

THE ENTITY FORMERLY KNOWN AS NIGERIA

A Declaration of Force Majeure Over an Inherited Existence

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for Okpara House

We should take a cue from the artist formerly known as Prince.

There was something profound in Prince's decision to relinquish his own name.

An institutional arrangement had acquired such authority over the commercial identity called Prince that his response was to withdraw himself from the identity.

If you have acquired power over the name through which I am bound to you, then I will cease, for a time, to answer to that name.

It was an extraordinary assertion of something easily forgotten:

The person preceded the arrangement.

The creative faculty preceded the contract.

The institution could acquire rights over the products of Prince's authorship. It could acquire contractual authority over the commercial identity through which those products circulated. But it could not become the source from which Prince emerged.

Prince could withdraw.

And in withdrawing, he revealed an ability that perhaps remained invisible until it became necessary:

the ability to refuse the identity through which another entity exercised authority over him.

There is a question here that extends far beyond Prince.

Can a people do the same?

Can a people discover that an identity they have spent generations inhabiting is itself part of an inherited institutional arrangement?

Can they suspend the inevitability of that construction long enough to ask what existed before it, what was altered in its creation, what remains alive beneath it, what has subsequently emerged within it, and what they might choose to build if they were once again permitted to begin from themselves?

Consider Nigeria.

What if the entity formerly known as Nigeria declared force majeure over its present existence?

Not force majeure in its strict juridical sense. There is no legal doctrine by which a country simply declares colonial inheritance sufficient cause to suspend its statehood or obligations.

The term is being borrowed deliberately.

Force majeure ordinarily recognizes that extraordinary circumstances can make continued performance under existing terms impossible or untenable.

Here, it becomes a civilizational metaphor:

What happens when the terms themselves require examination?

What if a people were to suspend—not abolish—the presumption that an inherited political arrangement must continue indefinitely in its existing conceptual form?

What if that suspension created an interval in which preservation of the arrangement temporarily ceased to be the first question, allowing another question to take precedence:

What has happened to the people?

That is what I mean by civilizational force majeure.

Not an escape from responsibility.

Not a legal annulment of Nigeria.

Not yet a prescription for what should replace it.

A suspension of inherited inevitability so that a people can recover sufficient authorship to decide consciously what should follow.

WHO DECLARES

Force majeure is declared by a party.

So who declares here?

Not the entity. Its authority over its own foundations is precisely what is in question.

The declaration belongs to the peoples within it.

They make it in the entity's name only because, for now, that is the name under which they are heard together.

That the declaration must borrow the very name it examines is not a flaw in the proposition.

It is the condition the proposition describes.

THE NAME WAS NOT OURS

Here the analogy with Prince reaches its limit.

And where it fails, our predicament becomes considerably more profound.

Prince's name was his.

Ours was not.

The persons who would eventually be called Nigerians existed before Nigeria.

They existed as peoples, communities, kingdoms, republics, towns, villages, lineages and other forms of human association.

They possessed languages through which they understood reality; institutions through which they ordered society; systems through which they negotiated authority, obligation, justice, exchange, land, spirituality and belonging.

Then an entity was created around them.

They were not collectively the authors of its original conception.

They did not collectively determine its boundaries.

They did not gather together and decide that the diverse worlds they inhabited constituted a single political self called Nigeria.

They found themselves inside it.

And then something extraordinary happened.

The container gradually became the identity of the contained.

People whose existence preceded Nigeria became Nigerians.

Their children were born Nigerians.

Their histories became Nigerian history.

Their lands became Nigerian territory.

Their resources became Nigerian resources.

Their political possibilities increasingly became questions of what was permissible within Nigeria.

With time, the arrangement ceased to appear as an arrangement at all.

It became reality.

Eventually something even more consequential happened:

the externally created identity became internalized.

Nigeria no longer existed only around the person.

Nigeria began to exist within the person.

Colonialism did not merely occupy territory or reorganize political authority. It also reorganized categories through which people understood themselves.

When the colonial administrator departed, the architecture through which the colonized had been reorganized did not necessarily depart with him.

The flag changed.

The anthem changed.

The personnel governing the state changed.

But the entity remained.

And increasingly, the people learned to understand themselves through it.

