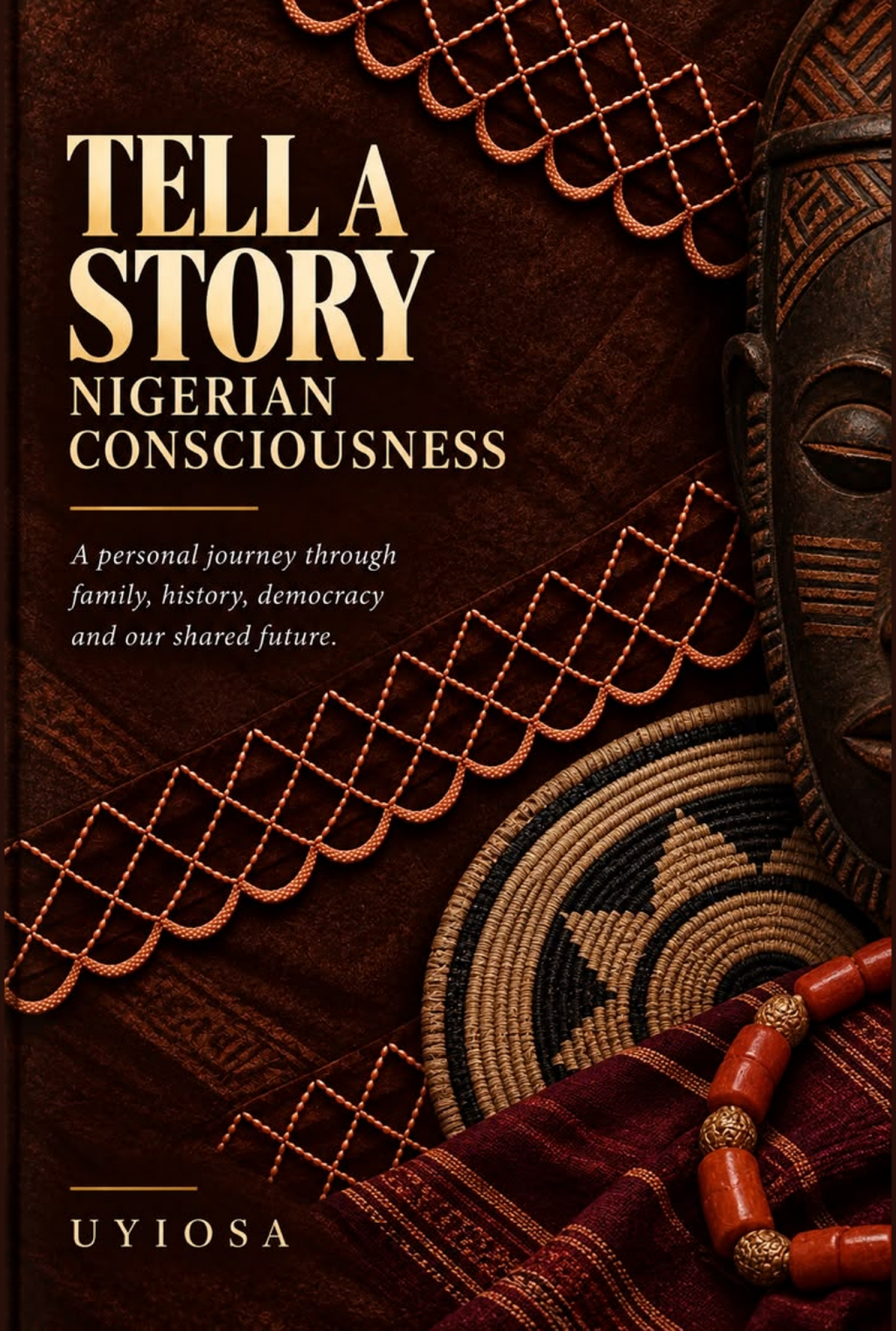

TELL A STORY
NIGERIAN CONSCIOUSNESS
A personal journey through family, history, democracy and our shared future.
UYIOSA

*Come sit with me for a moment. Before we speak about a country, I want us to listen closely to a quieter story, the story of how a mind becomes a mind.*

A story about a country can sound distant until we recognize ourselves inside it. This is a personal journey through family, memory, democracy, and the Nigeria we are still becoming.

*Tell your story. Tell us what you experienced, what you saw, and what you learned. The story does not end here. It returns to you.*

**A PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNEY THROUGH MEMORY, CONSCIOUSNESS AND CITIZENSHIP**

**U Y I O S A**

# TELL A STORY

## NIGERIAN CONSCIOUSNESS

*A personal journey through family, history, democracy and our shared future.*

U Y I O S A

# PROLOGUE

Come sit with me for a moment. Before we speak about a country, I want us to listen closely to a quieter story, the story of how a mind becomes a mind.

I have come to realize that consciousness does not aggressively knock at the door to announce itself. I have also come to believe that consciousness does not merely arrive in grand revelations or extraordinary moments. It slips into us almost unnoticeable: a voice in the morning, a story from a father, the kindness of a mother, the laughter and refuge of siblings, a classroom, a friendship, a disappointment, a loss, quite simple. And perhaps that is where our journey begins, not with an answer, but with a question.

There is something about the call of a story that makes people gather. Story, story, story is more than an opening. It is an invitation to listen, to remember, and to curiously enter a world that existed before the listener arrived. "Once upon a time" opens a door in the mind. Behind it may be a family, a stranger, a mistake, a triumph, or a life that seemed ordinary until someone discovered a lesson inside it.

