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The masquerade of death macabre in the North: strange revolutionary aesthetics in Nigeria

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In the late 1960s, all manner of assaults were directed between the Biafran secessionists and their Nigerian counterparts. As a result, unresolved ethnic, economic and socio-political lines exposed the “harvest” of the 1966–70 revolution. This harvest of corruption and military rule spilled into the 1980s and 90s creating resistant groups until the millennium age which ushered in new revolutionary tactics. Between 1970 when the revolution was officially declared ended till date, Nigerians have been made to harvest “proceeds” of both the colonial and postcolonial “legacies” which many critics pin down on bad leadership. For instance, while the steaming smoke from the battle nozzles of the Niger Delta revolutionaries is yet to fade away, the Northern region, under the violence of *Boko Haram* (Western Education is forbidden/sinful) has caused panic in the political arena. Against the backdrop of the current “global awakening,” this paper, through some critical works and Nigerian fictional artefacts, takes a careful examination of one particular aspect of this “harvest,” particularly the disillusionment and subsequent reactions of the people in various revolutionary garbs. The paper concludes that the amnesty antidote offered by the Nigerian leadership is simply a toothless escapist remedy. The position of this exploration is that the current militants or revolutionaries in any of the Nigerian geopolitical zones are reactive hydra-monsters created by a failing system where the national wealth has been hijacked by a few. Until this wealth is justly distributed, more chameleonic colours of revolutionaries are bound to emerge from the same system.

Keywords: corrupt leadership, escapism, revolutionaries, violence.

Introduction

In a metaphorical sense, the masquerade in Nigeria can be used as an artistic and significant representation of the nation’s politics. However, in the real sense, it is a typical phenomenon used in representing and invoking the cultural and traditional values of the Africans. It is associated with spiritual elements and, in Igbo belief, represents images of deities or sometimes, dead relatives. The identity of the masquerade is exclusively performed by men and a well-kept secret such as we find in one of the passages in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*:

Okonkwo’s wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second egwugwu had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of egwugwu. But if they thought these things they kept them within

themselves. The egwugwu with the springy walk was one of the dead ancestors of the clan. He looked terrible with the smoked raffia body, a huge wooden face painted white except for the round hollow eyes and the charred teeth that were as big as a man's fingers. On his head were two powerful horns. (63–64)

The thought of such practices of the masquerade's performance, often provokes a nostalgic return to the familiar pre-colonial experience through their lavish costumes and displays, to the thrilling experience of the laughing or frightened audience. It reminds us of the old and lost African traditional values. The reinvention of the being of the masquerader and preservation of the secrecy and sacredness of cult knowledge in this respect, enable it to function in political and social spheres as an agent of conflict resolution and peace building, to police the land and to create solidarity in the community. However, in this discourse one is bound to notice the difference between the political face of the mask through its conscious and calculated actions and the professed revolutionary face behind the mask. As the hidden personality behind the other carries out its selfish actions through the guise of its seeming revolutionary mission, the public is found in a wide pool of confusion and diverse opinions as whether to believe in this mission or doubt the motive behind its dance. Consequent upon this vacillation, the people's trust is further threatened as there exist suspicious moments of untrustworthiness and indictment against those same guides who are supposed to prevent the masquerade from cutting loose. This political scenario reveals three persons in one; the rein's handlers or guides, the phenomenon behind the mask and the masquerade. The role of literature in this discourse is therefore of great significance as it helps us with great insights into our socio-political conditions and gives us the opportunity to show concern for such convolutions that beset our society.

Memoirs of the first Nigerian masquerades

There is an Igbo saying that a man who cannot tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. For Achebe, the writer can actually tell the people where the rain began to beat them ("The Role" 8). Buried in Nigeria's history and, of course, constantly excavated by writers in their fictionalized arts, is the fact that the beginning of the rain (blood-stained) beating Nigerians today as viewed by Chinyere Nwahunanya includes:

the amalgamation of the North and the South in 1914; the constitutionally entrenched imbalance in representation at the federal level; the endemic ethnic distrust, envy and suspicion; the ethnic orientation of the political parties that emerged before and after independence; the 1962 and 1963 censuses; the May and October 1966 pogrom; the January 1966 coup and July 1966 counter-coup; the

creation of states on 27 May 1967, and the declaration of the Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967. ("Biafran" 79)

