

A landscape photograph showing a wide, shallow body of water in the foreground. In the distance, a herd of horses is gathered on the far bank. The sky is overcast and the overall tone is somewhat muted.

THE
PLAINS
OF MY PAINS

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¹ Keynote address at the First Summit of Northeast Youth held on 19th March, 2016 at Awala Hotel, Bauchi

Centre for Information Technology and Development

ISBN: 978-978-54842-1-2

First Published in 2016

Published by

Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD)

3rd Floor, NSITF Building, No. 1A, Social Insurance Road,
behind Trade Fair Complex, Zaria Road, Kano State.

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Starting with a personal note

My maternal great grandparents, having roamed the Komodugu valley and lost their cattle eventually settled in Nguru. For whatever reasons, they were called Fulata-Borno. But they did not find the settled life easier. Soon they resumed their wandering and followed the valley until they hit on the Jama'are River. The daughter of the house befriended a son of a local Fulani man and eventually got married to him. She gave birth to six children including the woman who became my mother. From the other side of the Jamaare River, another son of a local Fulani chieftain friended one of the products of the Fulani-Fulata Borno liaison and eventually married her. I was the first of their homework.

I was born in the Northeast. This is not just a statement. It meant that in schools we had classmates from all parts of the region. And if I am passionate about the Northeast, that is where I knew as a child. It shaped my world outlook. It left an indelible mark that no passage of time can erase. But I know more than just the geographical expression of this fabulously rich region.

As a child growing in an agrarian rural community, we could early in the morning trek to the river and stay till sunset. We did not have to carry food along with us because we were sure we could always get what we wanted to eat, as it were, without any preservatives or cooking additives. We could get lost but the ever meandering path of the river was sure to take us to a familiar point. Even in the night, the faint melancholic tunes of the guards man, lost in the wilderness of river and night, were sure signposts to our homes. We had no fear of kidnappers. We knew of river maids and various *bori* spirits but the word "kidnappers" did not exist in our lexicon. The animals would be released from houses and on their own go to the grazing fields

and by evening they would return, again on their own, and how intelligent these animals were, they all knew their different homesteads. There were no cattle rustlers or other animal thieves to waylay them. You could sleep in the *bukka* and there was no fear of insurgents burning the shack.

Comparing this with the contemporary situation of the northeast, I have once voiced my anguish as the pains of the plains of my birth. Here were some of the ways I had expressed this anguish at different times:

And I asked myself: what is the crime of those hundreds slaughtered children and women? Does it not prick our conscience that we have as a collectivity failed in our elementary civic responsibility as our brothers (and sisters) keepers? Sleep well the innocent souls of Konduga, Buni Yadi, Izge and all the other sites of this horror, your bewildered faces shall remain a ringing watchful eye on those with responsibility to stop the carnage.

Bama, Konduga, Izge and now Buni Yadi all forlorn. We can only honour the memory of those innocence souls that were slaughtered and remain our fractured conscience by organizing to stop further occurrence of this barbarism.

Words empty, tears impotent, fractured conscience feels numb for the pain is painless because it is extremely painful, parents all we are.

I did not miss the road. It is simply that the violence and destruction have obliterated all the historical landmarks of my memory of the place. Poor Konduga: we will yet rebuild you.

Today, our people cannot go to the farm, they cannot fish (but even the rivers are drying). They cannot go to the market. They cannot go to school. Government workers cannot go to work. Even the Mais, Emirs, Hardos, etc find their palaces insecure. Thousands have lost their lives. Schools, markets, hospitals, roads, etc have all been destroyed. Millions have been forced out of their homes and are now living as internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps that are not suitable for human habitation. That is the northeast of today.

The economic situation is in dire straits. Indeed there is virtually no economy in much of the region. You can only have an economy when there are economic activities. There are no economic activities taking place. Here, people are just preoccupied with making everything possible to survive. In the northeast today, survival is the only goal. Many have seen the terrible trauma of seeing their beloved relations killed or forcefully taken away. In the northeast of today, death is normal, survival accidental.

