

THE WHITE COLLAR

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Hunting the Hydra

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unt for the beast! we cried as we searched deeply and vastly for its cavern of safety. We put ourselves to the task of trapping and delivering ourselves from the hand of this faceless beast that scourged our land for years. We set our bravest and strongest to the task but one by one they left and never returned, so fear drove us to hunt it more desperately. Until one day, I realised, it was not us that hunted the beast, it was the beast that 'haunted' us. Then I saw the fear and delirium in our eyes and knew that though we thought we sought the beast, in the darkness we actually sought ourselves." – Hunt for the Beast

The Premise- The Nigerian Ideal 'to Aspire'

The above verse sets the vivid backdrop for our discussion. Nigeria is in search, some would say "hunting" even, for the 'White Whale', the great "promised land" and the leaders that will lead us there. It is also true that we see ourselves more critically come every election season and we allow ourselves the examination of our nation as we were, as we see ourselves, and as we think we ought to be. It is in light of this critical appraisal that our discourse will focus on our perception of success as a Nigerian ideal. As we proceed in the discussion, we will consolidate both the issues and their reference to the verse above to highlight, what is hoped to be a sincere portrayal of how to answer the latter examination – how to become the Nigeria we ought to be.

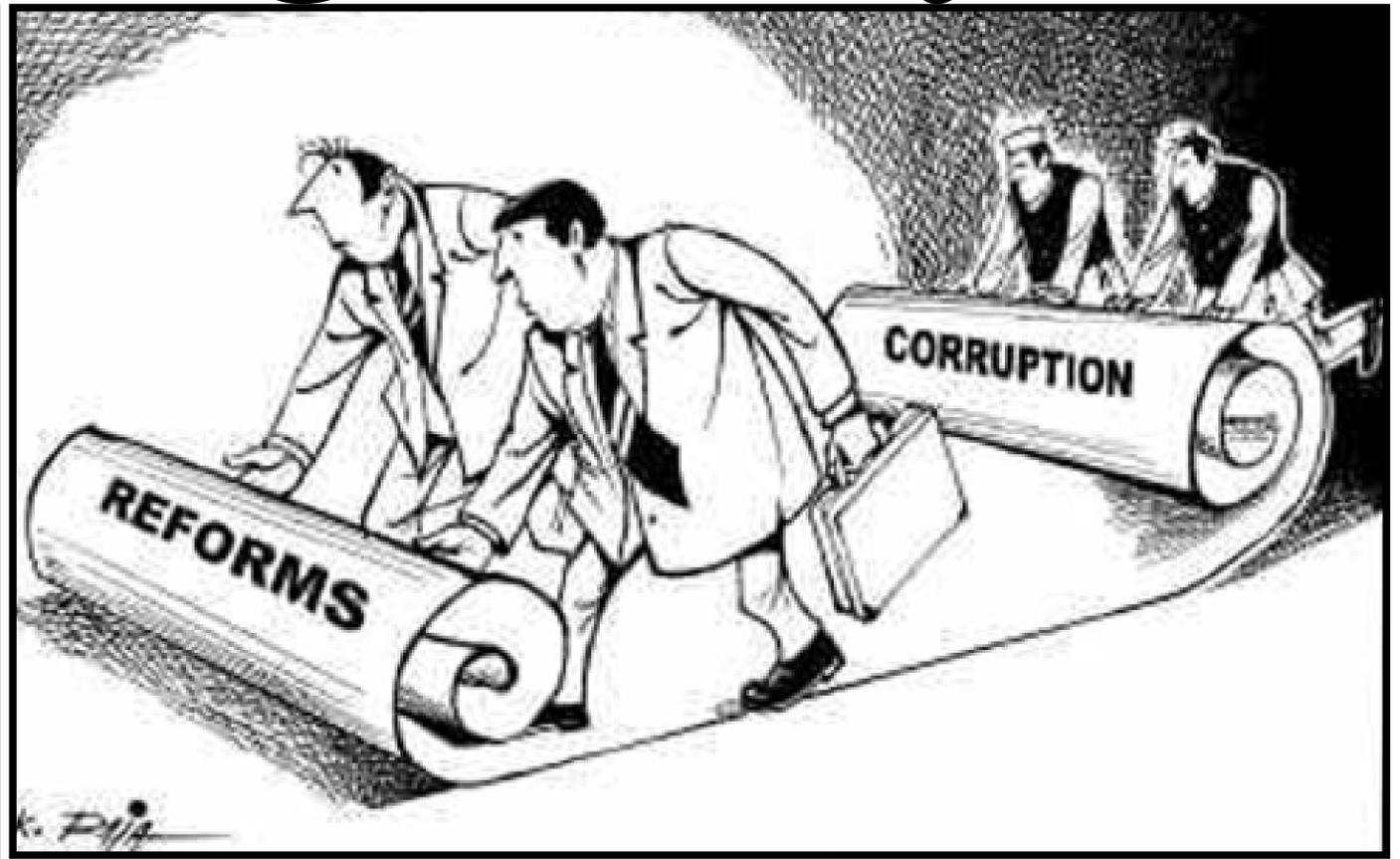
It is our Nigerian ideal to search for success, and aspire to accomplish. As a people we approach adversity as a "temporary" state on our way to the place we hope to reach. This approach is institutionalised from childhood, in our homes and in our places of worship. And while this may not appear unique to us, when we realise that it also becomes part of the character of our Government, it will show us that the search for "something better" is entrenched in our national character. Part of this search to construct a better Nigeria prompts the establishment of Commissions and Investigative Bodies that it is hoped will discover "the problem" and help us fix it. We may at this point choose to focus on prominent functionalities introduced relatively recently such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (The EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (The ICPC) and more traditional institutions like the Nigerian Police Force.