That is why I return to the storyteller.

I am not asking you to sit beneath me because I possess all the answers. I am asking you to sit beside me. Let us travel back in time together and unravel the making of a mind, how experience becomes thought, how thought becomes

consciousness, and how consciousness begins to act upon the world around it. Let us ask what responsibility means when the self is no longer an isolated thing, but part of something larger.

A story about a country can sound distant until we recognize ourselves inside it. What happens in public life eventually finds its way into private life, and what we learn privately does not remain private for long; it eventually influences the way we behave and experience life publicly. So before I speak about a nation I must speak about formation; the making of consciousness.

Where did my thinking begin? What did I hear before I knew how to question it? What did I experience before I had words for what it meant? And also what did I come to believe before I was old enough to call it a belief. Perhaps the answer begins where many of our stories begin: at home. Story, story, story… Once upon a time… Story, story, story. Once upon a time. I have always wondered what those words did to us before we became old enough to question them.

They were simple words, yet they possessed a strange kind of authority. A room could be noisy one moment and attentive the next. The storyteller had not yet told us anything, yet we already knew that something mattered. Before the printed page, the classroom, the radio and before the screen, there was the gathering. A voice would rise, and people would come closer. The call was not merely an announcement that some historical entertainment was about to begin.

It was an invitation to assemble: Come. Sit. Listen. There is something here that should not disappear.

Perhaps that is where we should begin, not with an answer, but with a gathering. With a voice. With the simple act of one person remembering aloud while others lean in to listen. Because before history becomes something written in books, it is often something carried by people. Someone remembers. Someone tells. Someone listens. And for a moment, what happened before becomes present again.

But what happens when the people who remember begin to disappear? What happens when a generation knows how to search for information but forgets to search the memory of those who lived it? What happens when the stories are still somewhere behind us, but there is no longer anyone close enough to tell them?

I began with these questions because I have come to see memory as more than a place where yesterday is stored. Memory can also be one of the places where tomorrow is prepared. The elder tells the child what happened before the child was born, and the child enters a world he never saw. A person who died before the child arrived can become present, if only for a moment, through the words of someone who remembers him. A place that has disappeared from the map can remain alive in the human mind because someone carried its memory forward. Perhaps this is what makes remembering an act of more than preservation. We do not remember only so that the past will remain behind us.

We remember because what a generation chooses to carry determines, in part, what the next generation will be able to know.

Perhaps history, then, is more than a record of what happened. Perhaps it is a bridge between those who were here, those who are here, and those who are yet to arrive.

And perhaps every generation inherits a responsibility it did not choose: to decide what must cross that bridge.

CHAPTER ONE

# Inherited Memories

Let me take you back to the place where I did not yet know that I was being formed. Home. If you had asked me then what those mornings meant, I might have given you the simplest answer. Today, I hear something deeper in them. What if the stories we hear as children are quietly becoming the questions we ask as adults? Stay with me there for a moment.

I began with a story because every journey of consciousness takes root in what we remember. I kept returning to the beginning because beginnings, in most cases, are deceptive. They make us believe that something starts at the moment we first notice it, when perhaps it had been taking shape quietly.

My own beginning was not a political speech or a book. It was home. Before I had a language for consciousness, I was already being formed by what I saw, what I heard, and what I was told. Much of it looked simple, even ordinary. I couldn't have known why certain things were happening or what they were making of me. That is one of the mysteries of formation: the things shaping us rarely announce themselves as important. They arrive disguised as ordinary moments, repeated until they become part of the person we eventually call ourselves.

I remember the reading at 6 a.m in the morning, the morning devotion… Those mornings were not only about prayer. They were also a classroom of memory. My father would tell stories from his own past, and those stories became lessons for us, his children. He connected his graceful instructions to something he had lived or observed, and the story gave the lesson a life of its own. "Think before you act." "Nobody has two heads." "If he can do it, you can do it." "A good name is better than riches." "Protect the family name." As a child, these were sayings. Looking back, I can see the architecture inside them. Thinking before acting taught me that impulse need not control a decision. "Nobody has two heads" taught me that another person's ability does not make my own ability impossible. "If he can do it, you can do it" gave me courage to regard achievement as a possibility. "A good name" taught me that what we do does not end with us. I did not know then that I was learning something about citizenship. I thought I was learning how to live.

My mother shaped that world through her thoughtful kindness, her affectionate care and a compassion that seemed to reach beyond our family to humanity itself. My siblings became part of that formation too; there was refuge, faith and courage in the bond we shared. No one announced, "This is how your consciousness will be formed." Life simply happened. A father told stories. A mother embodied kindness and care. Siblings became part of the emotional world. And I listened. A child does not only hear the words adults intend to teach. A child also watches what those words look like when they become behaviour. That is why the family becomes the foundation for consciousness. It

is the first place where many of us encounter authority, duty, correction, care, expectation, belonging and responsibility.

Fortunately, years later, I understood that my father's stories were also a form of inheritance. His voice allowed those experiences that happened in his time to keep speaking into mine even in the present moment. A story can travel further than the person who first lived it. And when a story travels, it carries a question for the next generation: what will you do with what you have received? We often think a beginning is the first event, yet perhaps the real beginning is the first question. Before I knew what I believed about my country, somebody had already given me a way of looking at it. Before I knew what history meant, I had already inherited memories that were not entirely mine.