How did this come to pass

How come that this vicious insurgency took hold of this otherwise peaceful land? How come these peace loving people now are at the receiving end of mindless violence? How come the insurgents found nesting and breeding grounds for the recruitment of murderers from among us? We need to answer these questions in order to be able to say NEVER again.

Before the Boko Haram insurgency, our region in relation to other parts of the country was least developed. We had the highest maternal and child mortality rates. We had the lowest number of school enrolments and completion and by the same token the lowest number of school accomplishments. We had the least number of graduates per population in the country. While we had in the past very good public schools and I am proud of such schools as the *Kuranga*, which

produced me, in the last couple of years, the education sector has virtually collapsed. It is the same with the healthcare or indeed every sector of the economy. We have no industries. Even the land that our farmers work on, they have to do so using the same century old methods and instruments. The fishing catch of the Lake Chad (itself fast shrinking) which used to supply dried fish across the country has diminished.

Was this situation the result of the region being economically poor? My knowledge tells me no. The flood plains land of numerous valleys is as fertile as anywhere in the country. We have huge population of livestock. We have variety of economic trees. Although much of the land is in the arid zone, there is much land that meets alluvial soil for cultivation. The flood lands across the major rivers provided water for all year round agriculture, at least until the dams across their paths became too numerous. Now, what they do, is that from time to time, gash out torrent of merciless and angry water that destroys everything on its path, submerging farms (the livelihood of farmers), emptying our fingerlings to die before they could grow to be of value, destroying houses and blocking roads, ensuring that some lives are periodically taken as well. The northeast is a victim and hostage of visionless and self-centred political leadership and a horrible do-nothing attitude to climate change that is wrecking havoc.

And so, we need to explain

Let us start from the most obvious. We may decide to live in denial but the truth is that many of the insurgents are rooted in us. They are our people, our uncles, often, more of our brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews and nieces. Who in the city of Maiduguri has not known at least one Boko Haram insurgent? They are predominantly young people, so innocently young. Who are these young people? A few might have gone to a university, obtained a degree, and like the counterculture of the 1960s in America, decided to opt out for ideological reasons. The majority are simple ordinary folks who

have no education, no skill and no means of livelihood. Many had no choice. We are not rationalizing, it is simply important to acknowledge that the society itself creates its own terrorists.

If all these insurgents are our youth or mostly youth, then we must ask ourselves an important question: why is it that youths will leave the mainstream society and move to the marginal space of insurgency whose only purpose is to violently confront the mainstream society? Why is it that the insurgents find it easy to recruit such youths in spite of the dangers that life in insurgency signifies? An answer to this is critical to developing a strategy that will undercut the recruitment base of the insurgents which must be part of the soft strategy for fighting the insurgents. We must admit as a nation, that government at all levels has failed our youth and an honest response is required for youth to believe that the Nigerian state cares for them. In this, we face the challenge that the state must justify its existence by making life meaningful for the ordinary youth who feel alienated from it.

How come they have no skills? Simple. Both the *almajiranci* system to which many had gone through and the western secular system to which many of them rebel, are today incapable of providing them with the necessary skills and knowledge to be wealth creators, not job seekers, running over the streets, chasing jobs that are not there. The old skills cannot take them anywhere. Even the caps of Maiduguri, those *Zannabukars* and other types that you could only get in the northeast, be sure that the Chinese are applying for patents for them and in the end, it is not that our artisans will not only be incapable of competing with made in China factory caps but also it would be illegal for them to sew because China has the rights over the designs!

Time was when we use to see lorries, full with *kaba* (from Katagum Maikaba?) taken to Maiduguri to become mats, both utility and decorative. Today it is China plastic mats that we see even in the mosques of those who are Boko Haram. Our education system is a mere shell, churning out certificates than

knowledge and skill. This is so primarily because of bad governance. Bad or poor governance makes governments to forget about societal (collective) priorities and pursue private interests. Poor governance makes it the norm for public officers to loot the public treasury and forget about development needs of the society. Poor governance actually makes government to be unaccountable.