The sound of Nigeria's first deadly raindrops in the early 1960s later grew into a rhythm of death macabre for the first sets of masquerades that danced for nearly three years. Preceding the rain which later became the bloodiest in Nigeria's history were signs of the impending holocaust and genocide in the form of thunder as was earlier prophesied in Christopher Okigbo's *Labyrinths* of "the smell of blood" actually floating "in the lavender-mist of the afternoon [...] the death sentence" (63). After nearly three bloody years, writers immediately expressed their different versions of what they fictively imagined either happened or actually happened. Indeed, the memoirs of the civil war came in different shapes; a fact which prompted Nwahunanya to further state that they are either triumphant, exculpatory or condemnatory (*Harvest* xix). The long list includes *The Combat* (Kole Omotoso), *The Last Duty* (Isidore Okpewho), *Toads of War* (Eddie Iroh), *Divided We Stand* (Cyprian Ekwensi), *Heroes* (Festus Iyayi) and a host of others. As each writer gives his or her own purview of the war, Omotoso's *The Combat* did not see any rationale for the war as it only served to expose the untold suffering. For him, the war was a miscarriage of judgment by the secessionists. Okpewho in *The Last Duty* portrays the war as a futility, arguing that the massive destruction of human lives is not heroic. For him the adverse human and emotional dimensions of war are more paramount. He sees the war as an agent that destroys the personal and communal sacredness of people. War leads to the wanton killings of human beings, the violation of natural laws and traditional beliefs. War also, for Okpewho, is conduct that gives birth to such societal vices as prostitution and power drunkenness among others. To enunciate his position he theatrically portrays Toje as becoming power-drunk just as Aku, a house wife, becomes unfaithful to her absent husband. Such pictures help to justify J. P. Clark's statement in one of his poems in which he states: "we are all casualties" (28).

Eddie Iroh in *Toads of War* sees the ordinary soldiers like Kalu, Ikechi and Sergeant Meju as the actual heroes of the war, because they fought seriously and sincerely to preserve the rights of their people. Some sacrificed their lives while others got maimed in order to save the people. He castigates Biafran leaders who indulged in profligacy and merry-making while sending the ordinary soldiers to the war front to fight and die. But Cyprian Ekwensi's *Divided We Stand*, runs along the line of individuals rather than collective heroism. For Ekwensi, Chika the correspondent is a completely realized individual and an intellectual. Chika's attributes arise from his courage and forthrightness, and, above all, he is a nationalist at heart.

From a different approach, Festus Iyayi's *Heroes* brings with it a new revelation that the leaders of Biafra and Nigeria are guilty for the murder of the poor masses who were all driven to a war they, in the first place, were forced or conscripted into; a war

in which the rich from both sides would exploit the death of each soldier, a war that rendered the poor poorer, the rich richer and the generals heroes. Ernest Emenyonu makes this view clearer as he states that, “Iyayi shows support neither for the federal army nor for the Biafran army. His concern is for the ‘third army’—the unknown soldiers, who like the civilian masses carry burden of suffering but are never recognized when alive and never when they die.” (107)

Iyayi’s position is simply that there was no rationale for the war except that the leaders were merely struggling for supremacy while using the ordinary people as tools of war. His desire is to use this macabre dance to expose the workings of certain forces in the Nigerian society, forces which he considers as prevalent today as they were in the past. Thus, for him, there is need therefore for a totally different army to ask questions about the purpose of the war, and about the reasons behind the war, since the real enemies are the politicians who robbed the country blind (90). Iyayi further substantiates this position elsewhere in the novel, thus:

Sell your arms to your enemy and collect the money [...] send the troops out into the battle before their pay day and get as many of them as possible killed and collect their pay [...] capture a town and the first place you make for are the banks. The important thing is to get the money because this war is part of the whole business enterprise. And that means it must yield profits. (148)

This message depicts the obscure but vantage position of the leaders who are invisible in the dancing arena of the masquerades, and the masquerades who are in turn programmed to accomplish certain questionable missions. They are criminally chained to their executioners who are actually the instruments hidden under the mask, professing change under the costume of some sort of revolution on behalf of the tribe, religion or people. Of course, they will always be at the receiving end, the docile masses that are always presented with the masquerade’s seeming mission. Therefore, the general concern of the people is bracketed within the colossal destruction the war engendered in terms of loss of lives and property, and the concomitant suffering and brutalisation of those who either fell victim to the onslaught of death, or experienced physical or mental trauma.