The first story I heard was therefore not innocent. It was the first room in which my understanding was furnished. What if every story leaves something behind in the listener? A sentence becomes an image. An image becomes an assumption. An assumption becomes a belief. A belief becomes a habit. A habit becomes part of a culture. I wonder whether this is how societies are quietly built: not only through laws and monuments, but through the things people repeat until nobody remembers when they first began to believe them.

However, there is a temptation to think that remembering means agreeing with what happened. I do not think it does. If I remember honestly, I must allow the past to surprise me. I must permit it to contradict the version I prefer. I must be able to admire one part of an inheritance and question another. Otherwise I am

not remembering; I am merely protecting a story I have already decided to believe. Perhaps this is why the storyteller matters. A true storyteller does not simply entertain the listener. He places the listener before a world and says, in effect, look carefully. See what these people did. See what they suffered. See what they misunderstood. See what they hoped would happen. Then decide what you will carry.

The older I think about the word memory, the less passive it seems. To remember is to make a choice about what deserves attention. Forgetting can happen naturally, but collective forgetting can also be cultivated. People may become so busy with the present that the past becomes inconvenient. Yet the inconvenient past often contains the questions the present most needs.

I wonder whether a nation can be compared to a person in this respect: a person who remembers only flattering moments eventually loses the ability to understand himself. He becomes a character in his own imagination. Perhaps a country can do the same. It can tell itself only the stories in which it looks noble, and in doing so becomes incapable of seeing the wounds beneath its pride. There is also something beautiful about the fact that a story can outlive its storyteller. The voice disappears, but the words continue in another mind. Perhaps that is one of the quiet victories of human beings over time. We cannot stop death, but we can refuse to let everything disappear with the dead.

I think of the child sitting near an elder. The child may not understand the importance of the conversation. He may even be looking elsewhere. Yet

something enters him. Years later, a phrase returns. A name returns. A place returns. A warning returns. He discovers that the old voice was still travelling inside him. Maybe that is what a generation owes the next. Not certainty. Not a perfect world. A usable memory. Something from which the next person can begin thinking without having to begin from nothing.

And so I cannot treat the story as decoration. It is the first instrument of consciousness.

Before a people writes a constitution, it has already been telling itself stories about justice, courage, belonging and betrayal. Before a nation builds institutions, its people already carry ideas about what authority should mean. If that is true, then changing a society may require more than changing its laws. Perhaps we must also examine the stories that make those laws imaginable. What have we taught ourselves to admire? What have we taught ourselves to tolerate? What have we taught ourselves to call normal?

These questions are uncomfortable because they do not allow me to place the entire burden outside myself. I have begun to suspect that the most dangerous sentence in a society is sometimes, "That is just how things are." It sounds harmless. It can even sound wise. But behind it may be a surrender of imagination. If something is wrong and we decide that its permanence makes it natural, then we have turned habit into destiny. The storyteller therefore gives us something more important than information: possibility. He reminds us that what happened once happened to people who also had choices. They were not

merely carried by history. They acted within it. And if they acted within it, perhaps we must admit that we are acting within ours.

The question that began to trouble me was no longer simply what happened before us. It became: what are we doing now that another generation will one day have to explain? I found that question harder because it removed the safe distance between myself and history. Perhaps every generation imagines itself as the audience. We watch the past, judge it, and move on. But eventually the curtain turns. The future becomes the audience, and we become the story. When that happens, our excuses will sound different. Our intentions will matter less than our consequences.

This is why I want the reader to remain with me at the beginning. I do not want to rush to a conclusion. I want to feel the uncertainty from which the conclusion must grow. I want to ask what I would have believed if I had been born in another time. I want to know which of my convictions are truly mine and which arrived before I was old enough to examine them.

Maybe consciousness begins at precisely that point: when a person notices the distance between what he inherited and what he has chosen. Between the two lies freedom. It may be a small freedom, but it is enough to ask another question. The story, then, is not behind us. It is moving through us. The words we repeat today will become the assumptions of tomorrow. The examples we celebrate will teach somebody what courage means. The things we excuse will teach somebody what is permissible.

I return once more to the circle of listeners. Perhaps the circle was never merely a place where people heard stories. Perhaps it was a small model of a society: one person speaking, others listening, everyone knowing that no single life contains the whole truth. There is wisdom in the circle because nobody can see the entire world from one seat. And perhaps Nigeria needs that kind of listening, not the silence of submission, but the attention required for understanding. Before we argue about what the country should become, perhaps we must become willing to hear the many voices that have already made the country what it is.

Sometimes I stop and ask myself whether stories shape memory. The question matters because it changes the way I look at the ordinary moment in front of me. What once appeared to be a private matter begins to look connected to the life of the wider community. I ask what would happen if we treated this not as an idea to admire, but as a responsibility to practise. Would our choices become different? Would our expectations of one another become more demanding? Would we begin to understand that a country is built slowly, through countless decisions that rarely make the news? I do not have an easy answer, and perhaps that is precisely why the question deserves to remain with me. A serious question does not always close a conversation; most times it opens the next room of thought. There is a temptation to say that stories shape memory. At first this seems obvious, but stories shape memory. Perhaps the lesson hidden here is stories shape memory.

CHAPTER TWO

# Those Who Came Before Us

As I began looking backwards, I discovered that memory does not simply preserve the past, it is not merely a box of old fragments stored away in the mind. It speaks to the present. A memory can disappear from the room and still remain inside the person, like a scent that lingers after a door is closed. That is where I began to wonder whether history is really behind us at all.

