

A Romance with Vultures¹

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The years 1993 to 1998 were a particularly dark period for Nigeria. They were the gory years of the Abacha dictatorship, with all its characteristic harshness and wanton brutality. They were the years of the triumph of evil, even falsehood and intolerance were shamelessly woven into the creed of leadership, when it was anathema to stand up for one's rights. The ASUU (Academic Staff Union of Universities) strike of 1996 was one of the many moments in history when the above scenario was most vividly dramatised.

Apparently buoyed by the successes of a 1992/93 strike which brought some measure of improvement to the university system, the ASUU embarked on a fresh strike in 1996 to press for further improvement. The government had reneged on some aspects of the 1992 agreement; the groveling inflation in the country had eroded any relief accruing from the 1992 agreement; students and faculty coped with poor study and work conditions; Nigerian universities had become a ghost of themselves; and above all, the Nigerian professor earned in a year what an average menial worker in the U.S.A. or South Africa, for instance, would earn in a couple of weeks. It was thus overdue that a change be demanded and negotiated.

Change and Negotiation. Those were the watchwords of the ASUU during the 1996 strike. The negotiations took place between the government and ASUU officials, but the much-desired change was not to be. In its characteristic nihilist manner, the Abacha administration frustrated the negotiations mid-way and banned the ASUU as a way of halting the strike. In these Machiavellian antics, the government used academics, including lecturers and vice-chancellors, to achieve its ignoble goals. The University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN) was the guinea pig for the government's tactics. The ASUU strike crumbled, like the fabled walls of Jericho.

The questions have been asked, why did UNN, with its array of lively and formidable intellectuals, allow itself to become the first victim of government's machinations against ASUU and

the education industry? Why not the Universities of Ibadan or Sokoto or Maiduguri? Why did the academics at Nsukka become so supine and helpless? These have become matters of serious conjecture and several reasons can be adduced.

The ASUU strike coincided with the bloom of Professor Umaru Gomwalk's sole administratorship at UNN in 1996. It was the first time in Nigeria's educational history that a university had a Sole Administrator. Professor Gomwalk's appointment at the University of Nigeria—a university founded by Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's greatest nationalist—was not only one of the many evil triumphs of the military over the larger society; it was also an aberration and a rape of the academic community. Education is conceived in civilized societies as one of the humanising mechanisms of culture and is acknowledged as a means to freedom, especially freedom from nescience, superstition, and fear. It equips the mind for a wider role in the society, creating the consciousness in the individual for his inalienable rights as a member of a given community. To be able to achieve these goals, education must be administered within the bounds of a liberal and democratic spirit, according to the norms of the civil society. A Sole Administrator appointed by a military despot to run a first-rate university would certainly go against the above principles. He would create a parade-ground mentality, which is never conducive to intellectual enquiry and research. In this instance, Professor Gomwalk's tenure at the University of Nigeria remains a classic exemplar.

First, he refused to recognize ASUU-UNN as an umbrella body for faculty on campus. He literally forced the university to reopen when others were still on strike. He sacked over 100 members of the faculty in order to intimidate them to go back to work. Many of these lecturers were made to apologise in order to be re-absorbed. He introduced a system whereby a single individual was the head of two or more departments, and where university security men invigilated exams set by academics. He publicly tore an order of the Federal High Court given at Enugu in 1996. On one occasion, his agents at Nsukka detained and beat up a court bailiff attached to the Federal High Court in Enugu. At his behest, 17 academics were detained and later arraigned for charges of sedition and arson. Even when the case was struck out of court for "lack of merit" he refused to reinstate the affected academics who he had suspended. He was alleged to have awarded contracts

to his sons while in office. Above all, his tenure generated the worst brain-drain ever experienced at the University of Nigeria. Any way one looks at the matter, the above recitals are not germs of good leadership, nor do they portray the professor as a liberal scholar.