This creates a question considerably more difficult than whether Nigeria is functioning:

What has becoming Nigerian done to the persons who existed before Nigeria?

We speak endlessly about Nigeria's political, economic, security, constitutional and developmental crises.

But perhaps beneath these visible crises lies another condition that is rarely institutionally acknowledged:

a crisis of selfhood.

What happens when generations inhabit an arrangement they did not author while gradually being taught that the arrangement is the primary definition of who they are?

What happens when institutions through which their ancestors understood themselves are weakened, displaced or rendered informal, while institutions inherited through colonial rule become the principal language of legitimacy?

And what happens when the resulting dislocation is no longer recognized as historical but experienced entirely as internal deficiency?

The people begin diagnosing themselves.

We are corrupt.

We are tribal.

We cannot govern ourselves.

We cannot organize.

We cannot develop.

Something must be wrong with us.

Some of these diagnoses describe genuine contemporary failures.

But another question must be permitted alongside them:

What if some of what we experience as failure is the continuing friction between peoples and systems of organization whose relationship was never adequately reconciled?

This does not absolve contemporary Africans of agency or responsibility.

Generations since independence have governed these states, altered them, benefited from them, harmed one another through them and reproduced many of their institutions.

We are responsible for what we do with what we inherited.

But responsibility for an inheritance does not require pretending that we authored the inheritance.

Nor should adaptation be mistaken for consent.

Nor longevity for inevitability.

We can become deeply attached to an inherited arrangement and still retain the right to ask:

Would we have constituted ourselves this way?

INDEPENDENCE WITHIN THE BOX

This raises an uncomfortable question about independence itself.

Nigeria's independence was real. It emerged through nationalist organizing, political struggle, constitutional negotiation and generations of Africans demanding the right to govern themselves.

That achievement should not be diminished.

But perhaps independence left another question unresolved.

The struggle became principally a struggle over who would govern Nigeria.

A prior question was not placed with equal force at the center:

What is Nigeria, and by what process did these peoples become Nigerians?

The independence generation fought consequential battles over who would control the box.

Hindsight allows us to ask another question:

Who authorized the box?

And after colonial authority had been removed from it:

Should the box itself have been examined before it was inherited?

This is not an indictment of those who fought for independence.

They confronted the historical conditions before them.

We must confront those before us.

What becomes visible now is that independence is layered.

There is political independence:

Who governs us?

Economic independence:

Who controls the productive capacity and material resources upon which our lives depend?

Epistemic independence:

Who determines what counts as knowledge, legitimacy, civilization and possibility?

And civilizational independence:

From what understanding of ourselves do we construct the institutions through which we live?

Political independence can therefore be genuine without completing the work of decolonization.

Perhaps independence transferred authority over the inherited state without requiring sufficient reconsideration of the terms upon which the state itself had been imagined.

The question has not been entirely absent since.

The National Question has returned repeatedly:

at the Constitutional Conference of 1994–95,
the National Political Reform Conference of 2005,
the National Conference of 2014.

But each asked principally how power, revenue and
representation should be arranged within the box.

We became independent inside the box.

This proposition asks us to stand outside it and look again.

THE QUESTION ONCE ASKED BY FORCE

The question has been asked outside the box once before.

In 1967, after the killings of Igbo people in the North the
previous year, the Eastern Region declared itself the Republic
of Biafra.

The war that followed lasted until 1970.

Most of its dead were lost not in battle but to blockade and
starvation.

Consider the name.

Biafra was not an Igbo word.

It came from European maps, which since the sixteenth
century had used it for an interior region and for the coastal
waters called the Bight of Biafra.

It was chosen precisely because it was not ethnic.

The Eastern Region held Ijaw, Efik, Ibibio, the peoples of Ogoja and others.

A geographic name allowed the new state to belong to all of them.

That choice was itself an act of authorship.

But at the moment of greatest rupture, the most available name was one drawn from the maps of those who had first described the coast from outside.

After the war, the Bight of Biafra was renamed the Bight of Bonny.

Biafra asked the territorial question under conditions that allowed no interval: after massacre, under threat, with no time to recover anything before choosing everything.

It shows what happens when a people's deepest question can only be asked in crisis, and only answered by force.

