We Sing Your Fire Back

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October 20, 2024

1. **Golgotha**

It started with a panic that spread over a bright day and blurred visions. Then an unknown rattling came from behind. They heard the gunshots. Terrified, they sat still, waving the Nigerian flag and chanting. They didn't know who had fired those gunshots. Some would say they were soldiers. Others would reckon they were police. Yet, we would all later find out it was both the military and the police. And people would question the morality behind the night's brutal actions of these security personnel. Who ordered them to shoot at peaceful protesters? But there, at that moment, people scampered for safety as bullets tore through skins and limbs. Voices trumped over the cries and screams and shots of bullets: *Lie down. Lie down*.

It lasted for hours. Then people wept. People yelled in pain. Victims were carried on shoulders. We would later learn that soldiers had tried to stop them and shooed them back. It was all televised to the whole country. Video clips saturated social media, and in my room, eyes glued to the screen, my body shook. I felt it was a movie, and that people were neither wounded nor dead. It was on October 20, 2020. It happened at Lekki Toll Gate, a place better known today as Golgotha. Unlike the death of Christ, the deaths on this night were unprecedented. Ineluctable and unholy. A country had just crucified its people.

The whole country went hysterical the next day. Young people, in defiance, descended on public properties and attacked police stations—because many believed they, too, had joined the soldiers to shoot the protesters. This frenzy spread beyond Lagos into many cities: Aba, Onitsha, Benin, Abuja, and Port Harcourt. Vehicles were burned. Warehouses and malls were looted and destroyed. Cities were shut down, movements restricted. Soldiers razed houses. And death tolls skyrocketed.

During this period, I was in Oyigbo, a small town in the oil-producing Rivers State, where I grew up and lived until November 2020. Rivers State experienced the freedom chants and marches of protesters who, from various corners of the state, gathered and marched to the State Governor's house. Like other protesters in various cities, they demanded an end to police brutality, and an end to the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit. They presented these and more to the governor who assured them he'd do something about them.

But Oyigbo turned sour after the shooting at the Toll Gate. Many young people felt betrayed. They directed their fury towards the destruction of government properties: they burned the police station and the customary court. Terror descended on the streets and, to quell it, security personnel, particularly the police, needed to step in. But the police station had been deserted and policemen were on their heels, warranting the military to move in to restore order. But how do you stir up the fury of a people who watched you, a few hours ago, attack their own? Perhaps the presence of soldiers aggravated them because, we'd later hear, they fearlessly attacked the soldiers. Unfortunately, some soldiers died as well as some armed angry mobs. And this, the death of more soldiers, led to more military reinforcement, leading to more deaths; a litany of tragedies.

A 24-hour curfew was declared on October 21st.

Someone's fiancè was killed. A bullet shot into a shop left her dead.

A woman was called to collect the corpse of her husband, a pastor lying in his blood.

We heard the cries of a woman. A stray bullet had pierced their wooden door and hit her daughter. We later heard the girl survived.

A boy who was peeking from behind a store was shot.

Another boy died along Oyigbo Expressway.

The numbers spiked.

A house on People's Street was burnt.

An ambulance carrying a corpse was burnt along Roundabout.

When we heard of this burnt corpse, our neighbour Uka and I decided to see it. As soon as the soldiers left our area, we sneaked out. Our parents balked, ordered us to stay back but we ignored them. Other people had gone there too. And we saw a charred body of the vehicle, the corpse unrecognizable. Tragedy had swallowed it whole. Grief, like a hawk, was hovering around, picking up the carcasses of joy in the town.

But before all this, before the military marched to the Toll Gate, before they occupied Oyigbo, before they opened fire and people fled, groaned in pain and died, before the country was thrown into pseudo-anarchy, there was a peaceful protest. Protesters were brandishing their placards, calling for an end to police brutality, an end to the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, an end to bad government.

2. **We Don't Want Nobody**

Many people, especially online, raised concerns about the Lekki massacre, about the killings in Oyigbo. Who had ordered the soldiers there? Why were they that brutal? Many pointed at the

governors of those states, and many didn't know where their fingers would face. Regardless, everyone wanted to know who had handed the people over to the soldiers. But the truth is that soldiers didn't just enter and begin shooting.

