INTRODUCTION

George Floyd’s death in the hands of the agents of the government in the United States sparked a renaissance of Blackism in the world captured in the slogan and hashtag, Black Lives Matter.

As the momentum, which swept off statues of pro-slavery historic figures reached its peak on Juneteenth, there was a critical tracking of centuries of slave trade to where the story actually began- in the villages, towns and empires of Africa. Towns such as Badagry, Abomey, Lagos on the shores of Africa. Empires such as Oyo, Benin, Dahomey where slave merchants such as Madam Tinubu in Lagos and Efunsetan Aniwura in Ibadan, Nigeria used their wealth to influence the rise and fall of kings and emperors.

Central to this trajectory is the attempt to periodise the time that human beings became commodities in Africa.

Blame it on nature. In the agrarian economy of the pre-feudal era, the weather and the soil were the critical determinants of the fate of the farms. Those favoured to farm on good soil and whose crops got the right sunshine harvested large tubers of yams, cassava and other farm products. The primacy of these forces goes a long way to explain the repertoire of propitiations- sacrifices, festivals, guilds in a structured pantheon to ensure the harmony of the spiritual and the material.

Those unfavoured by the elements had fewer choices to survive than to give up their freedom or the freedom of their children to serve their more fortunate fellow men. But this was often based on a contract of a few years to re-build capacity and try their luck again. The practice of “***asungba***” someone who temporarily gives up his freedom to be enslaved is well known among the Yoruba. Their status differs from the “***iwofa***”, men and women captured in inter-city conflicts and wars which became increasingly frequent as trade and commerce undermined the feudal order and facilitated the emergence of the coastal and trans-shaharan trade merchants.

It is to this era that we should ascribe the commodification of the “asungba” and the “iwofa” into chattels of merchandise. Since all societies transited from feudal to commercial and then bourgeois stages, what is described above is considered a universal occurrence until the discovery of the America and its prospect as fertile space for sugar and cotton plantations turned a trickle into a flood.

It was a flood of “sorrow, tears and blood” as Blackist musician Fela Anikulapo Kuti recounted in his commentary on the slavery taking place in modern times, many centuries after technological industrialization displaced manual labour on the plantations and led to the “crusade” against slavery.

The revolutionary music of Anikulapo-Kuti, named Ransome-Kuti at birth is the best conjuncture to unravel the logic of development of the market from slave trade to imperialism and assert the unbiblical chord that ties a violent past to a murderous present.

In “Why Black Man Dey Suffer” Fela explains how white men came to Africa and violently seized land and imposed their values:

***We dey sit down for our landi jeje***

***We dey sit down for our landi jeje***

***We dey mind our business jeje***

***Some people come from far away land***

***Dem fight us and take our land***

***Dem take our people and spoil our towns***

***Na since den trouble starti oh (huh, huh)***

***Na since den trouble starti oh (one more time)***

***Na since den trouble starti oh (hmm)***

***Our riches dem take away to their land***

***In return dem give us their colony***

***Dem take our culture away from us***

***Dem give us dem culture we no understand***

***Black people, we no know ourselves***

***We no know our ancestral heritage***

***We dey fight each other everyday***

***We're never together, we're never together at all***

***We're never together, we're never together at all***

The point is often made that African ancestors sheepishly surrendered to the onslaught of the panyarring forces. This argument has been interrogated and the available knowledge points to the advantage in warfare conferred to the aggressors by the innovation in gunnery. The invention of the Maxim gun, which has higher firing power than the Gatling and Martini guns that many African empires had bought and stocked to defend themselves. The valiant resistance of leaders such as Nana Ebrohimie of Itsekiri, King Overamwen of Benin, King Pepple of Bonny, Jaja of Opobo provides inspiration to the struggles of today and demonstrates that inequity has always led to struggles to re-assert the dignity of the human being,

The fact is that from the inception of the slave trade market which turned human beings to merchandise, Africa has known neither peace nor stability as the market moved from slaves to raw materials and led to the occupation of territory and its colonial exploitation.

THE STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAMME AND ENDEMIC STRUGGLES FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN NIGERIA

The hope of independence was the opportunity to rebuild the fractured existence of millions of Nigerians who, since 1861 when king Docemo was coerced to sign a protective treaty with the British, had transited from free members of kingdoms to subjects of a colonial power.