Unaccountable government are impunity at it starkest level. It does as it pleases and owes no one explanation or apology. Impunity is the situation in which people willfully do the wrong thing simply because they feel they cannot be called to account either as a result of their positions, closeness to power or because they are rich. Have we not seen it when the money meant to buy the guns that would secure the lives of our people have ended up in the bank accounts of few people who feasted while the Boko Haram were killing people. Every person that Boko Haram killed created opportunity for corrupt officials to milk public treasury into the pipe that goes into their private pockets.

We must end impunity so that rule of law can be the basis of our governance. Where there is impunity, there will ultimately be breakdown of law and order, which will result in security problems. The hue may not necessarily be Boko Haram, but it will always result in mindless violence. Check it out: Niger Delta, Somalia, Liberia until recently, etc. But there is a final consequence of bad governance, which is that poor governance creates islands of obscene richness within a vast sea of poverty. It normalizes the conspicuous display of vast richness as if flaunting it for the poor to envy. Our cities speak eloquently of this. But these riches are product of stealing and so they invite a sense of indignation on the part of the poor, who because they are powerless to attempt to alter things, become desperate and despondent. Poverty is only a necessary but not a sufficient condition for counter action for people to become susceptible to recruitment into violent cause. It is extreme inequality that pushes the balance for

desperate people to fight back in any way possible, an injustice that they see but because of the level of their cognitive development, cannot rationally explain and situate their anger within reason.

Three options are opened to such impoverished, desperate and despondent people. First is that there is the illusion that their chance may come with patience. A number of people falsely believe this and work to seek or create a space in the corrupt system for themselves. They don't see anything wrong with corruption per se. They are only too eager for their chance to come. However, they soon realize that corruption cannot be democratized because the loot it entails can only go round a few. They get blocked and fall off the ladder.

Second option is to accept our powerlessness, our impotence and resign to our fate: we can never change anything for good. We become chronic pessimists. Many people for a number of reasons find this not only convenient but also seductively harmless. The danger of prolonged pessimism is that it losses equilibrium and with time slides to the third option. Why is this dangerous, because the third option is a dangerous proposition.

The third option is those who crossed the Rubicon and violently confront the system. They are few but they take actions that impact profoundly on all of us. It is this minority that has brought the northeast to its knees. These people found a warm embrace in the hands of the Boko Haram ideologues but they are the product of our society, the making of the options that were not taken. Even if there were no ideologues of the Boko Haram type, the society would still have invented the gangs that will slaughter our people.

In this knock-up effect of impunity, people, ignorant, insecure, marginalized and hapless merge into a dynamic that haunts the society and today the situation of the northeast so sadly demonstrates this.

Hope is the key to reconstruction just as its absence is a calamity: when hope is emptied out of a people, they do not

know the difference between today and tomorrow or between living and not living. They inhabit a hallucinating world that hopeful people cannot imagine. In such a hallucinating world, death loses its meaning. Once such distinction becomes blurred, both their lives and that of others do not matter, so they can kill and are ready to die for no cause. Death is just another flight to higher scale of fancy.

This is where we are today in the northeast: a trajectory, not just of the making of the insurgents' ideologues but by the very society that has now become the victim of its own choices. We created the pool for the Boko Haram to fish from and they pick the most desperate, disillusioned and powerless amongst us. These people, the suicide bombers are both victims and valiant and in this equation government is the chief patron.

Up against pessimism

But that should not be so. That passive majority which appears impotent to take any action is where the hope lies. They need to be driven out of their passivity into meaningful engagement to take back our destiny. But as we know in the laws of physics, densely mass bodies have huge inertia. They are difficult to start on or stop when in motion. That mass of people, in the category of the impotent majority, is both stationary and in motion, depending on what your framework of reference is. Luck is that the same mechanics teaches us that small mass of bodies can be strategically organized to move more densely mass objects. Here, as we gather, we are the small masses that will strategically organize to push the dense mass: have we not seen this function effectively in the gear systems? That is what is needed of us, to put back the northeast on the path of sanity, growth and security.