Contemporary macabre dances

Ironically, echoes and consequences of the frightening proportion of violence that were recorded in the past are today resounding repeatedly in the different geopolitical zones and under the same old recognisable posture of various ethnic or religious masquerades. Whips now turned again into blood-dripping cutlasses have become weapons in the hands of the so-called “revolutionary masquerades” who claim to police the same society they actually destroy. The not-too-far-fetched examples of

wounds inflicted by the MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta) and, most recently, *Boko Haram* are daily refreshed in the minds of Nigerians through daily explosions of pipelines or Nigerians themselves. Re-evicting echoes of the 1967–70 death macabre through the image of the masquerade as a carrier of death, we are distinctly hearing again what Theodora Ezeigbo describes as the “chaotic rhythm of the tragic war and the violence of mindless soldiers merged with the maddening sounds of drumming attended by grotesquely masked Egwugwu. It is indeed a bizarre consortium. The reader is constantly confronted with the confusion created by the merging of these discordant rhythms and forces.” (161)

The puppetry of the present northern masquerade in Nigeria recalls the fate of the Igbo and other southern Nigerians who are repeatedly the victims and scapegoats used in the ritual of cleansing one particular tribe. The situation has been disturbingly portrayed in Wole Soyinka’s play, *The Strong Breed*, where Eman, a non-indigene, is picked as a carrier who would take away the ills of the community and die for them. Ikemefuna’s similar role in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* further re-evicts this phenomenon of searching for the sacrificial lamb from the tribe of the strong breed. This kind of lingering problem would likely provoke a battery of questions such as, whose tribe, how justifiable and for how long will these sacrifices be sustained? If therefore, there is a constant supply of sacrificial lambs from a particular part of the sovereignty, which has severally and consequently led to reprisal attacks in the past, leading to more human sacrifices, this condition will mean that peace in a country like Nigeria will not come through the suppression of desires for autonomy, otherwise the so-called current democracy would be a fraud. For it will then be a violation of ethnic rights not to tolerate an open discussion of issues on nationhood, even when there are already on-going discourses that seek to deepen the divide between ethnicities that constitute the postcolonial Nigeria.

Apart from the Igbo example which gave birth to the Biafran masquerade, the Niger Delta crisis has divulged its own masquerade with a strange tactical macabre dance of targeting oil wells and foreign/indigenous workers. This is a familiar story of a people whose environment and landscape have been neglected and destroyed by both the government and the expatriates. As have been earlier noted elsewhere, “The vitiation of the flora and fauna of the region, the decimation of the human population, and the frustration of the economic well-being of the people, have been noted by many critics as issues that are inevitable in the exploration of the literature of the region.” (Chinaka 558)

The Niger Delta environmental exploitation is sometimes confused with oil exploration. The exploitation comes under the umbrella of the typical Nigerian political promises of infrastructural development which include schools, hospitals, roads, markets, etc. But ironically, the reality on the ground is that one finds the exact opposite. This is the picture Inno Ejike’s novel *Oil at my Backyard* presents during the Oghu festival. Thus,

As the Oghu masquerade was patrolling the village in company of some youths, they spotted the brand new Toyota [...] some of them had the feeling that in no distant time, they may be asked to vacate their ancestral homes for the oil men [...] the oil companies are like cockroaches, they check in but they do not check out. The most annoying aspect of their business is, the government took all the proceeds from oil and only left behind devastation of their farmland, and eventually asked them to vacate to a very poor land, without adequate compensation. When the villagers try to resist ejection order from their farmland, the government called in the police and the military to guard the entire area. (9–10)