From 1960 to 1980, Nigerian governments pursued a nationalistic regime that sought to put the commanding height of the economy in the hands of the government. Four national development plans took advantage of the bipolar international environment to attract partnership from the East and West. With the indigenization law of 1974, only Nigerians could own commercial and retail entreprises, The Arab-Israeli war of 1973 shot up the price of crude oil and the country was awash with petrodollars. The Nigerian naira was 80 kobo to the dollar and exchanged at par with the pound.

Then the loan sharks descended on the country beguiling its leadership with the international credibility that comes with a good debtor status and lured it into transactions at the London Interbank Rate. This was a clear departure from the sovereign loans fixed for long tenure that had dominated the country’s debt profile. Declining oil revenues made it difficult to pay these loans and despite rescheduling in 1982, this plunged the country into a debt crisis.

Designed by the World Bank, the Structural Adjustment Loan that gave birth to the Structural Adjustment Programme was meant to create conditions for Nigeria to repay its loans by restoring its balance of payments challenges. With exports outstripping imports, enough could be raised to exit the debtors’ club.

But it turned out to be the anti-thesis of Nigeria’s post-independence developmental experience. While Nigeria had pursued an autocentric self-reliant economy that limited foreign interest in the economy to empower its citizenry, the SAP sought to restructure the economy to serve the interest of the Western capitalist system by selling profitable national assets to foreign investors, commercializing less promising ones and scrapping agencies considered moribund.

The export-led recovery mantra of SAP turned Nigeria’s commercial, financial, industrial and agricultural sectors into the service of the Western market at the expense of the country’s economy and its productive forces. These include the peasants, who constitute over 70 percent of the population challenged by the economic hardship of subsistence farming on small acreages. These also include the working class, constituting over 20 percent of the populace who had suffered layoffs, salary reduction and stagnated positions since the economic crisis began in 1982.

Much of the assumptions which informed the SAP was queried by Africanist scholars for fostering external dependence, the very evil that newly independent countries of Africa were striving to avoid and false assumptions.

Renowned economist, Dr. Pius Okigbo once declared: “Indeed, in most African countries, the private sector that is often used as a reference for comparison of efficiency with the public sector is not the indigenous but the alien dominated private sector. It is therefore wrong to assert without proof that the indigenous private sector is equally efficient, regardless of scale, to the public sector and that, therefore, it is or should be the source of the dynamics of the economy.”

Nevertheless, the SAP was violently implemented by the military regime of Ibrahim Babangida by crushing opposition forces including labour, students and the civil society.

The hardship caused by the devaluation of the naira led Fela Anikulapo to record his song, Overtake don Overtake Overtake, ODOO, where he tells the story of a man who had to keep saving money to buy a fan whose price was kept rising:

My friend wan come buy fan

Him dey sweat for him dey sleep for room

Him dey fall level of tree

The fan na seventy-five naira

My friend him dey follow salary

Him dey try to save and save and save

Every time he nearly buy the fan

Government go add ten naira more

Every time he nearly buy the fan

Government go start one activity

Till the fan reach two hundred naira

My friend nearly die, he never die

My friend he no wan die

Die-die no dey for him dictionary

For where? Huh...

Him dey try to save and save again

Him save for one year and six months

Inside cupboard

Under pillow

Under, under cooking pot

Inside socks

Under carpet

Him dey on his way to buy the fan

When alarm come blow

[Fela vocalizes a police siren]

Government announce second tier

Everything come tear to pieces

Everything come expensive

Even water become expensive

In subsequent outing, Fela declared the programme the second slavery of Africans prompting him to label the song, MASS, Music Against Second Slavery.

A sample from the lyrics:

“Wetin dis government dey do

No be for talk

Na for eye oh

(ye ye ye)

Selling the continent to become slaves again

(ye ye ye)…

Dem dey follow white men

Dem be like blind men

Disgracing Africa all over the world

Selling the continent without conscience.

Using Fela as the voice of the voiceless majority, the underprivileged traumatized by this toxic experiment of Breton Woods institution, enables us to go beyond sterile metrics and statistics and appreciate the human tragedy that the programme meant for many households in Nigeria in particular and Africa as a whole.