This proposition is not a reprise of Biafra.

It is an argument for the interval Biafra never had.

RESTORING SCALE

To stand outside the inherited box requires restoring scale to our imagination.

Consider Luxembourg.

It is a sovereign country.

Its population is smaller than that of many cities and historical communities contained within Nigeria. Its scale does not make its political existence conceptually absurd.

Now look again at Nigeria.

Within the entity called Nigeria exist hundreds of languages and the historical communities that speak them—communities possessing different memories, institutions, territories, systems of belonging and histories that long precede the Nigerian state.

This does not mean that every language constitutes a country, nor that every historical community should become a sovereign state.

That would replace one predetermined conclusion with another.

The significance lies elsewhere:

What we have learned to perceive as one country contains an extraordinary multiplicity of human worlds.

Colonialism did not merely place boundaries around those worlds.

It altered their scale in the imagination.

A civilization could become a tribe.

A nation could become an ethnic group.

A political system could become a custom.

A philosophy could become folklore.

A religion could become superstition.

An institution could become a tradition.

And an externally constructed territorial arrangement could become the unquestioned country within which these diminished categories were expected to understand themselves.

The transformation was therefore not merely territorial.

It was categorical.

Igboland offers a precise example.

Igbo communities governed themselves largely through village assemblies, councils of elders, age grades and women's associations.

They deliberated toward consensus rather than ruling through kings.

Colonial ethnography described such societies as acephalous—headless—as though the absence of a monarch were the absence of government.

Under indirect rule, the British appointed warrant chiefs:

men granted authority by colonial warrant over communities whose institutions had never vested authority in such a figure.

When the imposed office produced abuse, the failure could be read as Igbo disorder rather than colonial invention.

In 1929, thousands of women across Owerri and Calabar provinces rose against the warrant chiefs and the threat of taxation.

In the colonial record, it became the Aba Women's Riots.

In Igbo memory, it is *Ọgụ Ụmụnwanyi*—the Women's War.

A political system became an absence.

A war became a riot.

That hierarchy survives inside the questions we ask.

Instead of:

What kind of political society were we?

we ask:

What is the role of my tribe within Nigeria?

Instead of:

What institutions did we develop for governing ourselves?

we ask:

How can our traditions be accommodated within the Nigerian state?

Instead of:

What does our language know?

we ask:

How can our local language survive alongside English?

The scale has already been determined before the inquiry begins.

EPISTEMIC SOVEREIGNTY

This is why epistemic sovereignty must precede territorial sovereignty.

Before asking who should control territory, there is a prior question:

Who possesses the authority to define the political subject?

Who determines what constitutes a nation?

What counts as an institution?

What is philosophy and what is folklore?

What is knowledge and what is superstition?

What is governance and what is merely custom?

A people cannot freely determine the political arrangement appropriate to its future while encountering itself exclusively through categories inherited from the system that rearranged it.

Before determining borders, it must recover the authority to recognize itself.

This is not nostalgia.

The objective is not to return uncritically to the past. It is to encounter the past without first passing it through categories that have already determined its inferiority.

Then we can decide what should be retained, abandoned, transformed, combined with knowledge acquired elsewhere, or created anew.

That is authorship.

More than a century has passed since amalgamation.
Generations have lived and died as Nigerians.

They are not without agency because they inherited the
arrangement.

They can ratify it.

Transform it.

Reconstruct it.

Or choose something else.

But meaningful choice requires alternatives to be imaginable.

Consent cannot be meaningful where the alternatives have
become unimaginable.

Epistemic sovereignty therefore does not determine the
political answer.

It restores the capacity to choose one.

It restores the authors to the room.

RECOVERY IS NOT REWIND

There is another history we must acknowledge.

Nigeria may have begun as an externally constructed
arrangement, but Nigerians have lived within it for
generations.

And human beings create history wherever they live.

People have intermarried.

Relocated.

Built families across ancestral boundaries.

Created cities and communities that cannot be returned neatly to precolonial compartments.

Generations have been born for whom being Nigerian is itself meaningful.

Beyond the territory, Nigerians have created an influential diaspora whose professional, intellectual, commercial and cultural networks extend across the world.

These realities cannot simply be unwound.