There is need to underscore the significant juxtaposition of the resisting strength of the village located in the personality of the masquerade and the youths as to ward off the intruding exploiters on the one hand, and those that have sent them (the government) on the other hand. For these two socio-political forces will always take the stage in a violent manner in almost all such cases. As can be anticipated later in the novel, when eventually there is protest by the community against sheer exploitation and injustices, the government is indicted for “fine-tuning her decrees, on how to deal with dissident oil producing areas, instead of providing necessary facilities to alleviate their suffering” (134). One could almost hear the author reasoning through the petroleum chairman of a lasting and better solution, thus: “If you can arrange for a barrack, why not arrange for a general hospital or an electricity project to be sited there [...] The people would be more peaceful with basic amenities than with law enforcement Agencies, who will be harassing them from time to time. It would be more expensive to maintain the troops in the long run.” (139)

For the uncompromised youths or “masquerades,” Tanure Ojaide refers to them as the “Egbesu Boys.” He believes that they “do the honorable duty of brave sons” (Ojaide 41). Little or no criticism may have initially trailed after them until the point where a clear picture of their frenzy drive for selfish material gains appeared as the primary motive behind their revolutionary death theatre. At that point, they become suspicious masquerades who have played into the hands of corrupt political guides, therefore compromising a genuine cause. Amongst their recorded heinous crimes include, “bunkering, robbery, assassinations, kidnappings, bank heist, etc.” (Chinaka 29).

Ironically, at the seeming end of the Niger Delta macabre in 2009, the Federal Government further compensated or enriched members with billions of naira for them to desist from murder cases and more importantly, for them to stop blowing up their “oil wells”. The death drama seemingly ended with the Government’s antidotes branded “amnesty” or “legal freedom from all heinous crimes previously committed” in addition to the “settlement” of billions of naira under the umbrella of “character rehabilitation”.

Most currently, another masquerade in the northern part has emerged, giving its own excuse why it has become necessary, this time, to target police stations, churches and the general Nigerian people. The latest bombing spree and other forms of crisis, taking its cue from the Niger Delta incidents have been panoramically reflected in each of the latest seventeen short stories by Sumaila Umaisha. Each of the stories which come in the form of Nigeria's template of pains is independently topical, but collectively interconnected with a thematic centrality that reveals an endangered society characterized by political violence, militancy, insanity, etc. These segmented narratives replicate the admixture of unnerving realistic moments of an over populated multi-tribal society simply underscored by the single word which also is the title of the collection—*Hoodlums*. There is a silent indictment by the author against almost every single member of the approximately one hundred and fifty million citizens sharing one common national identity as hoodlums. There is reference to the religious, political and ethnic riots, the societal and cultural stigmatization, the insanity of every man, and the mysticism of the universe. For instance, one is bound to read with revulsion the stories of the "The Godfather" and "Do or Die" where there is acute struggle for control and dominance which is the violent power game that politicians play. There is also the issue of avoidable grief and pains as first introduced by the story of little Tene who loses her innocence by watching her dearly beloved mother die in the story entitled "Militants."

Umaisha attempts to explore the general madness or insanity of people irrespective of class, education, or gender, as an underlying message that is described as actions that are very unreasonable and possibly dangerous. "The Riot" tells the satirical tale of an Alhaji Ibrahim who watches with delight the burning city through a pair of binoculars, only to regret in the end that his wife has fallen victim to the crisis. The title story "Hoodlums" is a similar retributive warning to those who actually throw stones into the market place. It literally focuses on the experience of Ben, a sensationalist journalist whose reports feast on and sometimes inflame riots, having a penchant for sometimes filing in "reports in advance of the events" (17). This story shares a semblance with the case of Alhaji Ibrahim in "The Riot," as both men are later forced by the author to see what they never saw during the pleasurable moments of their sins. In the case of "Hoodlums", "No one looked back except Ben. And what he saw was beyond words. He slumped. 'To Rigasa!' the Inspector ordered the driver." (30) In the case of "The Riot", when Alhaji Ibrahim finally, "peeped into the car, he discovered to his eternal shock the real cause of the grief. On the back seat was the body of his wife." (102)

For a story like "The Honourable Minister" which satirizes the political hypocrisy in Nigeria, one finds the failed but applauded projects and policies embarked upon by those in power which bears no correlation with the yearning and plight of the masses. It is such political excesses that give rise to all the manners of masquerades in

this discourse. In the mock drama, one gets the uneasy feeling from the ease with which the Nigerian leaders (as represented by the character of the *Minister*) desecrate the social contract established with the people. Such picture is summed up in the following passage, as it should naturally disturb the meditative thought-flow of every Nigerian:

“Ha-ha-ha!” the *Minister* and his *entourage* laughed boisterously from the stage. “Who says to be a minister is a small thing,” the *Minister* enthused, trembling with laughter. “The siren really scared the hell out of them,” said one of the members of the *entourage*. “Why not!” What is a masquerade without the mask? Without thunder and lightning, how can the mortal appreciate what goes into rain making? Ha-ha-ha ... ! (88)

The work generally reveals the spectrum of criminality in Nigeria that cuts across all facets of life. Violent crimes becoming a brand in virtually every aspect of the life of the people which are incited and perpetuated by the hoodlums or masquerades hiding under the guise of “freedom fighters” as portrayed in the story—“Militants”; violent crimes perpetuated by the hoodlums or masquerades in security uniforms—“Hoodlums”; violent crimes perpetuated by the hoodlums or masquerades in the name of godfathers—“The Godfather”; violent crimes perpetuated by the hoodlums or masquerades in government offices—“The Honourable Minister”; violent crimes perpetuated by the hoodlums or masquerades that feast on the spoils of the society—“The Riot”; violent crimes perpetuated by the hoodlums or masquerades at highway check points—“Roadblock”; and also, violent crimes perpetuated by the hoodlums or masquerades in politics—“Do or Die.” Above all, this description appropriately fits the insanity of the Nigerian contemporary religious bigots who kill each other because of a “difference” that is not known to the poor man in the street.

The masquerades in the garb of *Boko Haram*

The *Boko Haram*, like other violent masquerades, have attracted the usual pontification of analytical ideology that characterises the Nigerian socio-political scenario. Eghes Eyieyien, one of Nigeria’s public critics, partly indicts Lamido Sanusi, the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, as having a link to the sect. According to Eyieyien, Mr. Sanusi in an interview with the *Financial Times* argues that it was now necessary to focus funds on regenerating other regions other than the South, if Nigeria wants to secure long-term stability. The Central Bank Governor’s illogical and false opinion that “there is clearly a direct link between the very uneven nature of distribution of resources and the rising level of violence” (2), as quoted in Eyieyien’s article entitled “Mallam Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, Boko Haram and Religious Extremism” could further be analyzed as part of the ethnic politics that has provided the opportunity through

the current macabre for the government to increase the monthly fund allocation to the North. This kind of opportunistic politicking is commonly found in the Nigerian political atmosphere. It has always had the capacity of misleading the federal government into misapplying the wrong antidote as they have always done to the older resistant groups.

This is the kind of wrong antidote used for the Biafran cause. In the case of the Biafran cause, the federal government chose to forcefully repress them without considering the genuineness of their plight, at least, in a round table discussion. A similar wrong antidote has been offered by the same federal government: bribe the Niger Delta militants through “amnesty” and “rehabilitation programmes that run into billions of naira” without sincerely examining the root causes of the degradation and underdevelopment of the general region. The consequence of these antidotes is that both older masquerades are still dancing till date. Some Nigerian critics, such as the likes of Achebe, would always believe that despite its vast resources, Nigeria ranks among the most unequal countries in the world, not because it does not have abundantly buried wealth in crude or fertile agricultural products, but because its leaders have always appropriated the wrong policies due to political interests, thereby widening the gulf existing between the poor and the rich (which is the real problem) irrespective of geopolitical origins.

Contrary to the impression given in some questionable reports, the *Boko Haram* as a group is not faceless. This group constitute mostly unemployed Nigerian youths who are vulnerable in the hands of politicians, religious and ethnic bigots. These deluded religious extremists, who believe they do God’s service through their murderous activities, have no genuine cause other than materialistic interest. This can be exemplified with the confession of one of their arrested leaders Kabiru Abubakar Umar Dikko’s (a.k.a Kabiru Sokoto). A report in the newspaper *The Nation*, Dikko states: “A major source of distrust and acrimony in the group was 41 million [naira] got from a bank that was not accounted for [...] we don’t know how this money was spent and nobody dared ask questions for fear of death.” (2)

