Secretary for Balewa. There is rivalry – Nigeria is big and Ghana may be a bit resentful. So some said we know Nigeria is bigger than Ghana but in the same way that one penny is bigger than three pence!

OW

Having talked briefly about Nigeria within Africa, I was going to ask you more broadly about Africa, the West, China and India – but I think that is another conversation for another day. Thank you for your thoughts on leadership.