When the ASUU strike started, I was personally convinced that it was a just cause. Unlike previous strikes, which I had observed as a student, I knew somehow that this one was not just going to be a trade dispute: it was a war, which the Abacha government was determined to win. Having gotten away with the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the deposition of the near-sacred Sultan of Sokoto, it was clear how Abacha was going to react to the strike by academics. At the University of Nigeria, where I was a graduate assistant, the Sole Administrator made the fear more palpable, as he literally played Abacha, the little god. Initially, academics at the University stood firm and spoke with one voice, but then their ranks were broken, gradually. For the University of Nigeria, an institution which counts many brilliant intellectuals, ex-commissioners, and ex-ministers, in its folds, the failure of the strike was most stigmatising, considering that the failure was orchestrated by a single individual whose presence at the University was both an aberration and an illegality.

Officials of ASUU-UNN, led by the Chairman, Dr. G.O.S. Amadi, fearing that the fire-eating Sole Administrator would carry out his sack threat, went to the Federal High Court in Enugu and obtained a court injunction restraining him from dismissing faculty members. It was useless. Laws in Nigeria, seemingly, do not apply to military dictators and their agents. Over 100 lecturers were illegally dismissed from the University of Nigeria in July 1996. They could not find protection in the court of law. Nor could their union, now supine, do anything to save them. Of the number dismissed, less than 20, including myself, remained. The others got back to work through diverse means, including writing letters of apology to the Sole Administrator. The strike was gradually killed in other universities across the country. The last hope for the emasculated labour in Nigeria under Abacha died with the strike and the proscription of ASUU. For the Abacha regime, it was another Pyrrhic victory. But like all such victories, the costs were many. Our universities are turning out travesties of graduates. Our ill-equipped libraries are stocked with out-dated books. Our

universities have pig-sites and chicken pens in the name of hostels and offices. University appointments are no longer on merit. The best brains can no longer be attracted to the system because of the poor remuneration. Consequently, you have mediocres as lecturers. Their students cannot see them for consultation. When they show up at all, they are there to sell their mimeographs and “self-published” books to students at cut-throat prices.² The effect is far-reaching. Cheating and stealing have taken a front seat. The creative-inventive sprit is dead. The teachers have become a laughing stock. Politics and soldiery are more important than education. Our society thus regresses into the abyss of pre-history.

The above points were not lost on committed Nigerian academics when they embarked on the strike of 1996. The logic was that a better-paid teacher and better-equipped university would produce better graduates. I used to be disgusted with lecturers who sold mimeographs. But after the 1996 strike, it is possible to justify the sale of mimeographs by lecturers, the many disadvantages notwithstanding. I am sure that many Nigerians do not know that an average professor cannot afford to cater for one or two wards in the university, the same system where he belongs. If he has to trade (in whatever) to be able to do that, let him. If we worry about the costs of his actions to the entire society, we should not blame him. We should blame those in high places who, in their relative comfort, have forgotten that “a stick in time saves nine”

Personally, as a teacher, I do not believe in mimeographs. I am in love with the heuristic method, which encourages the student to tap his own creativity and intelligence through research and association. But I can no longer condemn mimeographs vehemently, in the face of the realities of the educational system in Nigeria. And it is partially to ensure that such anomalies are eradicated through the amelioration of the general work and study conditions that I participated in the strike of 1996. So, when I received the letter from the Sole Administrator threatening to sack me from duty, I was not shaken. I found it funny that a modern university would want to dismiss a former first-class student. I was really angry—any respectable academic had to be. In early July 1996 when several lecturers, including myself, got sack letters from the university; it felt as if our society was finished and that education had been thrown in the mud. Although we tried, it was clear that we would not get much out of the courts, especially

when it was said that the Head of State, General Abacha, had personally directed that no lecturer dismissed as a result of the strike should be reinstated or employed in any government parastatal. That was typical of a Sani Abacha's feudal state: absolute triumph was very necessary at every intersection, even when it was ridiculous and suicidal.

But I was surprised—and I still am—at the way in which some of our esteemed academics fell before reactionary forces. These were the people I had looked up to at the initial state of the strike. And really, in those early days, they were sources of strength, courage, and hope. They would come to ASUU meetings bustling with energy, and they would speak like men of thought and action. But when the hips came down, they failed to act like men of thought. Some of them, including ex-officials of the ASUU, were the first to be caught by the madness of fear. They went crawling at night in the classic Nicodemean manner, to the administration, seeking ways of returning to their poorly paid jobs. Some of these were highly placed academics who were well-regarded not only in the university community but also in society. They could not rise above the expediency and cupidity in the air to uphold the truth and justice that defined the ASUU struggle. They allowed themselves to be mesmerised by a bread-and-butter administrator, so much so that they could not act to save their future or that of their children in a society that had become too militarised.