What if history is not only something we remember, but something we continue to become? I turn toward inheritance because nobody arrives in the world empty-handed. I was born into a world already in motion. There is another side to inheritance that I did not understand when I was younger: loss. When we lose someone, we do not lose only physical presence. We lose part of the world that existed between that person and us. Shared memories, familiar ways of speaking, lessons and experiences helped form a version of ourselves that existed in relationship with them. That is why grief can feel like losing a part of ourselves. Yet influence does not disappear because a life has ended. A lesson can remain. A story can remain. A way of seeing the world can remain. The person continues, in another sense, inside the people who remember.

That made me think differently about history. Experience does not automatically become understanding. We can experience something and never

examine it. We can suffer and learn nothing. We can succeed and never ask why the success mattered.

Consciousness grows when we begin to look at experience, question it, interpret it, and allow it to change the way we see. The same is true of a nation. A country inherits history just as a family inherits memory. Some parts deserve celebration. Some require repair. Some should not be repeated. To love where we come from does not require pretending everything inherited from the past was right. Sometimes love becomes more serious when it is willing to correct what must be corrected.

We do not have to wait for death before our lives become part of history. While we are alive, our decisions, actions, inactions, relationships, courage and compromises are already leaving something behind. The future cannot see us yet, but it will live with what we leave. The farmer, teacher, worker, nurse, student, parent and ordinary citizen may never appear in a history book. Their choices still matter. Public history is built from private lives. Perhaps that is why we are already living history.

That fact seems ordinary until I sit with it. Nobody asked me whether I wanted the history I received. Nobody asked me which victories I wanted to inherit or which wounds I was prepared to carry. Yet they arrived with me anyway, hidden inside names, languages, customs, expectations and stories. This is what inheritance means to me now. It is not simply receiving property. It is receiving a set of possibilities and burdens. A child inherits what his parents know, but he

also inherits what they did not resolve. A country inherits institutions, but it also inherits fears. A generation inherits achievements, but it also inherits unfinished arguments.

There are elders whose greatest possessions are not things. They possess memory. They know how a street looked before the buildings changed. They know why two families stopped speaking. They remember a journey that no map records. They know what people hoped for when a new political era began. Such knowledge is fragile because it lives in human beings. I sometimes wonder whether we understand what is lost when an old person dies unheard. We say that death has taken a life, but perhaps it has also taken a library. The tragedy is not that the library has closed. The tragedy is that nobody entered it while it was open.

We often describe young people as the future and older people as the past. I am beginning to think this distinction is too simple. The future needs the past in order to know what its choices mean. The past needs the future because memory has no purpose if it cannot be carried forward. Perhaps generations are not separate rooms. Perhaps they are one long conversation. One generation speaks from experience. Another answer from possibility. The conversation becomes dangerous only when one generation decides it has nothing to learn from the other.

I do not romanticise the past. I know that people before us made mistakes. They carried prejudices. They misunderstood one another. They sometimes protected

customs that deserved to change. But this does not make their experiences worthless. In fact, their mistakes may be among the most valuable things they can give us if we are humble enough to examine them. There is a difference between honouring an ancestor and obeying an ancestor. Honour can include examination. Love can include disagreement. To respect those who came before us does not require us to pretend they were incapable of error.

The question then becomes what should survive. Should every tradition survive merely because it is old? Surely not. Should everything modern be welcomed merely because it is new? Again, no. Age does not make an idea wise, and novelty does not make it true. Perhaps inheritance should be treated as an invitation to judge carefully. Keep what gives life. Correct what causes harm. Question what has become a habit. Preserve what carries meaning. Let go of what no longer serves human dignity.

I think this is difficult because people often confuse criticism with rejection. If I question something I inherited, it can feel as though I am rejecting the people who gave it to me. But perhaps the opposite can be true. Perhaps serious questioning is one of the highest forms of respect because it takes the inheritance seriously enough to examine it. A person who never questions his inheritance becomes its prisoner. A person who rejects all inheritance becomes rootless. Between those extremes lies something more difficult: conscious inheritance. The same may be true of a nation. We cannot build a future by pretending nothing existed before us. But neither can we build one by treating

every old arrangement as sacred. The mature nation learns to distinguish memory from obedience.

I think of the people whose names are celebrated and the countless people whose names are not.

History often remembers leaders because leaders leave records. But ordinary people carry nations in ways that rarely become monuments. Their labour, patience, sacrifice and persistence become the invisible foundations on which public history stands. Perhaps we need a broader idea of historical memory. History should not belong only to those who held office. It should also belong to those who raised children, planted food, taught students, repaired machines, crossed difficult roads, built homes and kept communities alive.

When I look at inheritance this way, I see that every Nigerian has received something from someone else. The question is not whether we have inherited. The question is whether we know what we have inherited. A person who does not know what he has inherited can neither protect it nor transform it intelligently. He may destroy something valuable without knowing its value. He may preserve something harmful simply because he does not know how to question it.

Perhaps this is why the story must travel. A generation cannot make wise choices about an inheritance it has never examined. An examination requires conversation. The conversation begins whenever somebody is willing to say,

"Tell me what happened." And perhaps it continues when somebody else is humble enough to answer, "I will tell you what I remember, but you must still think for yourself." I find it difficult to ignore the thought that elders hold fragile archives. Yet when I sit with the question longer, I begin to see that elders hold fragile archives. Then I remember that elders hold fragile archives. The country forces me to ask elders to hold fragile archives. I find it difficult to ignore the thought that elders hold fragile archives.

