I declare myself yet again an implacable enemy of bigotry, intolerance and all agenda of mind-closure. I join the world in mourning. As for anger, I fear I shall probably rage alone since the public language of diplomacy does not generally permit such emotions. No matter the degree of outrage, the terms of response are usually those of "regret," "sadness," etc. Occasionally - "indignation." I shall therefore settle for a general companionship in misery and attempt to contain my anger --- and importance --- within myself. And yet this should be a season of cheer, when feasting and conviviality follow the period of abstinence and sacrifice and --- hopefully - reflection.

It is the end of the great Muslim fast, and rams are being selected all over the world in preparation for the annual feast of the community. Perhaps those of a more sanguine temper will take consolation in the timing of the damnable event that has just eclipsed the world's cultural horizons, and absorb it as a symbolic partnership, an act of spiritual solidarity - albeit involuntary - with those for whom this has been a season of self-denial. For others, however, in addition to the sheer horror of this incalculable loss to humanity, this event is a signal for apprehension.

I have in mind those who are trapped in embattled zones where intolerance takes constant toll in virtually every facet of life, where the agents of conformism have positioned themselves so impregnably that they even ride roughshod, sometimes, over the majority will.

The Talibans have struck again. But the philistines are on the loose in every corner of the globe, and my own nation will serve us only too painfully as a companion observation post. If there is a rampage of the iconoclastic virus in search of captive space, it will find fertile earth in those territories whose intellectuals have undergone so much indoctrination from erstwhile colonial masters and invaders - with all their religious baggage - that they no longer recollected the origins of their names.

Thus, some years ago in Eastern Nigeria, in the land of the Igbo, a lecture series, dedicated to learning and cultural recovery, was plunged into a cauldron of seething religiosity spearheaded by the Christian intelligentsia. Named the Ahiajoku Lecture Series, this programme came under the censorious eye of this Christianised elite. They argued that, because Ahiajoku is the presiding deity of the New Yam festival and thus a "pagan" deity, it was unfitted to be the masthead for a contemporary exercise in knowledge! Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God explores the visceral intertwining of this festival in the lives of the Igbo people. Among several Yoruba, Tiv and Idoma
peoples also, the New Yam festival is the festival of the year.

The Christians were having none of this however, and the season of military dictatorship provided them the opportunity to instigate a decree forbidding the use of that name in a cultural capacity. They went further. They proceeded to demolish all statues to Ikenga in the state of Owerri, Ikenga being a related nature force that is at the heart of Igbo traditional belief. Only recently, after so many years in limbo, was the series restored, this time under the name Odenigbo, and even this has not passed without a vigorous protest by the born-again Christian agitators. The series, claim our Christian warriors, has been tainted, and Odenigbo in turn denounced as an attempt to resurrect the pagan wolf in an innocuous sheep's clothing.

The Christians' rivals and partners in this rabid, latter-day zealotry, the Muslims, have not been left behind. In a previous contribution, I addressed the incursion of the sharia law into some Nigerian states within a secular nation, but then I was concerned only with the piecemeal rape of the Nigerian constitution, the consequent massacres in Kaduna and some other cities, and the threat posed to the cohesion of the nation. Introduction of the Sharia was not however responsible for the iconoclastic rage that periodically erupts all over the nation, fanned deliberately by religious demagogues and political opportunities. It is the cultural dimension that provides the relevance for today's theme, and the flash point has been the town of Offa, in Kwara state.

The focus is a legendary figure named Moremi. The legend of Moremi is one of the most endearing of the Yoruba race. Finding her people helpless before the incessant raids of a fearsome warring tribe, she schemed on her own to penetrate the secrets of these invaders and put an end to the terror. Her strategy was simple: she allowed herself to be taken prisoner, well aware of the power of her beauty. As she anticipated, that beauty easily captivated her captors, whose leader took her as his war trophy and installed her as his wife. She bore him children. Once she had learnt all there was to know, however, she escaped and returned to her own people. The next time the attackers came, the town was prepared and easily routed their enemy.

