

On the Fatality of Silence

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Before I stumbled on the inspiration that gave birth to this write-up, I had always consciously avoided joining in any debate that had to do with the Nigerian polity. I believed that doing so was pointless since ours is a country where the craziest and the creepiest of things happens everyday. So I thought it's worthless catching some nasty headache for the sake of the country that has refused to be serious for once. For me, Nigeria is an eerily unbelievable country where sanity is far from making sense. But sometimes, I get pricked by this bizarre amalgam called Nigeria. In my silence (before I broke it recently), I had always respected the contributions of those who never get tired of talking about this country despite its daily dose of madness. However, I personally don't agree with them on certain grounds but I sincerely respect them for always trying to cope with this madness. About two years ago, I finally decided to break my silence because of two incidents. The first one is the piece that Dr M.A. Lateef of the Faculty of Law, Obafemi Awolowo University wrote about the perennial fuel scarcity and how he refused to buy at inflated price despite the hurl of insults from the petrol attendant. His courage to confront injustice in a country where doing so makes you a non-conformist really shocked me and amazed me at the same time. The second incident took place on the pages of *Random Blues* by Niyi Osundare, where I had quite a long quizzical dialogue with the following gripping lines.

Silence is serpent
With a fatal fang
Bring the wand, bring the word
Let's hit its head with a vocal bang

Il silenzio è serpente
Con una zanna fatale
Porta la bacchetta, porta la parola
Colpiamolo in testa con un botto vocale.

In the lines above I encountered the much talked about power of poetry, which got me overwhelmed and hit me with so much urgency that struck me with the ideas embodied by *Academia Letters*, August 2021 ©2021 by the author — Open Access — Distributed under CC BY 4.0

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this write-up. The lines nibbled at something in me and I began to weigh up the truth and accuracy of Osundare's dreadful evocations of the lethality of silence. It appears the genius-poet must have been very much aware of the weakness of moral will of those who stubbornly find recourse in the endless perpetuity of silence even when they are suffering hugely for it, and those with clinical predetermination, who systematically wield the power of silence to cow others into fear. The victims of silence, I mean the sufferers in silence, technically surrender their power to react, their ability to say no, and the will to refuse to accept being cheated even if it means being hurt.

Silence is a psychological weapon with a reverse effect. It is capable of taking away one's power of reaction. It kills the inner drive to stand up against repression or any form of undeserved suffering. It turns its victims into cowards while the other party revels in sardonic victory. Often times we hear of people employing silence to cast guilt on others; a smart way of refusing to contract the foolishness of others. Don't they say silence is the best answer for a fool? In this scenario, it is an open attempt to avoid embarrassment; a preventive method to escape being dragged into disrepute in the public eye or in one's own eye. Such power of silence comes with rare gentlemanliness; a sort of novel civility. Wielding such power is subtle. The Yoruba people refer to this as being *omoluwabi* (responsible individuals). It's not the fear of words as though spilling a few could bring one in harm's way. It's just a wise way of avoiding trouble.

Again, silence portends, sometimes, a narcissist tendency, an intentional recourse into silence to punish others in order to assert one's importance. This kind of silence is capable of making the other party feel guiltier than he really is. Indulging in this act is egocentric and possesses the power to suppress others into emotional weakness. Whoever wields this power has a fatal precision to compel others into perpetual submissiveness. Related to this is Mephistophelean silence, the kind that's perfectly described in this Yoruba expression; *adákéjéjé abi'wà kùnkun* (quiet but wicked/a silent killer). The indulgers in this kind of silence are vilely deep and utterly terrible. They are the kind of people whose smile is underlined by vile visage. The smile is just a simple concealment of the unimaginable evils that brim in their minds. I remember, one of the erstwhile Nigerian military dictators was so described.

I wish to commit the remaining part of this essay to elucidating on the exploitative nature of silence and how the individual that wields its power uses it to his own advantage. In this connection, I will also make attempt to theorize social silencing and how it has come to interplay with humanity and religion. Silencing describes a predetermined act of muting or muffling an individual especially when the silencer perceives a threat or a menace from his potential victims of silencing. Euphemistically, it can be said to mean snuffing life out of someone; a covert way of declaring that the whole of the person's existence is very much of

a noise. Such cacophony, as a matter of essence, is so unpleasant to the hearing that it needs not be tolerated any longer. In a metaphoric sense, it is a process of deactivation. Though the individual exists, in the real sense of living, his existence has been stifled and his life reduced to a depthless vacuum. The person then becomes a proverbial child who dare not demand answers to the mysterious expiration of his father if he does not have the sword by the hilt. By some way, the silencer has seized the sword completely. So the question of holding the sword by the tip or the hilt does not arise in the first place. His voice is only accepted or hearkened to when it is not perceived to be eventful or retaliatory.