CHAPTER THREE

# Who Are We?

Then the circle became wider. The child who once knew the world through the intimate experiences of home stepped into school, where the world began to take on other forms: friendship, shared spaces, university, and eventually the culture of work and community life. The word "I" slowly encountered another word: "we." And that small change in language carries a very large question.

If my life touches yours, where exactly does my responsibility end? I turn toward identity because inheritance alone cannot answer who we choose to become. The question of identity appears simple until I try to answer it honestly. There comes a point when the world can no longer be understood only through the word "I." School introduces us to other minds. Friends show us different ways of thinking. University widens the circle. Work introduces new responsibilities and disagreements. Community teaches us that private choices can have public consequences. Religious affiliation can become another part of the social world through which we understand meaning, duty and belonging. Slowly, "Who am I?" becomes connected to "Who are we?"

Nigeria makes this especially visible because our diversity is deep. Tribe, culture, language, history and religious affiliation give different communities their own memories and ways of seeing.

I do not see that difference as a weakness. Difference can be beauty. Difference can be strength. Difference can make the national story richer. The danger comes when what should enrich us is turned into a weapon. Tribe should not become an excuse for hatred. Religious affiliation should not be used to make citizens enemies. Culture should not prevent us from recognising the dignity of another Nigerian.

But a common future also requires participation. I understand the exhaustion behind "Na dem again." People have heard new promises spoken in familiar ways, only to encounter familiar disappointments. I understand the pain behind "Nigeria no go better." But what happens when disappointment becomes a permanent philosophy? If I decide that nothing can improve, why would I participate in improvement? If I stop asking questions, who benefits from my silence? If I stop learning who represents me, stop remembering what happened and stop participating between elections, have I escaped the problem, or have I simply left the space for somebody else to decide?

This is not to place every failure on citizens. The government has responsibilities. Institutions have responsibilities. Leaders have responsibilities. Citizens have responsibilities too. Democracy needs people who participate before the crisis, not only after it. Know who represents you. Know what the office is supposed to do. Know what was promised. Ask what was delivered. Ask why. Listen. Examine. Remember. Then make your decision.

Patriotism is not blind loyalty to the government. It is a commitment to the wellbeing and future of the country. Sometimes love asks difficult questions. And sometimes love says: we can do better.

I can tell you my name, but my name was given to me. I can tell you where I come from, but I did not choose that place. I can describe my culture, yet culture itself arrived before my conscious choice. So what part of identity is inherited, and what part is made? Perhaps identity begins as something received and becomes something chosen. A child receives a language. Later, he decides what that language will mean in his life. He receives a history. Later, he decides whether he will understand it, reject it, repeat it or transform it. This makes identity more demanding than a label. A label can be printed on paper. Consciousness must be lived. To know who I am requires me to know what I value, what I remember, what I refuse, what I hope for and what I am prepared to take responsibility for.

When I apply this thought to Nigeria, the question becomes larger. What does it mean to be Nigerian beyond citizenship? Is there a consciousness that can hold many histories without erasing them? Can belonging be strong without requiring sameness? I do not think unity means that everyone must remember the country in exactly the same way. That would be impossible. Unity may mean something harder: that different memories can exist inside one political and moral community without turning every difference into an excuse for

hostility. A mature consciousness does not need every person to tell the same story. It needs people to be willing to hear stories they did not inherit.

This is difficult because memory can be intimate. What one person remembers as achievement another may remember as loss. What one community celebrates may be questioned. A national consciousness that cannot hold such complexity will always be fragile. Perhaps the answer is not to create one perfect story but to create a shared willingness to keep talking.

The nation becomes stronger when disagreement does not automatically become hatred. I sometimes wonder whether our strongest identity may be our capacity to continue becoming. A country does not have to know its final form in order to know what values should guide its movement. If dignity is a value, then dignity should not depend on tribe, region, wealth or political connection. If justice is a value, then justice cannot be reserved for those who have influence. If human life is valuable, then the ordinary person's life must matter in practice, not only in speeches.

This is where consciousness becomes moral. Once I recognise another person as part of the same human community, his suffering becomes a question for me. I may not be able to solve it, but I can no longer honestly pretend it has nothing to do with me. Perhaps national consciousness is therefore not merely the feeling of belonging. It is the awareness of mutual responsibility.

I ask myself if we have taught enough of this responsibility. We teach young people how to succeed, but do we teach them how to belong? We teach ambition, but do we teach stewardship? We teach how to compete, but do we teach how to build something that outlives competition? A country can have brilliant individuals and still lack a strong collective consciousness. Intelligence does not automatically become wisdom when people stand together. Something else is required: a shared sense that individual freedom exists alongside public responsibility.

Perhaps that is why the question "Who are we?" must eventually become "What kind of people are we becoming?" The second question is more difficult because it is about direction. We cannot change the fact that we were born into a particular history. But we can decide what that history will mean in our hands. We can become prisoners of old divisions, or we can become the generation that understands them well enough to move beyond them. The choice is not simple. Memory does not disappear because we wish it away. Wounds do not heal because we declare that everyone should forget. Perhaps healing requires remembering differently: honestly enough to recognise pain, and generously enough to imagine a future beyond it.

I find myself returning to the individual again.

