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THE PURPOSE OF NIGERIA

"Our country is the largest single unit in Africa... we are not going to abdicate the position in which God Almighty has placed us. The whole black continent is looking up to this country to liberate it from thralldom." (Jaja Wachuku, Nigeria's first Minister of External Affairs.)

When the fetters of colonisation began to break in the late 1950s and 1960s in Africa, there was a need for a big brother nation to emerge among the newly independent African countries that would lead the way in the political stability and economic prosperity of the newly liberated continent. Due to its size in population and resources, Nigeria seemed to have been a perfect fit for the role. And as soon as it gained independence in 1960, Nigeria began to lead, offering political, military and financial supports to African countries in need.

For instance, arguably, no other country outside the frontline states did more to fight apartheid in South Africa than Nigeria. Quoting Mawuna R. Koutonin, an article on *Katakata* details Nigeria's immense contribution to the South African anti-apartheid struggle and notes that Nigeria was the only nation to set up a National Committee Against Apartheid (NACAAP) world wide. Nigeria also set up the Southern Africa Relief Fund (SAFR) and it helped establish the United Nations Special Committee against Apartheid which it chaired for 30 years. Nigeria's

bold move to boycott the Olympic Games in 1976 and the Commonwealth Games in 1978, as well as its vocal denunciation of apartheid helped shine the spotlight on apartheid until it drew international condemnation and eventually succumbed to pressure in 1994 ("Nigeria's role in ending apartheid," 2017). Nigeria also financially backed South African nationalist parties like African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). Similar support was also given to liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Namibia.

Furthermore, when the flames of civil war engulfed Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, threatening to burn down these countries, Nigeria helped facilitate the creation of Economic Community of West African States Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), providing "an estimated 80 percent of ECOMOG troops and 90 percent of the funding," according to Obi (2009, p.122).

It is easier to understand the purpose of Nigeria by looking at the role Nigeria has played in Africa and beyond since it gained independence in 1960. As the brief account in the preceding paragraphs has demonstrated, Nigeria had and still has a leading role to play in the world and especially in Africa. However, the new millennium and the present has come with fresh challenges that are threatening the very purpose of Nigeria which is to assure the quality of life of Nigerians and to play a leading role in Africa and the world at large.

Insecurity, corruption, crude-oil dependency, unemployment, poverty, gender inequality and violence, decaying educational system, inadequate infrastructure and social amenities, etc. are some of the issues and challenges that require urgent and decisive action from the government in order to ensure that Nigerians live in comfort in the only country they

can truly call home. Of what use is a country that cannot protect and provide its citizens with the basic necessities of life? The purpose of Nigeria, thus, lies in safeguarding the lives and property of Nigerians and also in providing conducive environment for a prosperous and fulfilling life.

Furthermore, as Nigeria has demonstrated in the past its capacity and willingness to play the role of the big brother nation in Africa, Nigeria must also continue in the present. The fact that colonisation has ended in Africa does not mean there are no longer other challenges besetting the continent. Currently, some African countries are engulfed in conflict. The civil war in Libya, which started as an uprising that ousted longtime leader, Muammar Gaddafi, in 2011, still rages on. There is also conflict in Mali, Sudan and South Sudan. The continent also seems to be increasingly susceptible to terrorism. The activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria have spilled over to neighbouring countries; al-Shabaab still holds sway in Somalia and neighbouring countries. Also, the need that has existed since the decolonisation of Africa to ennoble the continent to become great and not just to be known as a continent of third world countries still persists. Indeed, the challenges facing Africa in the present are much more than it faced in the past, and this means that Nigeria has even more to do and a greater role to play now than in the past.

In the face of these many challenges that Nigeria faces today within the country, its immediate West African and African environs and the world at large, the questions that linger are whether Nigeria "can". Can Nigeria be trusted to fulfil its purpose of safeguarding the lives, property and interests of Nigerians? Can Nigeria be relied upon to play a leading role in Africa

as the continent continues to battle intractable and sometimes endemic challenges like poverty and conflict? Would Nigeria eventually be among the top countries of the world along side countries like the USA, China, Russia, Germany and the UK, etc.? — Which would not be too much to ask given its huge population and abundant natural resources. These are questions that define the purpose and existence of Nigeria as a country.

Nigeria is capable. What inspires the confidence that Nigeria is indeed capable of securing the interests and comfort of Nigerians and of becoming a power house in Africa, and a country to reckon with globally is that the not-too-distant past contains proofs of Nigeria's capacity, capability and willingness not only to safeguard the lives and property of Nigerians but also to be Africa's power house. The glory days of the past show that the purpose of Nigeria is to play a leading role in Africa and beyond; and the way it played the role in the past with aplomb inspires confidence that Nigeria is more than capable of such a leading role in the present and future.

The confidence in the capability of Nigeria to fulfil its purpose does not only rest on previous exploits of the country in and outside Africa. There are encouraging indications in the present of Nigeria's capability and its assumption of leadership responsibility. The 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria were relatively free and fair (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020), and have been exemplary to other African countries. Nigeria has also formed a military alliance with neighbouring countries of Niger, Chad and Cameroon to combat the menace of Boko Haram, playing, as would be expected, a very active part in the military coalition. Even as recently as July, 2020, Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, joined other four West African

leaders to seek a lasting solution to the political crisis in Mali. And Nigeria still continues to play a key role in ECOWAS and AU.

In addition, the circumstances that inspired Jaja Nwachukwu's reference to Nigeria's God-given position — which is self-evidently a leading position — are still very much the same. At over 200 million, Nigeria has the largest population in Africa and the seventh largest in the world. Nigeria also has the largest economy in Africa and has abundant natural endowments of crude oil, gas and other resources (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). These are indices which inspire confidence that Nigeria can fulfil its purpose.

In conclusion, Nigeria cannot afford to fail. And for it not to fail in its purpose, Nigeria must look to the exploits of the past to erase any self-doubt about its ability to fulfil its purpose; Nigeria must fight the demons of the present such as insecurity, poverty, corruption, etc. that have so far bogged it down; and Nigeria must harness its huge human and material endowments in order to fulfil its purpose.

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