Moremi is thus a venerated personage. Shrines and monuments are erected to her. The songs that have been inspired by her legend are numerous, so are the plays, including a musical drama or "folk opera" by the late dramatist, Duro Ladipo. The town of Offa was no exception; a village close to Offa being reputed to have been her birthplace. It is in that town of Offa however, that religious fanatics, this time of Muslim persuasion, have declared war on her memorial. Their life mission now revolves around the defilement and destruction of the shrine, whose existence they declare an affront to their faith. Time and time again, the monument is re-built and, just as often, the fanatics tear it down.

The crusade against Ikenga statues, or the jihad against the shrine of Moremi in some little known towns of Nigeria, may be reckoned as vandalism in a minor key, compared to the destruction of the Buddhist heritage in Afghanistan by the Taliban. However, the valuation of the symbols of any people's culture and history not measurable in ponderousness, antiquity or even aesthetics. It is true that I have no Afghan blood in me nor am I a Buddhist. If the status had survived my demise,
it is doubtful that I would ever have journeyed to see any of those religious figures in Afghanistan that have just been pulverized by heavy artillery, bombs and every form of diabolical instrument ever devised for warfare.

Nevertheless, I consider myself heir to the artistic heritage of Afghanistan in as much as I also consider the legend of Moremi part of the world’s cultural patrimony. Thus, in my reckoning, the Taliban did not merely spit in the race of Buddha, they spat on the face of Moremi and thus, on mine. They pulverised not just the features of Buddha but those of Orisa-nla, Shiva, Ala, Ogun, Ikenga etc. By whatever name or form of godhead is pursued, the Taliban had assulted and defiled the spirituality of all humanity. They have revealed themselves possessed by mortal hubris, not divine pietas.

Not since the conduct of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia has any occupying force done such devastation to the aesthetic and spiritual oneness of the world. It goes, alas, beyond the loss of priceless artifacts in any one zone of infamy or the other. Is it really necessary to make the prediction that, even as this is being written, the sick, fanatical minds of the world, and certainly of my own nation, are already mobilizing their demolition squads to out-Taliban the Taliban. Visual affronts to the purity of a proclaimed faith will now surface everywhere, even where they have never constituted an offence. A season of purges will be proclaimed from church pulpit, Muslim minaret, Buddhist altar, etc, by the belligerent aspirants for the kingdom of God, eager to earn redemption coupons in advance of their mortal call. Nothing but a terror of mortality drives these minds, a sycophantic need to worm their way into the good graces of their chosen deities.

My city of Lagos may wake up one morning to find that the figure of Sango, the demiurge of lightning, coopted by the sculptor Ben Enwonwu to symbolise the essence of electricity, has been blown off its pedestal in the frontage of the electricity power building. Some innovative mind is bound to preach a change of the national currencies in other places because they bear human portraiture. In pursuit of one or more of these competitive acts of spiritual cleansing, humanity - the ultimate impurity - will prove, alas, often brutally disposable. The women of Afghanistan, Algeria, etc, are of course already at the forefront of such disposable impurities, in the case of Afghanistan, backed by the officialdom of a cruel, unconscionable, theocratic state where women have been summarily flogged and even stoned to death for carelessly baring an arm or ankle. Perhaps this is an ignored dimension of the manic rage against Moremi - that she actually dared to have been a woman! When we denounce fanaticism, when we deplore its inhuman face and its tendency towards terminal censorship, we are often confronted by apologists of theocratic power, even those who parade themselves as scholars and intellectuals. They accuse us of hating the religion itself. It is a cheap form of blackmail, truly beneath contempt, one that, unfortunately, works in certain form of fundamentalist discourse called political correctness - the most notoriously compliant being readily found in the United States and Canada.

The extremists of the world listen to this flaccid, apologetic discourse with glee and contempt, seize upon it as open license for repression, an invitation to expand their territory and usurp the critical space that makes human cohabitation an adventure in exploration. We insist however that the passages to truth are myriad and forever open; they are clogged only by the spume of dogmatism. I declare myself yet again an implacable enemy of bigotry, intolerance and all agenda of mind-closure. A plague on the Taliban intuitions, its expressions of the ineffable, and its artistic
enhancements of the environment of nature within or outside the inspiration of religion. Let the voices of the world ring out clearly and unapologetically, and never, and never cease in denunciation of this desecration of the universal shrine of creativity.

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