Nor should they be.

Recovery is not rewind.

The externally constructed container has itself become a site of genuine human creation.

Both truths can coexist.

There is an Igbo saying that gives language to this reality:

Ebe onye bi ka ọ na-awachi.

Where one lives, one tends.

Contained within it is a recognition particularly relevant here: dwelling creates obligation.

To live somewhere is not merely to occupy it. It is to participate in its making—to tend what sustains life there,

repair what is broken, and acquire responsibilities toward the place and the people with whom life is being made.

Origin gives inheritance. Dwelling creates obligation.

One does not necessarily extinguish the other.

The fact that the Nigerian political container was externally constructed does not make the human relationships subsequently created within it unreal. Nor does recovering ancestral selfhood require denying forms of belonging that generations have since created.

A human being can carry several legitimate geographies of belonging.

Recovery therefore cannot mean returning people to an imagined moment before history happened.

We must recover what colonialism obscured without erasing what we have subsequently become.

The objective is not purity.

It is authorship.

And authorship need not lead toward smaller political worlds.

A people secure in its historical and civilizational subjecthood can freely choose association with others equally secure in theirs.

Federation becomes imaginable.

Confederation becomes imaginable.

Regional and continental association become imaginable.

Even Nigeria becomes imaginable again—but now as a conscious proposition rather than an inherited inevitability.

Recovery does not require us to become smaller. It requires us to become visible before deciding how large we wish to become together.

THE DECLARATION

This is the practical meaning of declaring civilizational force majeure.

It does not mean suspending government.

It does not mean suspending law.

It does not mean repudiating citizenship, abandoning international obligations, closing borders or dissolving Nigeria by proclamation.

The suspension is conceptual before it is political.

What is suspended is the assumption that the inherited arrangement is beyond foundational examination.

The declaration creates an interval in which the state ceases to be the unquestioned starting point and the human beings within it become the starting point instead.

During that interval, questions normally treated as settled become available for examination again.

What should education produce?

What should we manufacture?

How do we secure food and energy?

Which responsibilities belong closest to communities, and which require larger political association?

How should land be understood and governed?

How might indigenous institutions coexist with institutions acquired from elsewhere?

What knowledge should our languages be capable of carrying into the future?

On what terms should external capital gain access to our resources?

What productive capacity must exist if political sovereignty is to have material meaning?

And ultimately:

What political arrangements would we constitute if preservation of the arrangement we inherited were no longer the predetermined answer?

That is the declaration.

Not:

Nigeria ceases to exist.

But:

Nigeria ceases, for an interval, to be exempt from first principles.

The movement is therefore not:

Suspend. Destroy.

It is:

Suspend.

Recognize.

Recover.

Deliberate.

Reconstitute.

Re-enter.

Throughout the interval, the state continues to govern, and much of the rebuilding will pass through it.

What changes is not its operation but its exemption.

The interval is not a retreat from modernity.

It is an exercise in deliberate reconstitution.

Other societies have undergone sustained periods of internal rebuilding under circumstances very different from ours. China and South Korea followed distinct, difficult histories and cannot simply be offered as templates for Nigeria.

Both rebuilt under strong states whose national frame was enforced rather than examined.

What is proposed here differs:

the rebuilding proceeds while the frame remains open.

Their experiences nevertheless demonstrate something important:

A generation can transform the material and institutional capacity of a society.

Twenty years is a long time in the life of an individual.

It is not a long time in the life of a civilization.

What might become possible if a generation deliberately rebuilt?

Education aligned with actual social and productive needs.

Energy.

Food systems.

Industry.

Transportation.

Scientific capacity.

Institutions capable of preserving and developing indigenous knowledge.

Languages capable not merely of remembering the past but of discussing science, technology, law, philosophy and the future.

Political arrangements whose legitimacy emerges increasingly from the people inhabiting them.

Relationships with external capital negotiated from positions of greater productive capacity.

A generation dedicated not merely to surviving the inherited condition but to transforming it.

Then the interval ends.

Not because every problem has disappeared.

But because sufficient authorship has been recovered for the next decision to be genuinely ours.

RE-ENTRY

The diaspora need not stand outside this recovery.

It may become one of its great resources.