The sect is popularly believed to have originated in Maiduguri in Borno state (Nigeria) where disciples were hoodwinked to see anything ‘western’ as evil in all its ramifications. The group’s official name, *jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-jihad*, which in Arabic means “people committed to the propagation of the prophet’s teachings and jihad” had its popular name dubbed as *Boko Haram* by its founder. According to Farouk Chotia on BBC News Africa, the Koranic phrase that “anyone who is governed by what Allah has revealed is among the transgressors,” has become a guiding motto for the sect, leading to much mayhem in the northern parts of Nigeria. Before the founder, Mohammed Yusuf, was caught and killed he had already ignited his disciples with the idea of conceiving western education as forbidden and this philosophy, till date, has been tenaciously upheld, dictating the rhythm of their

morbid dance. *Boko* in Hausa or Islam means education while *Haram* means impermissible, prohibited or forbidden.

The ideological background that could be seemingly extracted from the meaning of the word *Boko Haram* (western education is forbidden) becomes an ironical travesty or misrepresentation for the sect since they cannot deny certain western benefits they may have enjoyed from the same “loathsome” westerners and their education—a good example being the mobile communication gadgets and auto-mobiles used in accomplishing their “cause”.

This is a similar argument made by Achebe in 1966 against Tai Solarin’s position through the example of the English language as to be adopted as Nigeria’s lingua franca, therefore placing it above Nigeria’s local languages. Achebe’s question in that argument helps us to re-examine the *Boko Haram* philosophy. Thus, Achebe puts the question to Solarin: “If you are truly as sickened by a defense of English as you make out, why have you gone on week after week, year after year, in season and out of it, writing and publishing your newspaper column in the same loathsome language? Surely, Hausa or Yoruba or Igbo should have been the obvious medium for you.” (*Morning* 87–88) Re-evicting Achebe’s reply to Solarin helps to explore the bias certain individuals may have adopted as their ideology which at the same time could be misleading. The statement above when rephrased in the following manner could satirically expose the deficiencies of the sect and question the moral foundation they tend to present, thus:

If you are truly as sickened by a defense of western education as you make out, why have you gone on week after week, year after year, in season and out of it, speaking their language and using their loathsome technological inventions for your selfish goals. Surely, your bow and arrows should have been the obvious apparatus for your cause, rather than the western bombs.

As the world presently advances in its technological status, through its shared multicultural and technological inventions to civilisation, it is unthinkable and shocking that one still finds reactionary feelings among the scattered present day’s philosophies. The example of the present day ululation, at the instance of the birth of twins to an Igbo family, which but for western contact through Mary Slessor’s abolition of the killing of twins in the old Igbo custom, stands distinct amongst other examples. The question that should follow therefore is if going back to our roots necessarily includes such un-progressive practices.

Conclusion

The drama of the masquerade thus interestingly becomes a figuration of the unresolved differences between the ethnic groups, the religious sects / the government, and the

people of Nigeria. Evidence has shown that both the old and new masquerades are more interested in either individual enrichment, sharpening party and ethnic lines, emphasizing the residual powers in political offices or creating and eliminating political rivals. Just like Sisyphus, these dramatic problems roll round in an eternal circle of doom because each government has always played to the gallery by administering palliative solutions instead of curative ones. Lest Nigerians shoot themselves in the leg, the summary of the matter is that over 70% of the Nigerian youths are unemployed and have become easy instruments for political masquerades. It has even become more pitiable that as the society becomes increasingly unstable, breeding a plethora of bloody masquerades who believe they can attain their orchestrated and devious agenda through unchecked intimidation of the booming bombs, they fail to understand that Christianity and Islam at one time in Nigeria's history were accidental foreign spiritual legacies which should significantly unite rather than tear Nigeria apart. Part of the consequences of their action is that they force their fellow citizens to stock up bags of lamentation and sorrow as the dead are counted. This new rhythm of religious fanaticism by misguided religious bigots or irreligious masquerades will soon come to terms with a Government who will always have a palliative answer of "lets-settle-them". Therefore, if yesterday the Biafran masquerade is the virulent thorn in the flesh of the Nigerian citizenry, and today the Niger Delta militants and *Boko Haram*, then tomorrow it will be the turn of another masquerade in desperate search for a slice of the Nigerian national cake.

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