Indeed, in terms of implementation and duration of negative effects, SAP has lived up to its precursors such as the slave trade and colonial oppression of the Nigerian people. To worsen matters, after more than two decades of “ No Alternative to SAP,” in which Nigerians were used as guinea pigs for a neo-colonial experiment, the World Bank admitted its failure.

Its words: “Under the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) introduced in 1986, Nigeria reformed its foreign exchange system, trade policies, and business and agricultural regulations. This success notwithstanding, per capita income is still only US$320 and consumption and income are little higher (in real per capita terms) than they were in the early 1970s before the oil boom. Because over 90 percent of Nigeria's export earnings are from oil, growth in agriculture and manufacturing could offset little of the large drop in purchasing power that resulted from the collapse of oil export revenues that had prompted the adoption of the SAP.”

Imposing SAP as the economic foundation of the emergent political order birthed by the regime’s Political Transition Programme destroyed democratic values and tenets. It led to the denial of the right of Nigerians to form parties of their choice and the imposition of two parties whose manifestoes were written by the military regime. It led to the bans on Nigerians who disagreed with the policy from contesting elections, and where they tried and won, denying them their victory. The draconian and authoritarian posture led to the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential victory of business mogul, Moshood Kashimawo Abiola, whose presidential manifesto, Farewell to Poverty, pledged to undo the economic injustice of adjustment programme.

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS AND PRIMORDIAL PLATFORMS FOR THE APPROPRIATION OF SOCIAL SURPLUS

The struggle to appropriate scarce resources in an economy in recession has intensified the competition to appropriate public and private resources based on the primordial platforms of ethnicity, religion and other social networks. Despite constitutional measures to manage the distribution through federal character provisions, segments of the country’s 250 ethnic nationalities have been agitating against what they termed lopsided appointments. This social injustice has encouraged organisations claiming to represent two of the country’s major ethnic nationalities – the Igbo and the Yoruba- to register at the United Nations as independent nations requiring the protection of the global body. A case has also been instituted in court to enforce the federal character provisions.

Similarly, the Christian Association of Nigeria have been agitating for the right to religious freedom for its adherents particularly in the Muslim –dominated Northern states where churches have been burnt in the course of social disturbances. Recurrent flares of clashes between Muslims and Christians in the North Central regions have also claimed lives.

But the most devastating consequence of the mass immiseration inflicted by SAP is religious fanaticism which rose by offering a better life in an Islamic theocracy. Powered by the Boko Haram, translated as (western) education is against Islamic tenets, it has, in the last 10 years, engaged the Nigerian defence forces in a war that still continues.

In the circumstances, Nigeria’s political elite, currently represented in the government at the federal level by the All Progressives Congress President Muhammadu Buhari is emburdened with the task of mitigating mass poverty created by SAP with social welfare programmes such as school feeding, cash transfer to the indigent, subsidized education and non-collateralised loans to small and medium scale entrepreneurs.

The economic hardship, manifested by unemployment of both blue and white collar candidates has also led to serious desperation to migrate to Western countries, a thirst that the American Visa Lottery programme and similar enticement schemes has wetted.

Indeed, it will be interesting to interrogate the impact of the influx of educated African middle class to a country such as United States in relation to native Black and White Americans’ competition for economic opportunities. Many African professionals and graduates, groomed to believe the United States as the American Wonder, a destination at the apogee of civilization, are often shocked at the pitiable condition of the Black Americans in terms of access to college and jobs.

What really was the aim of the Visa Lottery? To replace Black American labour? To weaken the negotiating power of Black Americans? To consign Black Americans to the self-denigrating welfare and penal system while raising a more knowledgeable Black citizenry? There are many questions waiting to be answered!

In the midst of these social currents, what should be the role of the Museum? To preserve the repertoire of activities for historical excursion and revision. As important as the dollar bill that Floyd offered to buy groceries in that store is crucial to the memorial and should be acquired by a Museum, the organisers of the anti-SAP riots who defended the cause of the Nigerian people, the artefacts of their struggle should be set up in a Museum of Popular Struggles in Nigeria.