A nation is an abstraction until a person lives inside it. Nigeria becomes real in the experience of the citizen who wakes up, works, worries, loves, hopes and asks whether tomorrow will be better. If consciousness begins with seeing, then

perhaps our first national task is to see one another more clearly. Not as categories first, but as human beings who have inherited different stories and yet share a future.

And once I see that shared future, the question of identity can no longer remain merely personal. It becomes political, ethical and historical. Who we are determines what we believe we owe one another. The more carefully I look at this, the more I wonder whether belonging creates responsibility. What if the opposite is also true? Belonging creates responsibility. Another thought enters my mind: belonging creates responsibility. I return to the same question because belonging creates responsibility.

CHAPTER FOUR

# The Nation Remembers

Now we arrive at the place where my private understanding meets the public good.

I want you to walk slowly with me here. Take a breath. Gather yourself. There are ideas ahead that may ask more of us than simply agreeing or disagreeing. Because this is not merely an explanation of democracy. It is a question of what happens to a person when the meaning of responsibility is forgotten.

Listen carefully, not only to what I am saying, but to what the silence between these words is asking of us. I turn toward history because the present is filled with the decisions of those who came before. History is often presented as though it were a finished room.

Let me say plainly what democracy means to me. Democracy is not merely elections, political parties, campaign posters, speeches, or the ceremony of choosing representatives. Democracy, in substance, is the continuing relationship between the people and the institutions created to serve the public. It is a representation. It is participation. It is about rights and responsibilities. It is accountability. And at its centre is the rule of law.

I learnt an important part of this before I thought of it as political philosophy. I once stood before my father to thank him for everything. Before I could finish,

he stopped me and asked what kind of father he would be if he did not set a good example. What was I thanking him for? He explained that providing, caring and setting an example were his responsibility and duty as a father. They were not favours. That distinction stayed with me. Responsibility is not a favour.

When a public official performs the responsibility of the office, citizens may appreciate good work, but appreciation does not surrender the right to ask questions. A road built with public resources is not a personal gift from a politician. A hospital built with public resources is not a private favour. A school funded through public revenue is not a personal donation to the children who attend it. Gratitude is not surrender.

Now I want to turn that question toward the institutions themselves. To the executive. To the legislature. To the judiciary. To every institution that keeps a democratic system functioning. Hear the cry of the people. The first demand is the rule of law. Not the rule of personalities. Not the rule of convenience. Not the rule of influence. The rule of law.

When laws are applied selectively, trust weakens. When citizens believe justice depends on who they are, who they know or what they possess, the foundation becomes unstable. At first the damage may appear small. Then people become suspicious. Explanations lose credibility. Institutions lose trust. People begin looking for protection outside systems that should protect them. This is how a gradual fall from order can begin. One exception becomes a habit. A shortcut

becomes normal. A rule is ignored because somebody is important. A public resource is diverted because consequences seem unlikely.

A difficult truth is softened because telling it plainly is inconvenient. Individually, each act may look small. Together, they create a culture. When trust weakens, the survival mentality grows. The question changes from "What is right?" to "How do I survive?" That is dangerous because a society cannot remain healthy if everybody is forced to become a survivor at the expense of becoming a citizen.

Corruption feeds on desperation. Division can feed on it too. When institutions fail to inspire confidence, people may retreat into smaller identities for security. Belonging itself is not the problem. The danger is weaponising tribe, culture or religious affiliation to hide institutional failure. If a road is bad, the question is not which tribe should be blamed. If a hospital is failing, the question is not which religious affiliation the patient belongs to. If insecurity is spreading, the question is not which community can be made a scapegoat. The question is: what responsibility exists, what failed, and what must change?

Democracy is easy to pronounce and difficult to practise. It requires institutions strong enough to resist pressure, citizens informed enough to ask questions, leaders willing to answer them, and laws strong enough to apply without fear or favour. If people lose faith in that structure, indifference and desperation can follow. A society can gradually move away from democratic substance toward a system in which power becomes concentrated among a small group while

public participation becomes ceremony. That warning should be heard before the damage becomes normal.

The people have power. Not the power to destroy. The power to participate. The power to remember. The power to question. The power to organise lawfully. The power to choose. The power, through lawful democratic processes, to hold representatives accountable and remove them when the system provides for it.

The government is not an alien force outside society. Leaders come from us. Institutions are made of people. The story of government is therefore also, in part, our story. "What relationship have we built between ourselves and the power we have entrusted to institutions?" That question does not excuse failure. It makes accountability possible.

We enter, look around, memorise what is displayed and leave. But history does not behave like a museum. It continues to live inside the present. The past survives in institutions, in boundaries, in memories, in family stories and in the expectations people carry. Sometimes it survives in arguments that began before the people arguing were born. This is why I become cautious whenever someone speaks of history as though there is only one possible interpretation.

A historical event happened once, but its meaning can continue to be examined. Facts deserve seriousness; interpretations deserve scrutiny. A nation that refuses to examine its history will eventually repeat its patterns without recognising

them. It may change names, governments and slogans while preserving the same habits underneath.

I think of the political figures whose names became part of Nigeria's story. They mattered. Their decisions mattered. Their disagreements mattered. But history becomes smaller when it is reduced to famous individuals alone. Behind every political moment were millions of ordinary lives. The farmer who cultivated food while political arguments filled the newspapers was part of history. The mother who raised children during uncertainty was part of history. The teacher who continued teaching was part of history. The young person who believed tomorrow could be different was part of history. Perhaps the real history of a nation is the meeting point between public events and private lives.