The Law

In keeping with our theme, the law allows us to examine our collective intent, and how these bodies are to help us achieve a "better" Nigeria. Section 6(b) of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission Act 2004 (The EFCC Act) stipulates that the functions of the EFCC among others are "the investigation of all financial crimes including advance fee fraud, money laundering, counterfeiting, illegal charge transfers, futures market fraud, fraudulent encashment of negotiable instruments, computer credit card fraud, contract scam, etc;"

The Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Act 2000 (The Corrupt Practices Act) in its own stead establishes the ICPC and by section 6 also stipulates among others that it is the ICPC's duty to:

"(a) where reasonable grounds exist for suspecting that any person has conspired to commit or has attempted to commit or has committed an offence under this Act or any other law prohibiting corruption, to



receive and investigate any report of the conspiracy to commit, attempt to commit or the commission of such offence and, in appropriate cases, to prosecute the offenders"

"(b) to examine the practices, systems and procedures of public bodies and where, in the opinion of the Commission, such practices, systems or procedures aid or facilitate fraud or corruption, to direct and supervise a review of them" and

"(c) to instruct, advise and assist any officer, agency or parastatal on ways by which fraud or corruption may be eliminated or minimised by such officer, agency or parastatal"

The now infamous section 419 of the Nigerian Criminal Code Act 1990 (The Criminal Code) declares:

"Any person who by any false pretence, and with intent to defraud, obtains from any other person anything capable of being stolen, or induces any other person to deliver to any person anything capable of being stolen, is guilty of a felony, and is liable to imprisonment for three years..."

The White Elephant in the Room

These laws are simply a cross-section of the many laws currently in force simply constructed to create the reality that Nigerians hope for, a system where it is increasingly difficult to disrupt or subvert the mechanism of administration and governance. Taken as they were drafted they identify various issues of corrupt practice as "the problem" and are robust both in intolerance and in the various tools to prohibit and criminalise anything remotely sharing the form of a corrupt act. Most Nigerians would be surprised to find out just how many laws and mechanisms there are for dealing with this problem. All the while Politicians speak of "Corruption" as the foremost threat to the Nigeria we desire, and internationally Nigeria is labelled as a nation with one of the worst corruption records on the planet. It is therefore not hard to conclude, we are all looking for the "White Elephant" in the room so that we can remove it and finally reach that "promised land".

So it is only fair to ask "What does a White Elephant look like?" We are engaged with finding "Corruption" and even though the Law concisely determines "Corrupt acts" are the problem how do we identify them so

that we may rid ourselves of the scourge?

A Lost Identity

An answer may be found in our history as a nation. Nigeria was not always identified as a corrupt nation, conversely there was a time the Nigerian identity was synonymous with industry and an extreme entrepreneurial spirit. The first generation of Nigerians who defined this lost identity have all but passed on and it is unfortunate we do not now have their presence to guide us, yet with us still are the records of their actions. In early post-colonial Nigeria the Nigerian identity was defined predominantly by industry and productivity, this is evidenced by the success of the primary industries, manufacturing, agriculture, arts and textiles which all flourished after independence. Education, knowledge and Cultural Identity dominated the character of those who were viewed as prestigious or affluent because as a trade nation there was demand for our commodities and we had demand for predominantly Western Education and development. With this in mind, as a nation we understood that success required "trade" whether that was in 'commodities' or in the process of learning (i.e. 'Time'). There was pride in the "grade" or "year" attained in training, there was clear hierarchy of progression and this defined success, the ability to be productive.

A Broken Value System

Conversely today success is defined by one commodity- Money. It is not defined by intelligence, it is not defined by education or even industry. Our cultural framework has been modified over the last few decades to identify wealth as the one defining factor of a successful Nigerian. We may not share this view personally, however it is clear in our nation that successful Nigerians are rich Nigerians. Why? Because it has become acceptable to simply be rich over anything else.

The Nigerian value system simply reflects the truth of this situation. Therefore the ordinary man, woman and child live and interact within a value system that encourages them to cheat, steal and plunder when they have the chance to because, Money at the end will justify the means. This value system contends with the idea that there is value in productivity, which is why it is

also acceptable to be rich and contribute nothing to society.

With this in mind we can begin to identify the patterns becoming apparent. We have a plethora of laws criminalising "Corruption" and decrying our sad state but in direct contradiction to these "zealous" efforts is our value system which prioritises Money over everything. The system will inevitably produce men, women and children intent on getting rich by any means, therefore increasing the prevalence of the very "problem" we think we are fighting. We hunt the faceless Beast ravaging our land, until we find that in the darkness the Beast we seek is us.

How is the Beast Slayed? How do we reach the "Promised Land"?

So how do we deal with the problem of "Corruption"? By redefining success and teaching a new generation about different ideals. Ideals that are compatible with the Nigeria we desire and so desperately seek. We overcome it by prioritising community, education and culture over money. By focusing on teaching the next generation the value of industry, arts, sports and virtue so that their Nigeria, and maybe even ours, will be defined by functions that improve a person and a community rather than printed paper. We overcome it by demystifying money and recognising it for what it is- a tool and one of many means to agreeing.

Another irony is that in our desperate "search" for the "promised land" we don't realise that we already have it. We are blessed with a nation so vast, diverse and rich that it would become the "promised land" if we only allowed it to be that. Each man, woman and child is the Nigeria that exists and only we have the power to make this country what it ought to be. We need to begin to act out what we want to see, so that it is.

The truth is, like all generations, these are the challenges we face today and they are the legacy we leave for those coming after us. It is imperative that we begin this change in ourselves and we begin them today because we must all realise for some to be rich others must be poor, and as we all scurry for money and the poor continue to have nothing, "one day they will have nothing left to eat but the rich."