Across the world are people carrying Nigerian and older ancestral identities while participating in sophisticated professional, technological, academic, commercial and cultural systems.

They possess networks, knowledge, capital, institutional experience and technological access.

And perhaps most importantly, experience inhabiting multiple worlds simultaneously.

The diaspora can become a membrane between recovery and the world.

Looking inward therefore does not mean turning away from the world.

It means recovering the authority from which we encounter it.

The purpose of civilizational force majeure is ultimately re-entry.

To return to the world neither as a restored precolonial society nor simply as the colonial state inherited at independence.

But as something new.

A modern society increasingly of its own authorship.

And here the original question returns in altered form:

What happens to Nigeria?

We cannot know in advance.

That uncertainty is not a weakness in the proposition.

It is its integrity.

Perhaps Nigeria survives.

Perhaps its peoples consciously choose to remain together.

Perhaps they construct a federation more deeply grounded in constituent societies.

Perhaps authority moves closer to communities and regions.

Perhaps new political associations emerge.

Perhaps something for which we do not yet possess adequate vocabulary becomes imaginable.

The point is not to smuggle a predetermined territorial answer into an inquiry devoted to recovering authorship.

The answer must remain open because the question must genuinely belong to the people answering it.

Civilizational force majeure ends when sufficient epistemic, institutional and productive capacity has been recovered for that deliberation to occur from a position of meaningful agency.

Who judges when that point has been reached?

Not the state under examination.

Not the author of this proposition.

The peoples within the arrangement, through processes they recognize as their own.

And an interval that never reaches that point has itself become a new inevitability, and must be examined in turn.

Then the peoples within the arrangement can ask:

Knowing who we are now;
knowing who we were before this arrangement;
knowing what was interrupted;
knowing what survived;
knowing what we have subsequently created together;
knowing that we have intermarried, migrated and become entangled with one another and with the wider world;
knowing that alternatives exist—

what do we now choose to hold together?

That is a fundamentally different question from:

How do we keep Nigeria together?

One begins with preservation of the entity.

The other begins with recognition of the people.

Prince eventually reclaimed his name.

But here the analogy reaches its final limit.

The name Nigeria was not ours to begin with.

Our question is therefore more fundamental than whether we should reclaim it.

The question is whether, after recovering ourselves, we would choose it.

Whether we would retain it.

Whether we would transform what it means.

Whether we would constitute something different.

Or whether the peoples who preceded it—and the generations who have subsequently created lives within it—might finally determine together the terms under which they wish to belong to one another.

We do not need to know the answer in advance.

Indeed, prescribing the answer would reproduce the very error this proposition seeks to expose.

Epistemic sovereignty must come before territorial sovereignty.

First, recover the authority to see.

Then the authority to name.

Then the authority to imagine.

Then deliberate.

Then choose.

The entity formerly known as Nigeria declares force majeure over its inherited existence.

Not because the peoples within it have ceased to exist.

But because they existed before it did.

Not because everything created within Nigeria has been without value.

But because what has subsequently been created together cannot retroactively transform the original inheritance into an authored beginning.

Not because the past can be restored.

It cannot.

And not because the future must reproduce the political worlds that preceded colonialism.

It should not.

The declaration is made because a people cannot indefinitely surrender the authority to examine the terms under which they exist.

There comes a moment when endurance must give way to inquiry.

When adaptation must give way to authorship.

When the question is no longer merely:

Can we make this work?

But:

Is this what we would make?

That is the threshold.

This is not a declaration of disappearance.

It is a declaration of presence.

We are here.

Before the borders, we were here.

Before the name, we were here.

Before the categories through which others learned to describe us, we were here.

And after more than a century inside the arrangement, we are not who we were before it.

We carry both histories now:

the inheritance that preceded Nigeria,

and the history we have subsequently made within it.

Neither can erase the other.

Perhaps that is what civilizational force majeure ultimately protects:

the interval between inheritance and consent.

The space in which a people can distinguish what was given to them from what they would choose for themselves.

The space in which memory can speak before policy.

Knowledge before administration.

The human being before the state.

And peoples can encounter one another again—not merely as ethnic groups competing within an inherited structure, but as authors considering what they might deliberately constitute together.

