

The Fox and the Cock in Contemporary Nigeria

By

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The space between the two buildings within a compound where I grew up as a child at Ijebu-Ode was our play area. Some football and running around during the day and knowledge sharing spot in the evening. It was where we learnt critical thinking through Yoruba stories and proverbs. Without knowing it, as children, we were learning Yoruba philosophy and world outlook in a play mode. Out of interest, an older man shared different stories. His stories were more exciting because we participated as he got us to sing songs that accompanied the narratives. At the end of each story he asked all the children what lessons could be learnt. I learnt about the fox and the cock during one of these knowledge sessions.

The fox used to be fearful and constantly running away from the cock. One day, the cock crowed unto the fox asking him (fox) to stop running away. The fox responded that it had to constantly run away because it did not want to get burnt by fire. The cock was shocked and asked where the fire was. The fox pointed at the beautiful flowery comb (ogbe) adorning the head of the cock like a crown and stated that the cock was carrying fire on its head. The cock invited the fox to come closer that it is just a comb and not fire and that it is only meant to attract hens. Hesitatingly, the fox came closer and touched the comb and discovered the truth. Upon the discovery that the cock had no fire, the fox grabbed the cock, killed it and ate it. We were asked to draw lessons from the story. The one I remembered was that we should be very skillful in life and not disclose our source of power to strangers.

My Sagamu-based retired engineer-friend wanted to reinvent himself by becoming a farmer. He wanted to provide progressive political leadership to southwest farmers to make them produce more food. He invested a lot on farming in Yewa part of Yorubaland to produce plantains. He got to his farm one day and found cows eating up his freshly growing plantain suckers. He shouted. A Bororo herdsman asked him why he was shouting and disturbing the feeding cows. He told me he meekly left as he was worried that the herdsmen could burn the nearest village with no recourse to law enforcement if he stood to defend his interest on his farmland. He decided to stop farming.

Many farmers in the southwest growing maize, beans and other crops have similar stories to tell. The timid Governors in Yoruba states like scared foxes were of no help to their people. They all want to be President, Vice-President or, at least, Ministers of Nigeria and were ready to compromise the real interests of their people. The Governors have a feeble advisory relation with the police. The police structure is under the control of cow-loving and cow-owning President Muhammadu Buhari (PMB).

The more powerful south did not realize its power as the fox in Nigeria but was afraid of the core north thinking its flowery cock comb was fire until a Sunday Igboho went after Sarkin Fulani of Igangan and the OPC went after Iskilu Wakili. Both had allegedly been terrorizing and destroying lives and farmlands in the southwest while the police waited for instruction that apparently never came from Abuja.

Actually, the foxy southern Nigeria has more unrealized power. The foreign exchange earning black gold is in the south. The south is not landlocked. It also has arable farmlands. It has more forest and lush greens and lesser dry and dessert lands. It has the seaports. It is more open to investment. ‘Mr. Nigeria’ or the real owner of Nigeria sited his petroleum refinery and petrochemical plant in Lagos instead of Kano. It was a practical profit-motivated decision and not out of love for the southwest. This major investment gives him more power as it also gives Lagosians counter power. Mr. Nigeria has a strong interest in making sure Nigeria avoids war. It is generally known that one can prevent a war by being prepared to fight one. But power is not only from the barrel of the gun.

There's ample soft power in the southwest. It was realized that the north-central portion of Nigeria grew a lot of food that middlemen brought to the south. The core north provided onions and tomatoes as well as cows, sheep and goats. Some food is being produced in the south but the value is always discounted when the Yoruba speak among themselves.

Gari, the real staple food in southern Nigeria before rice, is made from cassava tubers largely grown in the south and middle belt of Nigeria. Yams and other tubers are grown in the south. There are plantain plantations all over the place with a small production of beans. Palm oil and fruits and vegetables, including tomatoes were grown before the huge investments in river basin authorities all over the country. The northwest portion of Nigeria did very well by realizing a tomato and onion revolution. Protein was largely livestock (goats and cows) from the north or, better put, in transit through northern Nigeria from Chad and Niger Republic. It is a myth that Nigeria produces a lot of cattle, goats and sheep. Sure, northern Nigeria produces some but the large portion is imported from Niger Republic and Chad.

The recent weeklong food blockade that saw the food transporting middlemen from the north of Nigeria clamped on the southern part proved so many things. Inadvertently, the cock as middlemen who regularly drive cows, goats and rams to sell in the south showed to the south that the south can survive without so-called food from the north. Equally, it showed that the onion and tomatoes growers of these perishable products in the north as well as tubers and grains producers in the middle belt do not have identity of interest with middlemen cattle sellers.

It is normally said that the consumer is King. This truism was an uppermost lesson that can be derived from the one-week blockade. Nobody begged the middlemen except one or two jokers who were searching for national relevance who claimed they prevented a civil war. As I said, Mr. Nigeria borrowing a lot of dollars for his refinery cannot afford a war. His interest is to keep his protected market at whatever exchange arrangement he prefers (forget about the Central Bank of Nigeria that pretends to be making such decision), as he exports under AfCFTA to other African countries.