When I think about Nigeria this way, I see a country that cannot be explained by one sentence. It is a country of aspiration and disappointment, creativity and contradiction, generosity and division, extraordinary resilience and painful failures. It is tempting to choose only one side. To say Nigeria is great and ignore its failures, or to say Nigeria is broken and ignore its possibilities. Both positions are incomplete. Perhaps love of country requires the courage to see both.

If I love something, I should want to know it honestly. Love that depends on blindness is not loyalty; it is fear. The national story therefore has to become more honest. We should be able to remember achievements without turning them into excuses. We should be able to remember failures without turning

them into permanent definitions of ourselves. A nation can be proud without becoming arrogant. It can be ashamed without becoming hopeless. It can remember wounds without making wounds the only language through which it understands itself.

This is where historical consciousness becomes useful. It gives us distance without indifference. We can step back from the present and ask how we arrived here. How did certain expectations become normal? Why did certain institutions become weak? Why did certain divisions become so powerful? What choices created them? What choices might undo them? These questions are not asked to embarrass the dead. They are asked because the living must make decisions. The future cannot be built by a people that has no idea which parts of its past are still operating inside its present.

Perhaps the most mature historical attitude is neither worship nor rejection. It is an examination. We look carefully. We ask difficult questions. We preserve evidence. We listen to more than one voice. Then we decide what kind of future the past has taught us to build. I think this is what it means for a nation to remember.

Not merely to celebrate anniversaries, but to allow memory to change conduct. If history teaches us that division destroys trust, then memory should make us more careful with division. If history teaches us that power without accountability becomes dangerous, then memory should make us more demanding of accountability. History becomes meaningful only when it enters

the present as wisdom. Otherwise it remains information waiting to be forgotten.

Perhaps what troubles me most is that pride and criticism can coexist. I have begun to suspect that pride and criticism can coexist. Could it be that pride and criticism can coexist. One thing becomes clearer to me: pride and criticism can coexist.

## CHAPTER FIVE

And now I must give the story back to you. I have taken you through the rooms in which my own thinking was formed. But a story cannot remain alive if the listener never becomes part of it. So I will not finish by giving you an answer. I will rather place a question in your hands. We have travelled from the first call of the storyteller to the point where the listener must become a storyteller too.

Tell your story. Tell us what you experienced, what you saw, what you learned and what you remember. If you have experienced democracy, tell us what that experience taught you. If an election gives you hope, tell us. If an election disappointed you, tell us. If insecurity changed the way you move, work, sleep, travel or raise your family, tell us how it changed. If you have experienced the health sector as a patient, worker or family member, tell us. Who represents you in the areas that affect your life? What have you seen from them? If a policy or reform changed your education, work, business, family or community, tell us. If the government made a promise and you lived through what happened afterwards, tell us.

Let us tell the story while we are still living it. But telling a story carries responsibility. Do not turn rumour into history. Do not turn hatred into evidence. Tell what you know. Tell what you experienced. Where you are uncertain, say so. Where you have evidence, preserve it. Where another person's experience differs from yours, listen.

Think about the people who represent us. Many of them grew up among us. They went to school. They had classmates, friends, neighbours, teachers, family and work. Somebody remembers them. Perhaps you were his friend. Perhaps you were her classmate. Perhaps you worked with him. Perhaps you knew her before public office. Tell us what you remember, responsibly. What was that person like in primary school? What was that person like in secondary school? What kind of student was he? How did she treat people? What did they do before politics? These memories cannot replace evidence of public performance, but they can add context.

Leaders did not appear from nowhere. They came from society. If we know society better, perhaps we can become more careful about whom we send to represent us. One person's memory may be incomplete. Another person's memory may correct it. A third person may add something neither remembered. Together, if we are honest, we can see more of the picture.

So I call upon the farmer: tell your story. I call upon the politician: tell your story. I call upon the doctor: tell your story. I call upon the nurse: tell your story. I call upon the lawyer: tell your story. I call upon the worker: tell your story. I call upon the student: tell your story. I call upon the child: tell your story. I call upon the elder: tell your story.

And I call upon the older generation: tell us what you remember.

And I call upon those coming after us. Listen, question, and add your own chapter.

I call upon political parties. Tell us what you stand for, and let your actions become part of the record. I call upon lawful associations, justice seekers, good-governance movements and communities. Tell us what you have seen, what you have done and what you are asking for.

And to every citizen: do not believe that your story is too small. Your experience of a school is part of the education story. Your experience of a hospital is part of the health story. Your experience of an election is part of the democratic story. Your experience of insecurity is part of the security story. Your experience of work, farming, business, family and community is part of the country's living record. We are not waiting for history to begin. We are inside it.

Tribe is part of our richness. Culture is part of our richness. Religious affiliation is part of the many ways Nigerians understand belonging and meaning. Our uniqueness should make the national story richer, not poorer. Nigeria is not one page. Nigeria has many pages. The task is not to erase the differences. It is to make the pages belong to the same book.

Let us tell the story. Let us listen to the story. Let us remember the story. Let us question the story. And when we discover that part of the story is wrong, let us have the courage to correct it. The child of tomorrow deserves more than our

complaints. He deserves a record of what we did with the time we were given. What did we protect? What did we repair? What did we tolerate? What did we challenge? What did we leave unfinished? What did we make possible?

These questions belong to all of us. Let us tell our story. Let us make history together while living it. We tell our history while still living it. Let's make history while we still live it.