As a young man of about 29, this scenario held so many lessons for me. It dissected the Nigerian society and its leadership and laid them bare on the stretcher for anyone who cared to see. In my innocence, I used to believe that there was something special about academics and that they are paragons of sincerity and liberty. But I was mistaken. The poverty, agony, contradictions, hypocrisy, and deceit of modern Nigeria is well mirrored in the education industry, especially with the death of research and the inventive spirit. People are just there to survive; and they do anything to survive. If they have to mortgage their future in order to survive today, who cares? And that is the kind of principles they are inculcating in our children, the so-called leaders of tomorrow. Every Nigerian university suffers the same disease. Education is no longer a means to freedom from want and oppression. Nor does it stress the virtues of sound values, principles, and standards.

It is so bad now that in the entire mad-house known as the university system, there is no one to look up to. Role models are scarce and heroes are virtually non-existent. The situation spells doom for a young nation, especially one which considers itself, or wishes to be, important in the comity of nations.

History shall be the ultimate witness of those who were persecuted for holding on to the truth during the crisis at Nsukka. Now that the Abacha cult is broken and many of the acolytes humbled, the hunter and the hunted can sit down and count the losses; and the losses are many. They may never reach a consensus on the origin and history of the avoidable crisis from which they just emerged, but one thing should be certain in the innermost parts of their heart: the tragedy of Nsukka and the entire education industry is the tragedy of their generation; the folly of a wasted generation.

Notes

¹ For the full version of this essay, see C. Krydz Ikwemesi, *A Basketful of Water: Selected Essays* (Enugu: Charles & Charles, 1999). This excerpt is lightly edited for formatting.

² Teachers in Nigerian tertiary institutions have often bombarded their students with publications that can mildly be described as less than qualitative. In some instances, the students' success or otherwise in examinations depend on whether or not they have purchased such books and not on their academic performance or intellectual ability. This tendency, no matter how it is rationalised, is ultimately anti-education.



On the Road to Golgotha, Oil on board, 1998



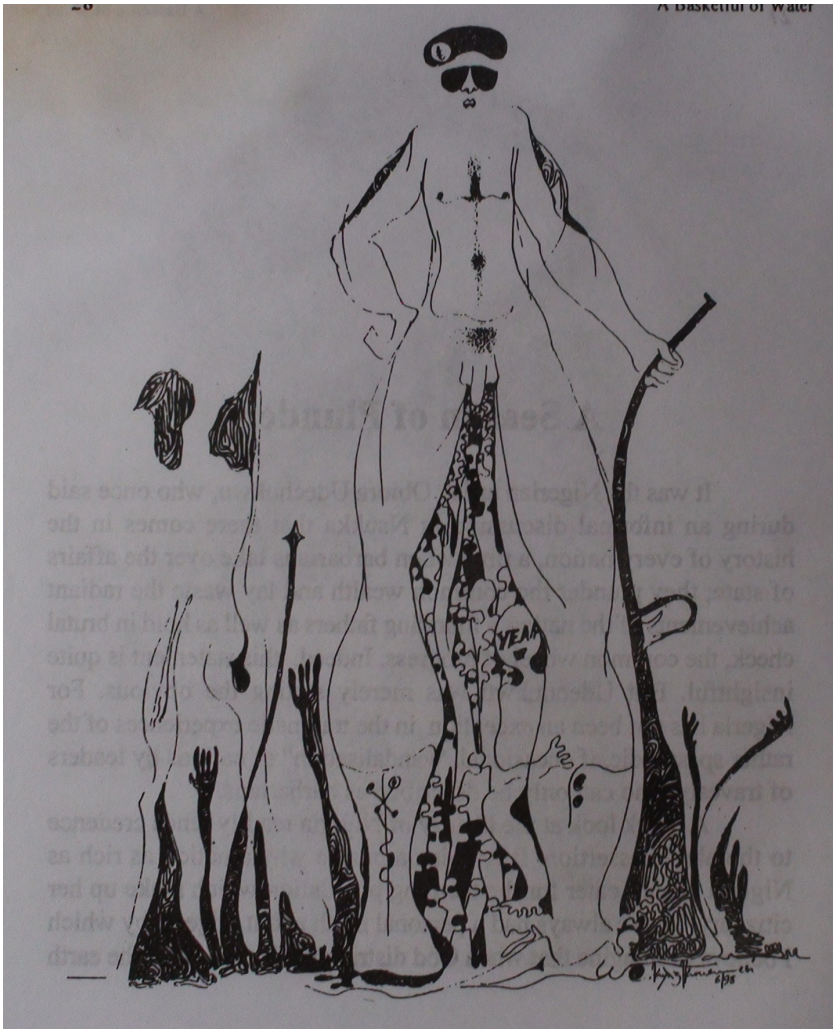
The "Convultural" Conference, Pen and ink, 1994



