

# Questions for My Ailing Country

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A young police officer is standing with a woman I assume to be his mother. She is praying for him loudly, at a major junction on the streets of a Lagos suburb; speaking in tongues unashamedly while passers-by stare, some in admiration, others, not so much.

The young force personnel is shy, hiding his face from the seeming embarrassment of being publicly prayed for. His mother isn't, she holds onto his hands, firmly, wringing it when he doesn't say *Amen* loud enough for her wrinkled ears.

I have been in this same situation before. Many times. My mother also never cared about your feelings: if her guts told her to pray for you (which almost always happened), she would pray for you, whether it meant bending your head in shame, avoiding the stares of people you thought would laugh at you, she didn't care. So, I understand the plight of the young police officer.

I.

I remember my mother this morning. It is the beginning of August. Her calls wake me up every new month, with intense prayers that last long, and fill me with a sense of confidence that, spiritually, I am good. It has been a ritual since I left home, having been wandering all my life.

December 31st 2020, that privilege stopped. A mother's prayer is something the country took from me through the negligence of its institutions, like the recklessness of the police force, and the lackadaisical attitude of doctors and nurses in a state hospital.

My mother died as a result of recklessness of the staff of the public health institutions who in turn are also underpaid. Mainly, the medical staff are often overwhelmed with demands of an increasing number of patients thronging into the wards. In the long run, the carers also need care and the poor

patients often suffer for it.

It is a confusing situation to judge: do you blame the medical personnel for their lackadaisical attitude? Do you also blame the government for creating a system where doctors and nurses do not get paid, making it very difficult for them to effectively do their jobs? I understand the place of the Hippocratic oath which compels medical personnel to put their patients first. I also understand that being owed salaries and not being able to provide for your family or even pay your own bills, is a frustrating situation, worsening the mental health of some of these health workers.

Because, no matter how we try to analyse it, it takes super-human abilities to flourish in a job when the conditions are toxic and there is no indication that the job considers you important. In the end, the government ends up making life miserable for everyone; patients and caregivers alike. The Nigerian system is being run to the ground by crooks who have no sense of justice and order. As such, this madness filters into every system.

In the real sense, government hospitals in Nigeria, especially in Lagos, where I have lived for about 28 years, are the people's resigned final resorts. Basically, a kind of 'affordable' structure for the poor. One would almost think that when the public health structure in Lagos was established, the plan was to kill so many people with the deliberate callousness and negligence of health care workers who attend to patients poorly like they run an exhibition of death.

For its relative affordability, public hospitals in Nigeria put patients at so much risk.

For me, it started with my mother.

Working in public health institutions comes with so much baggage. There is the delay and lack of willpower in implementing policies that could improve service and output, there is the stress of extra work hours and its attendant mental cost, there is the menace of uncompensated work hazards. In the end, all is a vicious circle. I have been there. Many times; watching people I love dying helplessly; observing the slow protocol of nurses who were inundated by a number of patients; perplexed as oxygen was taken away because of lack of funds.

This is political failure but the leaders have found their way out of the systemic problem they orchestrated. Funds meant for enabling good health facilities are reappropriated for medical tourism. For example, the Nigerian President travels outside the country for medical check-up every other month while the hospital in the State House in Abuja is bereft of medical resources to cater to the presidency. This is the same for prominent and corrupt Nigeria politicians who travel every other week for basic medical check ups. A recent case is that of Bola Tinubu, a former governor of Lagos, who, in his two terms, failed to create a working health care structure but relies hugely on the healthcare systems of foreign developed countries created by their working governments.. This rot, from the presidency to the local government continues to spread, filtering into institutions created to serve.

Even after death, the process of reclaiming the remains of a loved one is tedious and frustrating. The system is run in such a way that it is terrifying for Nigerians, especially the ones without privilege, to enjoy it. The government refuses to pay salaries of workers; workers treat patients recklessly and without any passion for the job. But, in the end, we all suffer the repercussive effects of this mismanagement: people die. Everyday Nigerians perish in the hands of a failed system.