Then how does the silencer select his victims? Does the victim have the power to overcome or outsmart his silencer? What categories of people are the silencers? These and many more curiosities I shall attempt to satisfy as I make a case for my theory of silencing. As pointed out earlier, silencing transcends individuality. When a group of people is forced, either consciously or incidentally, to jettison their beliefs and ideas in favour of or in obedience to another, then they can be said to have been silenced. This may happen through enticement, force or volition. The moment the silencer is able to gain the full control of the people's minds, they are doomed to be silenced.

The human mind is, no doubt, the house of all human emotions. It is the part of the human body which provides definitions for the personality of man. In the same vein, it constitutes a major distinction between animals and human beings. Don't other lively creatures have minds too? Well, I suppose they do. But it is only the human mind that is capable of providing answers to the numerous questions of sense and sensibility. Hence, in the case of silencing, the silencer dispossesses the silenced of sense or better still, replaces it with his own sense. That way, the silenced does not think or do anything except what the silencer wants him to do or think. In George Orwell's words, until they become conscious, they can never rebel and until they have rebelled, they cannot become conscious. So the weakness as well as the strength of humanity lies in the control of the use of sense and the exploitation of the human sensibility. The sole aim of the silencer is to mentally incapacitate its victims so that they could be kept permanently within the grasp of his whims and devilries.

This brings up the question of religion in this discussion. Arguably, I think religion has been the most exploited tool of silencing. Consider this expression that sets my theory in motion – *ìgbàgbó* roughly translated to mean faith. But with a lexico-semantic dissection of this Yoruba phrase, it means 'acceptance and audience'. *Ìgbà* – the act of accepting, then *ìgbó* – the act of hearing. In my own view, to put this logically, *ìgbó* should come before *ìgbà*. So the expression should be rephrased to *ìgbógbà*. Reasonably, it is not possible to accept an idea or opinion without first of all being in audience to it. So I suppose this phrase has given us the full gist about religion – a set of dogma that is not meant to be refuted or rebuffed even if

it contrasts fundamental reasoning or goes beyond human comprehension. In this case, man must silence (suppress) his own reasoning to be qualified to hold allegiance to any religion. Even in the acceptance of a belief, one should have acquired the full understanding of such belief for one to decide either to accept or reject it. However, it is not impossible to fake or deny one's understanding of that belief, which is why there is àgbóyí, that is, acting against one's hearing or understanding.

Àgbóyí could also happen in an instance of someone who is bereft of adequate understanding but parades himself as having full. In other words, it could describe a situation whereby someone thwart or tweak the true understanding of a religion in order to deceive people. Such individual is capable of strangling other people's understanding because he is so fanatical about his inadequate knowledge that selling it to others is only a matter of impression and pride. Some so-called men of God among pastors and sheiks twist the Bible and the Qur'an to exploit their congregations. This explains why some people with a little or no àgbóyé (understanding) of their religion portray themselves as men of God to deceive others. Religion is now a tool of enrichment for 'smart' sheikhs and pastors. And as for their poor victims, it is a weapon of immiseration. Religion has therefore become a fast growing business for those who know how to exploit and explore this dimension of silencing.

Humanity and Religion

To paraphrase Wole Soyinka in *Climate of Fear*, religion is neither a primary condition of human existence nor a critical necessity of living or evolving as humans. But as much as it is impossible to dispute this, many shocking events that came up with the turn of the new century have had people to ponder or perhaps criticise the roles that religion has to play in human existence. And it almost seems like the brains behind these events are either querying the essence of religion to humanity or testing the survival of man with or without religion. Arguably, religion is one of the excuses that have been used to generate many misunderstandings and crisis in Nigeria, not to mention around the world. The excuses woven around religion and the crisis that ensued have continued to arouse a lot of curiosities and for many years to come those curiosities may not be fully satisfied.

My intention here is to dabble into one of the foundational issues that paved ways for these curiosities, which is the nexus between humanity and religion. I will try to do this based on my background as a Muslim and with the knowledge that debating religion, especially in a volatile environment like Nigeria, is like stirring a hornet's nest. Speaking of Nigeria, the country has been polarised across religion binaries – Christians and Muslims and this has been used essentially by politicians to set us against one another. This has aroused suspicion

mentality. Muslims suspect Christians and Christians do the same to Muslims. Everyone of us goes about with this mentality and it is not helping our humanity. There was a time I offered to help a boy raise money for his admission to the university. I decided to approach my colleagues to contribute their widow's mite. One of them said; e tun ti de pelu eyin ati awon anakumllahi yin (you and your Muslim folks have come again). Another colleague who knew the boy quickly corrected her that the boy is not a Muslim and that I am not helping him because of his religion. I only did it because that boy needed help and I felt I should help him. That's all! Most of the time we fail to accept the fact that we are humans before we are either Christians or Muslims. And to be a good Christian or Muslim we must first of all be good humans. We have let our religions go into our heads by failing to realise that religion is never for the head but for the heart (Invisible Man, 257). I mean how does one describe or understand the mind of a Boko Haram insurgent or an ISIS suicide bomber who straps loads of bomb to his body in order to kill thousands of innocent lives? How on earth would one process such sinister mentality? The madness of this magnitude is beyond any human reasoning.

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