Our being here is a statement of rejection of the three options. We are not powerless and we are not seeking a place in the corrupt system. We are not violently confronting it but will rationally and peacefully act to change the trajectory of our region, and with that, of our country. That change would be

grounded in social justice.

By being here today, we all have made a conscious choice, not be in other places. We are here because we are concerned and because we are concerned, we can do something. We reaffirm our self-agency for change and proclaim to all that we are the engineers of our souls.

What can we do to change the narrative? Let us first start with what it is that we collectively have: our resources. We have three things: our passion for justice, our love for humanity. We have ideas and lastly we have youthfulness, meaning we have the energy to walk the talk we are committed to.

We do not have power as in an institutional repository but we all know that power has as its foundation in ideas. Without ideas, there can be no power. Power is constituted by ideas. With our ideas, therefore we have potential power to effect changes. We should use our ideas to articulate solutions to our problems and how these solutions can be brought into being. I will not be prescriptive of these solutions as others have elaborated in details for different sectors of our problems. Suffices it to state some of the key principles upon which these solutions can be crafted. These include:

- A return to and affirmation of social justice as the organizing principle of our society. Social justice requires that all citizens have equal opportunity for self-realization and self-actualization. We have to be free to choose what we aspire to be within the confines of the law. No one should be discriminated upon on the basis of any naturally or socially conceived parameter or identity such as gender, religion, language, etc.
- Social justice cannot strive without democracy. We must therefore seek to deepen democracy in our society. Doing this includes a greater fidelity to rule of law, improved conduct of elections in the country, democratization of institutions, including political

- parties, and credible elections in local government, etc.
- At the base of democracy is the question of trust- the ability of government to keep to social pacts. This is the realm of accountability. Accountability of course is not possible without transparency. Accountability and transparency are the anti-dote to corruption. Corruption not only subverts rules of law, is conducive to impunity and allows hate crimes to go unpunished but also perverts and destroys the basis of our morality without which we would have no social anchorage. Corruption also siphons resources that could be used for development into private pockets and accounts, and impoverishing the people. It makes injustice to become more visible: an ordinary person who is caught with marijuana or has stolen chicken is sent to jail while a big man trading cocaine across continents use the money to sponsor Godsons into political offices or even win a seat for himself. Such normalization of injustice leads to security problems.
 - Democracy is about participation. Participation is only possible when people know the issues. That means that they are educated. But education is not only critical to democracy but also to overall unemployment crisis in the region. With huge number of unemployed youth, we would always turn for the worse. We must therefore revamp our education systems to make them both affordable and functional, functional in the sense that they produce the desired learning outcomes in the beneficiaries in terms of knowledge and skills for them to be active economic agents. Affordable in the sense that people actually get to be educated.

Bottom-line is that our youth to day must become the advocates for the revamping of the education systems in the northeast. That is the means of escape for without a sound education system, we shall always

return to the path of desperation. This leads me to return to the beginning: what is the solution to youth radicalization that injustice, impunity and want create? Current efforts at winning back the minds through de-radicalization programme avoid the real issues. Preaching is important but the minds can only make sense of the messages if there are no counter-narratives.

Holiness of the mind without fullness of the stomach cannot be a solution. You cannot win the minds of idle and marginalized people in the long run. We must go beyond winning the minds to also win the economic battle, which is to make the youth productive agents in the society. Ultimately, to say NEVER AGAIN, our youth must be gainfully engaged and be socially and politically involved. That is, we must end the reign of impunity and injustice, and institute an inclusive, participatory and accountable system in our polity and social organization. That is an agenda for not only of the youth of northeast but for all youth of Nigeria. We can do it, and hope you are ready to do it. This is the challenge I want leave you with today.

Thank you.



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