In his defense, the governor of Rivers State stated that, "The issue of people saying I sent soldiers to Oyigbo to kill the Igbo people is balderdash." He further informed the public about how he didn't have any command over the police. "Have I even directed the police one day?" He added.

However, as the governor of a state, If he hadn't commanded the soldiers to go to Oyigbo, then it seemed he'd know where the order came from. Similarly, the governor of Lagos State denied giving any order to the military. In his words, "This is the toughest night of our lives as forces beyond our direct control have moved to make a dark note in our history." He added, "We will face it and come out stronger."

During this period, the silence of the federal government had grown too loud to ignore. It dragged a barrage of questions on its back: Why had it not said anything? Is it—or is it not—the "forces beyond" that commanded the soldiers to go to Lekki Toll Gate and Oyigbo? The then Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed, would later say the Lekki incident was a "phantom massacre without blood or bodies."

But on 30 November 2020, the Nigerian Army admitted that its soldiers, armed with live ammunition, opened fire on protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate. While giving testimony to the Judicial Panel, Brigadier Ahmed Taiwo also alleged that the Nigerian Army was called upon to intervene by the Governor of Lagos State, Babajide Sanwo-Olu. He added that Sanwo-Olu called the Chief of Army Staff and the General Officer Commanding (GOC) 81 Division, claiming that the Police had been "overrun." This admittance came a few days after a forensic documentary report was released by CNN on the incident at Lekki the night of the massacre.

Why did the people have to wait for a forensic report by CNN to know the true tragedy of that night at Lekki? Why did we need a Judicial Panel for the military to confirm, after a series of denials, that they shot at protesters? Why do we have to wait and wait to get an official admittance from the government about who ordered the shootings? Why is the government denying that nobody was killed at that protest? Why did Major Charles Ekeocha, as noted in a *Daily Trust* article, inform the press that "the soldiers sent to Oyigbo were very professional in carrying out their duties and did not kill innocent residents"? Perhaps the intention was to deny that people actually died, and that there was indeed a "phantom massacre without blood and bodies."

This blatant denial seems to be the reason the government is inattentive to the real plight of the people. Perhaps this is the reason empathy is lacking. Perhaps this is the reason justice is distant here. If not, why would the government treat its citizens with so much disdain? The first thing Nigerians, especially poor young Nigerians living in the country, are taught about themselves is to survive. To survive like slaves. To survive without questions. If this is not the case, then the government should inform its people who ordered the shootings and killings at the Lekki Toll Gate and Oyigbo. Just like Christ, the Roman soldiers didn't scourge him until Pilate handed Christ to them. In Nigeria, it is apparent that someone handed the protesters to the military, who whipped and scourged them. While there is a glimpse into the rump of the situation, many Nigerians demand the stone of silence on the tomb of this tragedy be rolled away. They demand that the government acknowledges its mistakes. To accept one's actions, especially when it hurts or affects others, is to recognize other people's humanity, which is a valid step to a longstanding change and reconciliation.

Will this acknowledgement come? By not addressing salient, pressing issues, Nigerian leaders seem

to think that Nigerians will always forget—perhaps a sort of collective amnesia. For in this country, we have a meticulous and unabashed proclivity to draw out closures in an open wound; to feign forgetfulness even when the fire of memories is lit everywhere.

This is a country that has given us silences, yet we fill its corridors with laughter and tears and riddles and proverbs. A country that has turned—and continues to turn—everything we have loved into ghosts, yet we cling to the garments of her brutality, hoping it'd realize our loyalty. This is a country we call ours even when it denies us the fruits of our soil. We continue tilling its grounds, breaking our backs to feed it. What haven't we done for this place, this country? If we could do all this and more, what stops this country from loving us as a mother would cater for her own? What stops her from falling on her knees and seeking forgiveness for all that she's done to us? Until what killed the dead is made open and stripped of its cloak, until who killed the dead is uncovered, the living will continue to remember. And this remembrance is sometimes a burden or an agony. But it's always a form of resistance.