Like the title of Ayo Sogunro's short story collection, *Everything In Nigeria Is Going To Kill you*: the police. The hospitals. The soldiers. the Justice System. The government.

II.

This is how brother Segun died:

Stray bullet hit him just at the junction of his house: cult boys were fighting each other.

It is an area called Governor's road in Lagos. There are a handful of police stations. The regional headquarters is barely 200 metres away and it is easy for cult boys to brandish guns and release bullets in communities where people live.

A Lagos Teaching Hospital takes out the bullet. But, somehow, they forget to do reconstruction surgery.

They suggest amputation. Bullet hit his foot, so in a bid to save face, they must cut off the foot before it begins to rot, which would have exposed their incompetence.

They amputate.

He gets worse.

He dies.

Just like that. Dead. From a bullet wound in his foot, that could have been treated. He could have survived. The unfortunate reality of brother Segun's death is that, about eleven years ago, through the terrible condition of the Lagos public health care system, his mother, who has been my mother's lifelong best friend, had had her left foot amputated when one of the Lagos State Teaching Hospitals decided, having mismanaged a foot injury, suggested it. The only difference was that she did not die, but has remained immobile and will never be independent or self-sufficient for the rest of her life.

The denominating factor is how the government has structured the lives of people: Make sure the teachers aren't paid on time so they lose interest in teaching the students, which makes the students resent their teachers; makes life hard for health workers so they become unconcerned about patients even when it's an emergency; make DSS officials and soldiers haunt journalists so that exercising your freedom of information becomes a criminal offence. Make sure there is enough hate to go round for the citizens. Distract them from the stench of your political irresponsibility.

That way, hatred and resentment become national elements.

III.

What is the value of a human life? What is the value of a Nigerian life? To what extent do we suspend reality and live in willful disbelief?

While I watch this mother pray for her son, a young police officer, I wonder how many other police officers and soldiers who wreaked havoc at Lekki Toll Gate, during the #EndSars protest, are in this exact situation. How many of them have denied some mothers this reality they enjoy? How many children have they killed? How many mothers and fathers have they decimated? How many children have they rendered fatherless and motherless? Imagine a mother who knows the reality of her son's murderous activities but still prays for him to go to work and return in peace? How many parents no longer have children to pray for on the first day of a new month?

But, is it wrong for a mother to pray for her child's safety when they go to work? Is it the fault of a murderous police officer if he says Amen to his mother's prayers? Do we crucify a mother for wanting the best for her son, even if, in his line of work, he is commanded, sometimes, to kill harmless and innocent citizens?

The Nigerian structure glorifies bad behaviour. From Twitter users who think that stupendous and extravagant display of wealth by 'socialites' should not be commented upon because "no one investigated the source of their poverty, when they were not yet rich, to male friends who protect and cover up for their rapist friends because that is "what good friends do;" from people who make excuses for the likes of Hushpuppi because "the country has frustrated them," to people who, with their western religion as a yardstick, slander queer people and label queerness a Western influence: the irony.

Even though I understand, to a reasonable level, the place of familial and friendship loyalty, I consider myself first a human being. And, with that tag, I would never wish on anyone else the same misfortunes I would protect my friends and family from. Some actions should have consequences, even when they are committed by the people we love dearly.

#### IV.

Rape is a criminal offence. Aiding and abetting a rapist is also a criminal offence. And I will always call out rapists because, apart from being criminal, it is dehumanizing and has a lifetime effect on the victim, who is also someone else's friend and sister. It should never be allowed or permitted in a sane society.

Being LGBT is a criminal offence in Nigeria. It is a criminal offence in some other countries. However, many people around the world agree that what happens between two consenting adults should not be criminal. In fact, there is a knowledge that criminalising queerness is a violation of human rights.

On whatever side of the divide we are, within us, we know that these are distinct examples of criminal cases. However, one offence hurts the image and alters the life of the victim while the other is just a reflection of an irresponsible government that dares to use religion and African morality as excuses for its backward and redundant Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act.

It really is not easy to throw a loved one under the bus, if we are being honest. But then, doing the right thing has never been easy; it takes grit and sheer determination to report a friend who has just raped a lady. As far as I am concerned, being a human being is knowing when to suppress our biases and stand for what is fair, which, in this case, is justice for a rape victim.

