

One Renaming Too Far

If there are Nigerians who believe that the late M.K.O. Abiola does not deserve to be honoured by the government and people of Nigeria, they must be very few. The only thing we differ on is what constitutes the most appropriate honour and the best vehicle with which to realise it. From the ruckus that has greeted the announcement by President Goodluck Jonathan, as part of his 29 May, Democracy Day message, that the University of Lagos would be renamed Moshood Abiola University, with immediate effect, it is clear that not too many Nigerians agree that this is either appropriate or the best vehicle.

I would like in this piece to give reasons why those opposed to the President's move ought to be listened to. The government should reverse itself and find another, more appropriate and better, way to give Abiola the honour he so richly deserves.

First, when Abiola won the election that made him our undeclared president-elect in 1993, a vast majority of Nigerians, including the voters in his opponent's home state, voted for him and did so massively. This is in spite of the fact that it was a Muslim-Muslim ticket. What is more, all the shibboleths that people love to invoke as to why Nigeria could not work—ethnic, linguistic, religious differences—as if Nigeria were a rare exception in the world respecting those characteristics, were shown to be just that: shibboleths.

And, regardless of attempts by time-servers and revisionists to make it seem that the national democratic struggle to realise his mandate and restore representative democracy to Nigeria under the leadership of NADECO was a 'Yoruba' movement, the record of the national spread of the leadership and followership of the movement is unimpeachable. Given the fact that Abiola was a national figure and his popularity was national and the office for which he gave his life was the presidency, no less, the most appropriate honour for him must be NATIONAL and the best vehicle for this honour must be no less NATIONAL.

Now, some might argue that the University of Lagos, as a federally-owned university, is a national institution. Yes, it is and, properly executed and in different circumstances, a renaming might be in order. But, in the circumstance, it is not the best vehicle for honouring Abiola; nor is it an appropriate one.

As the widely acclaimed, even if undeclared, winner of presidential elections, Abiola's honour must not have even a hint of regionalism to it, much less one located specifically in Abiola's home region. This manages to reduce Abiola's stature from that of a national figure to one whose honour would be localised—name an institution located among 'his people' so that the likelihood of protest would be minimised. The government misfired on that score.

Had Lagos remained the seat of Nigeria's government, it would have been appropriate. But it is precisely to have a non-regionalised, national capital where everything Nigerian would be focused that Abuja, FCT, was created. This is where Abiola's honour is most appropriately located. If a university, the last time I looked, there is a university in Abuja that still bears a generic name: why not Moshood Abiola University, Abuja? It is federal; it is sited in a space to which all Nigerians belong; it is a research university. And this should not be the only honour to be done him. But it is a good place to start.

There is a second reason why this renaming is one too far. It may

be time for us to develop a national policy regarding when to name our public property and what criteria would have to be met. It is unfortunate that this is not a central part of the debate on the name change at University of Lagos. When the then University of Ife was renamed Obafemi Awolowo University, people protested but were defeated because we were then under military rule. This is not an insignificant factor. We are now in a democracy and decisions are not routinely taken by diktat in any democracy worth the name.

This is even more so given that there are rules guiding the relationship of the university and the government that sponsors it. We have no evidence that those rules have been followed in the current instance. It is a sad commentary on the "yes, boss" mentality of those who run the National Universities Commission that its Executive Secretary would not see anything wrong with an elected President behaving like a military ruler.

Don't blame President Jonathan. After all, he clumsily renamed Liberty Stadium after Obafemi Awolowo without those of us who

thought it was wrong protesting loudly. He obviously thought what any public institution sponsored or owned by the federal government was called, and when, was his absolute prerogative. He is wrong. The renaming of Liberty Stadium was unfortunate. It did not occur to the President and his professor advisers that the moniker 'Liberty' was not lightly chosen. Liberty was not a mere slogan for Awolowo and his party, the Action Group. It was the centrepiece of a philosophical orientation that made freedom the watchword of the government's relationship to and handling of its people.

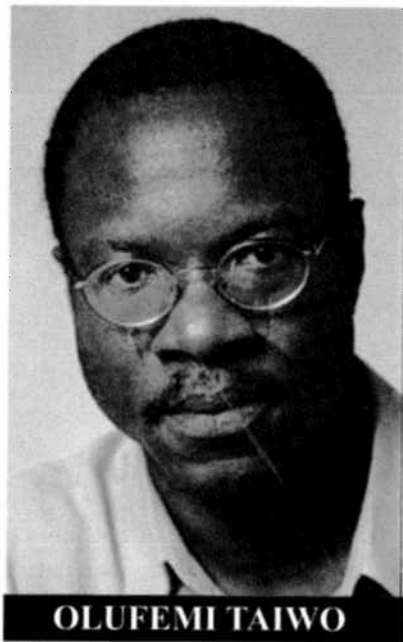
Apparently, our President and his retinue of Ph.Ds and professorial types thought that it was just a name, nothing more. I am sure that Awolowo would not have wanted his name to supplant liberty in his people's imagination. Mr. President, this is not military rule where the rulers thought that they were beyond making mistakes. Let's have a national debate on the wisdom of your action. Reversing your ill-thought decision is no sign of weakness; it is a sign of respect for process, the heart of liberal

representative democracy that is supposed to be our system of government at the present time.

Finally, such a debate will allow us to do something that is rarely done in Nigeria any more: renaming a major institution that has been in existence for close to 50 years cannot be a costless transaction. Do we know how much the change will cost? We are not merely replacing the signposts at the entrance. We are talking stationery, physical property, etc. These are the cheapest costs. As any woman academic knows who, subsequent to marriage-inflected name change, has had to persuade fellow scholars and prospective employers that she is the same accomplished researcher denoted by her maiden name, the costs to the worldwide recognition of the university are enormous. As a Unilag alumnus friend said to me, "How do I persuade people that my university was not dissolved or even fake?" in the aftermath of the name change?

These are not trivial issues. In societies where reason guides their actions, these are issues that are usually debated by citizens with responsive and responsible governments before momentous decisions affecting the lives and fortunes of thousands of citizens are taken. It is not too late for this administration to show itself as a responsible and responsive government. Meanwhile, as irresponsible and responsive citizens, Nigerians must resist this irresponsible exercise of naked power.

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