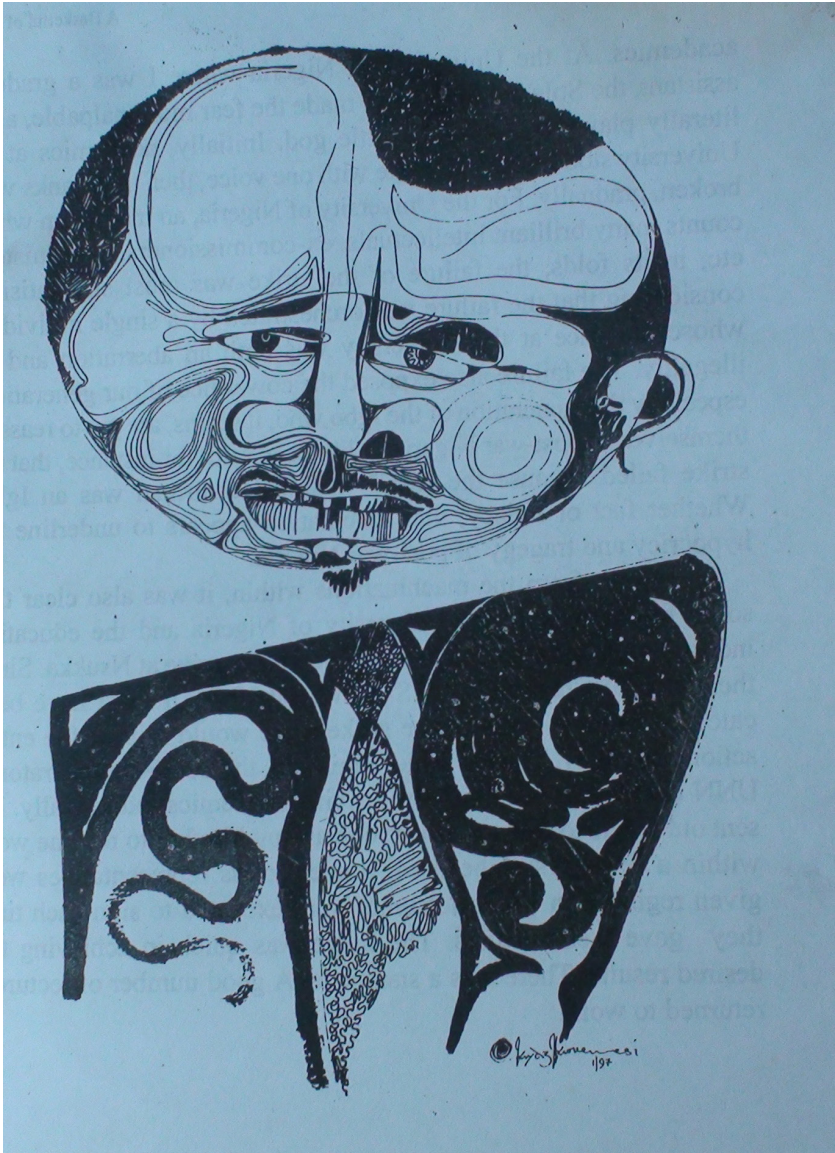
The Trial of UNN, Pen and ink, 1997



Letter to my Countrymen, Oil on canvas, 1993



No One But Me, Pen and ink, 1998



Professor, the Miserable Egghead, Pen and ink, 1997