3. **Hold This Fire of Memories**

The agony that stretched across the country after the Lekki incident is a collection of grief that roared out of the loss people experienced. When the military and the police brutalized those protesters, they plunged their loved ones into corrosive misery so unfathomable, so raw that time, rather than heals, aggravates it. This agony is the disinterest in any "legitimate process" in which people are unable to find *legitimate* justice. Sometimes, when trying this process, people are often greeted with silences, extended false hopes or watery verdicts. This is evident in the number of undisclosed EndSARS protesters who are still lying in various prisons across the country. This agony is the terror that breathes when people seek freedom, when they fail to be their true, authentic selves, when they are tortured for criticizing the government, when they see their future unravel so excruciatingly.

The taller agony, hedged between the other walls of grief towering in the center of this country, is the scarcity of trust the people have for the government. Many people wondered why the government denied commanding the military to move to the protest grounds, denied killing the protesters, and denied that there was ever a massacre. If government actions or policies are shielded from criticism, how then does a government mirror its actions? For whom are those policies and ideas?

Afrobarometer, a Pan-African research network, in its 2023 pre-election study discovered that many Nigerians showed interest in a strong democracy. However, the small fraction of voters who actually voted, out of the numerous registered voters, indicates a troubling trajectory of the country's democracy, which is crumbling on the back of distrust.

There is a proliferation in the emergence of so many autocratic and fascist governments around the world. They punish critics to assert fear and influence. But influence doesn't come from such ruthless power; instead, it grows out of trust. When a people trust their governments, they believe in them and can lay down their lives in defense of that trust.

Sadly, the idea that all critics or dissents want to colour a government badly and bring it to its knees is a rogue idea, a parochial way to think. Dissents or critics wish, often, the government well by offering them their opinions, their ideas and how they feel about certain policies. The EndSARS protesters offered their opinions about police brutality, demanded a change and received missiles of attacks instead. Democracy is not about the clampdown on differing opinions or the restrictions on

rights and privileges. It is about freedom: accommodating varying opinions and listening to the other side.

On every anniversary of the Lekki Toll Gate massacre, I imagine families of the people who didn't return to life after that night or people whose disappearances they are still expecting to end. I imagine the despair and affliction they live with each day, thinking about their loved ones, knowing they never deserved the way they left. I imagine those who laid their lives before that incident, professing their love and hopes and dreams of greatness. I imagine them practising in their mirrors before they left their houses how they would dance with victory with their demands met. I imagine them terrified when they heard gunshots, hoping they wouldn't become victims. I imagine them chanting songs of freedom even with bullets lodged in their arms or legs. I imagine them struggling to live because they believed so much in this place, in the dream of this country. But the agony is not that they died, it's that their deaths were denied, and their existence unrecognized by a government so eager to conceal the detritus of its crime. Time doesn't heal such grief. We sometimes accuse the British of the evil they did to us during the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism as a reason for our backwardness and disunity. Yet, we are good at denying the damnation and blood drawn by our hands, caused by our own people, people of the same country, our leaders. For no evil is heavier than the one a mother does to her child. We avoid talking about the genocides of the Nigerian-Biafran war, the Odi Massacre, the religious-ethnic wars in some parts of the country. We speak less of the Lekki Toll Gate massacre. It is as if this has been swept off the front shelves of our memories. Perhaps we are terrified of shouting about it. Perhaps we are still mourning those who died, who are still missing. Perhaps we are still searching for whom to hold accountable. But we are not terrified of remembering our loved ones, our dead. Maryse Condé in her novel, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, affirms that the dead only die if they die in our hearts. Authoritarianism or fascism can momentarily take our words or voices and instill fear in our tongues, but they can never erase our memories. It is ours. We hold on to it. We keep it fresh and luxuriant with remembrance. So, every October 20, we stoke the fires of our memories, shudder at the terror of that night, and question the morality and humanity of a government so brutal it slaughtered its own. We remember that night and the nights that grew out of it. A tragic mystery.

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