CHAPTER SIX

# What We Leave Behind

And now I turn towards responsibility, because knowing is not enough. Knowledge does not always send a person into motion. Sometimes it only changes the weight of what they carry. Once something has been seen clearly, ignorance can no longer be worn as an excuse. We may still choose not to act, but we can no longer honestly say we did not know.

This is where I become uncomfortable because responsibility does not allow me to stand outside the country and point at it. It is like standing in a leaking room and speaking about the rain as though it belongs to someone else. I am part of the story I am examining.

It is easy to speak about Nigeria as though Nigeria were another person. Nigeria is failing. Nigeria should change. Nigeria must become better. But the politician is Nigeria. The citizen is Nigeria. The parent is Nigeria. The teacher is a Nigerian. The trader is Nigeria. The student is a Nigerian. The child is a Nigerian.

The country is made visible through human conduct. This does not remove the special responsibility of those who hold public power. It makes that responsibility clearer. Leadership affects millions. A private mistake and a public abuse of power are not morally equivalent. Public office is a trust

because public decisions travel beyond the person who makes them. A bad decision can become another person's hardship. A good decision can become another person's opportunity.

I want the politician to imagine the day after power. Imagine the office is no longer yours. The convoy has moved on. The men who once stood at your door are gone. The applause has thinned into silence. What remains when nobody is standing to greet you? Perhaps the answer is found in ordinary things: the child who can finally read, the patient who was treated with dignity, the worker who could plan a future, the citizen who no longer had to pay someone simply to receive what was already a right.

But then I must ask the citizens to imagine the same day. What remains of our own conduct? Did we become more honest because we demanded honest leaders? Did we become more responsible because we wanted a responsible government? A nation cannot demand from its leaders virtues it refuses to practise anywhere else.

Leadership matters enormously, but culture also matters. Institutions are operated by human beings whose habits were formed somewhere. Perhaps the rebuilding of Nigeria must therefore happen at two levels at once: the reform of power and the reform of expectation. We need leaders who serve, but we also need citizens who refuse to celebrate failure simply because it benefits their side. I do not want political disagreement to become moral blindness. A leader should not become good merely because he belongs to my camp, nor bad

merely because he belongs to someone else's. If justice changes depending on who benefits, then justice has become another instrument of power.

The country deserves something more difficult: consistency. I think about the child who will inherit whatever we decide now. That child will not care which argument sounded clever in our time. He will live with what our decisions made possible. That thought makes politics feel different to me. It is no longer merely about winning an argument; it is about shaping the conditions in which another human being will have to live.

Perhaps this is why we should keep asking: when we make a decision today, what are we leaving for the person who comes after us? Are we making their lives easier to live, or simply passing our unfinished problems into their hands?

If we ask that question often enough, some choices become harder to justify. Waste becomes harder to celebrate. Corruption becomes harder to excuse. Division becomes harder to weaponise. Neglect becomes harder to hide behind speeches. The story is now in our hands. We cannot return to the moment before our choices. We can only decide what the next sentence will say.

So I return to the old circle. The storyteller called people together because something needed to be remembered. Perhaps today the call is different. It is a call to responsibility. And this time the story is ours. We are no longer merely the listeners. We are the people being remembered. I do not know what Nigeria will become. But I know that it is not finished yet.

A finished story cannot change. Ours can. The page is still open. The sentence is still being written, and the hand holding the pen is not one person's. It is ours.

Let the politicians hear this story: power is temporary. The office is borrowed. History is patient. Let the citizens hear it too: the country is not somebody else's problem. It is the place where our choices become other people's lives. Let us remember that patriotism is not merely the loudness of our words, but the seriousness of our conduct. Let us remember that leadership is definitely not possession. It is stewardship. Let us remember that citizenship is not merely entitlement. It is my responsibility.

And let us remember the child who is not yet old enough to understand any of this. That child will one day inherit the country we are shaping now. What will the next Nigerian inherit from us? Will they inherit only our explanations, or will they find evidence that we tried?

Perhaps this is the final question. Not whether we loved Nigeria in words, but whether our lives made it possible for another Nigerian to love Nigeria without having to lie to himself.

And now the story is ours. The voice has passed from the storyteller to us. So has the responsibility. The generation before us has handed us a country still in the making, and the next generation is already waiting to receive what we do with it. There is nothing more to explain. Only a pledge. If I am honest with myself, Nigeria is unfinished.

## Our Pledge

*I pledge to Nigeria my country.*

*To be faithful, loyal and honest.*

*To serve Nigeria with all my strength.*

*To defend her unity, and uphold her honour and glory.*

*So help me God.*

## My Pledge

*I pledge to keep listening, to keep questioning, and to keep learning.*

*I pledge to remember that responsibility is not a favour, that citizenship is not spectatorship, and that my choices are part of the history another generation will inherit.*

*I pledge to tell my story truthfully, to listen to the stories of*

*others, and to do my part, however small, to leave a better inheritance.*

## CONCLUSION

Tell your story. Tell us what you experienced, what you saw, and what you learned. Tell us about the country you envision. What does it look like? What kind of future do you want to leave behind?

The country you envision is not beyond the reach of collective effort. It begins in the choices we make, the way we treat one another, the way we participate, the questions we ask, the laws we respect, the wrongs we refuse to normalise, and the accountability we are willing to demand.

But the vision is yours. What is your contribution? What will you do with the part of the story that belongs to you?

The story does not end here. It returns to you.

*#TellYourStory*

*Let's make history while we yet live it.*