#### V.

What is the future of a country that pits citizens against each other? What is the point of a police force that citizens are suspicious of? The reality of Nigerians' hate towards it's police force is that it transcends profession; it begins to seep into the core of humanity: if you, a police officer, don't see me as a human being, I won't see you as a human being, too. That's the reality.

So, while we hate the police as a whole, we begin to hate the people wearing the uniform, not just the uniform. It escalates into a system where the hate towards the police matches the hate the police gives back, which is exactly what we have. The hate never stops at the corrupt institutions. It seeps into the people it houses.

What does the Nigerian government benefit from an underlying tension and unease between the police force and the people it swore to protect? Division: The Nigerian political system thrives on division; religious, ethnic, social class. So, an extra division is just what the government needs to distract citizens from the reality of its own doom. For all I care, it could be a ploy: put the police in a precarious situation where it uses extreme force on citizens for no reason, then the citizens, fed up with at the receiving end of violence and brutality, begin to hate them back, that way, the police is

compromised and subjected to do the government's bidding: see, the people don't like you, so you have only us to trust.

## VI.

The unfortunate reality of the Nigerian system is that, perhaps a show of false self-importance, or a coping mechanism from the reality of its own failings, it refuses, or is unable to, deal with its own problems, but instead plays big brother. Like President Buhari trying to broker peace in other countries while the North East is ravaged by religious extremism and armed banditry; like Nigeria spending \$2bn on building a railway line to Niger Republic when our northern borders are porous and kidnapper-friendly; like President Buhari traveling on international trips when the sports federation could not even provide proper anti-doping mechanisms for athletes going for the Olympics; like members of the Nigerian Police Force manhandling young citizens while the Deputy Commissioner of Police is in cahoots with fraudsters.

Abba Kyari, a Deputy Commissioner of Police has just been fingered by the US intelligence agency, FBI as receiving funds from Hushpuppi, the popular fraudster who was recently arrested by the US authorities. In reality, he is only one of the police officers who have been unfortunate to be caught: Nigerians always say: *"Na all of us be thief, na who dem catch be robber,"* which loosely translates in my opinion, to mean that, we're all guilty of the same things, but don't make the mistake of getting caught.

## VII.

Many Nigerian police officers, rather than hand internet fraudsters, popularly called Yahoo boys to the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, make a business out of the fraudster who has committed the Nigerian sin of getting caught. This is how the system works: catch a flamboyant Yahoo boy, ransack his phone, find incriminating evidence, arrest him, threaten to take him to court, add a sprinkle of torture when he doesn't comply, get a substantial amount of money off him, become friends with him, eventually, informing him beforehand of police raids, have him on speed dial as someone who regularly sends you money.

Sometimes, the victims of these arrests are not even fraudsters, young people working in tech, young people freelancing and getting paid in foreign currencies. But the Nigerian Police do not care. They want money, and, one way or the other, they will try to squeeze it out of you.

Among many other corrupt practices, the indicted Deputy Commissioner of Police was allegedly paid the sum of 8 million Naira by a fraudster to illegally jail another fraudster over a fraudulent deal.

This is a graphic illustration of the Nigerian society; a self-denial. The police force itself is one of the most corrupt institutions in the country. But, it willingly suspends this fact, pretends not to perceive its own stench, and continues to go after seemingly successful young persons, notwithstanding their profession. Just like how the government interferes with other countries' polity while avoiding the reality of its own failure.

## VIII.

The police son has just squeezed the sum of 500 Naira into the mother's hand. This is how politicians treat the Nigerian citizenry; a handful of thousands of Naira and they expect a pat on the back and for us to egg them on. Like this mother telling her son to *"Go, I dey your back,"* even if it meant agreeing to be a tool used by the government to enforce violence.

Where does he go? To Lekki to maim innocent and harmless citizens? To harass young hardworking Nigerians and profile them as criminals? To be a positive change in a police force soaked with corruption, fraud and every other grime of social illness?

IX.

We'll never know.

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