Videos and pictures of piles of tomatoes and onions rotting away in just one week ruined many farmers who were not interested in the political quest for power of control over food security in southern Nigeria. It was too unfortunate that a few greedy individuals could take a very irrational, thoughtless, decision to blockade compatriots. Attempts to divert food products to sell in neighbouring countries failed woefully. None of those countries or even a number of them pulled together has the purchasing power of Lagos.

Of course, reduced availability of farm produce resulted in higher prices that were willy-nilly absorbed by consumers. In effect, the readiness of Lagosians to purchase onions and tomatoes from the north should not always be taken for granted. More organically grown onions and tomatoes can be easily increased and this should be done by individuals returning to their farms with self-help defense if necessary. I must hasten to note that self-defense is not how to run a country but with the resistance on state police and the crippling of Amotekun by the Federal government and state Governors, self-help is becoming welcomed even though we must accept it is a road to warlordism that is best avoided if there are alternatives. Unfortunately, we are moving in the direction of Somalia.

“All stakeholders and members of the Amalgamated Union of Food and Cattle Distributors of Nigeria (AUFCDN) in our nationwide strike are glad we achieved what we wanted to achieve. Since Kogi State Governor Yahaya Bello begged us on behalf of the Federal Government of Nigeria, we agreed to call off the nationwide strike today” declared the AUFCDN President, Muhammed Tahir in calling the blockade to a close.

In the aftermath of the blockade, people in the south must begin to look inwards, the nature of the dependencies, interdependencies should be examined in the light of the intentions behind the blockade,

consumption patterns, demands could be tamed to explore substitute, and options available around, subsistence farming for individual families should be embraced more.

Finally, integrated ranching should be beefed up. The southern Governors can use some of the percentages of their revenue to beef up on alternative protein production arrangements. Ogun and Lagos are foremost in the production of poultry products in Nigeria. This can be easily doubled by redirecting many unemployed youths into poultry production. In a more civilized and well thought out manner, (characteristics of the Yoruba people), the south could find a way around these issues. Nutritional research, awareness, and enlightenment can be used to draw attention to viable and more nourishing sources of proteins. Chicken broilers can be all over the place in just three months. With the fecundity rate of pigs, pork that is hygienically grown can be on the tables of those who want it in roughly 6 months. The successful Ijebu poverty reduction initiative which has been on for some 20 years can be easily doubled if not tripled at its current site if capital support is extended by Ijebu people without waiting for the government. This can be duplicated in many southern states.

On a longer term of two to three years, the old Western Region ranches created by the Awolowo-led self-government at Ibadan, Shaki, Ikun, Agege, Ikare, Akunu, Oke-Ako, Ikorodu and Imeko are mostly in ruins today; same way the Obudu ranch lies in waste after being abandoned for many years. These old Western Region ranches used to be stocked with cattle imported from Mali and Argentina to form a crossbreed that was ok in the humid environment. These ranches were built with good facilities, including dams. In Oyo state, about nine ranches in different parts have been abandoned, with full facilities for farm settlement, segments for animal husbandry, fishery, poultry and piggery, and the part for growing fodders and crops. Over 16,000 hectares of land dedicated to cattle ranching in Oyo state, 5,000 hectares for Ikere Gorge Dam, another 5,000 for Ibarapa ranch, are all in ruins today. They can be easily revived. Ogun state is not different: in Imeko sits a ranch of 4,000 hectares abandoned; same with Oke-Ako in Ekiti, with about 12,000 hectares lying in ruins. Recently, the governors of Oyo and Ogun states announced intentions to revive these ranches. Individuals should step forward with proposals to have these Awo legacies revamped. The respective state Governments should be visionary and reasonable enough with these individual investors.

Meanwhile, as Loupa Pius pointed out, in Nigeria based on sizes varying from small to giant, the prices of cattle range from N60,000 to N450,000 (1,089.25 USD). In Somalia, cattle with an average body weight of 300kg is sold at about USD300. The most current price of cows in South Sudan is about 307-460 US Dollars. In Uganda, it is USD246. The south has a chance to renegotiate prices by importing beef in the frozen state or on the hoof. I read a compatriot writing about PMB when he was GMB banning importation of beef. I do not know if this is fake news. Fake or not, the situation today is different. Nigeria's obligation under AfCFTA makes importation of foods and livestock a kosher business. Before the ranches become operational in 2-3 years, Botswana and South Africa are alternative sources of supplies.

The cock has inadvertently shown the fox it lacks the power the fox attributed to it. Unlike the case in my childhood story, the south needs not do the extreme, but only use this realization to fortify and strengthen its comparative advantages. This being the case, the erstwhile conception of powerlessness should lead to more protection for farmers all over Nigeria.