Whatever emerges from that encounter—Nigeria retained, Nigeria transformed, or something not yet imagined—would

possess something the original arrangement could never possess:

their authorship.

Before we continue being what history has called us, then, there is one question from which all the others must proceed:

Who are we?

And once we have recovered the authority to answer it, another follows:

What do we now choose to become?

NOTES

Notes are keyed to phrases in the text. Each carries a grade: *verified* (confirmed in the sources cited), *reconstructed* (well supported but resting on secondary accounts), or *proposed* (the essay's own argument).

“the artist formerly known as Prince” — Prince adopted an unpronounceable symbol as his name in 1993, amid a contract dispute with Warner Bros., and resumed his name in 2000 when the contract expired. *Verified*. Fish & Richardson, “Prince in Perpetuity: Preserving a Legacy through Trademarks”; “The Head-Scratching Story Behind Prince Changing His Name to a Symbol,” *American Songwriter*.

“since amalgamation” — In January 1914, Frederick Lugard amalgamated the Northern and Southern Nigeria Protectorates into a single colony. Nigeria's own 2014 National Conference traces constitution-making to the instruments of that amalgamation. *Verified*. John F. Riddick, “Sir Frederick Lugard, World War I and the Amalgamation of Nigeria 1914–1919” (MA thesis, Western Michigan University); Federal Government of Nigeria, *National Conference 2014 Report* (Abuja, 2014).

“The National Question has returned repeatedly” — Convened respectively by Sani Abacha, Olusegun Obasanjo (February–July 2005) and Goodluck Jonathan (17 March–14 August 2014). Their recommendations addressed states, revenue allocation, the legislature and the system of government. Dates *verified*; the claim that each worked “within the box” is *proposed*. *National Conference 2014 Report*; “Key National Conference recommendations you need to know,” *Premium Times*, 21 August 2014.

“the Eastern Region declared itself the Republic of Biafra” — Some 10,000 to 30,000 Igbo were killed in the Northern Region in 1966. Ojukwu declared Biafra on 30 May 1967, and Biafran forces surrendered on 15 January 1970. Death estimates range from 500,000 to 3,000,000, with starvation under blockade accounting for most civilian deaths. *Verified*; figures vary by source. Toyin Falola, “Nigerian Civil War,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; “Biafra,” *Britannica*.

“Consider the name” — “Biafara” appears on European maps from at least Ortelius’s atlas of 1584. Nigeria renamed the Bight of Biafra the Bight of Bonny in 1975. Map history and renaming *verified*; the reason for the choice *reconstructed* from secondary accounts. “Does the Republic of Biafra still exist?,” *The HistoryVille*; “Bight of Biafra,” *Collins English Dictionary*.

“Consider Luxembourg” — Luxembourg had 681,973 inhabitants on 1 January 2025. *Verified*. STATEC, *Luxembourg’s demography in figures* (2025).

“warrant chiefs” — Under indirect rule, the British appointed warrant chiefs in southeastern Nigeria, an office foreign to Igbo political structures, which dispersed authority among assemblies, elders and associations. *Verified*. The description of such societies as “acephalous” is standard colonial-era and anthropological usage. *Reconstructed*. A. E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria, 1891–1929* (London: Longman, 1972); “Warrant Chiefs, Africa,” Encyclopedia.com.

“the Women’s War” — In November and December 1929, thousands of women in Owerri and Calabar provinces protested the warrant chiefs and the threatened taxation of women. Troops fired on crowds, killing more than 50 women. The colonial record named it the Aba Women’s Riots; Igbo history calls it the Women’s War. The protests led the administration to drop the tax and curb the chiefs. *Verified*. “Aba Women’s Riots (November–December 1929),” BlackPast; “Tax and Women: A Review of the 1929 Owerri Province Insurrections in Colonial Nigeria.”

“China and South Korea” — South Korea industrialized rapidly under Park Chung Hee (1961–79), who ruled in a highly authoritarian manner. China’s reform and opening began in December 1978 under Communist Party rule. Facts *verified*; the characterization “enforced rather than examined” is *proposed*. “Park Chung Hee,” Wilson Center Digital Archive; “China’s 40 years of economic reform,” ABC News, 1 December 2018.