

REVIEWS AND REVIEW ARTICLES.

1. For Sovereign National Conferences in post-colonial Africa:

A Review Article of,

F. Eboussi Boulaga's, *Les Conférences Nationales en Afrique noire. Une Affaire à Suivre*. Paris: Karthala, 1993.

A Sovereign national conference to examine the national question! This is the clarion call of human rights groups and other concerned groups and individuals in Nigeria. The former military president, Ibrahim Babangida, thought that such a conference would be an exercise in futility. According to him, the two houses of the national assembly, which were recently disbanded by the new military rulers, were already discussing the crucial issues affecting the nation. However, the call became louder after the Babangida deceit and with the return of the military under Sani Abacha. The Abacha junta played into the hands of the supporters of the national conference, or wished to mollify them, by calling for a "constitutional conference". If such a conference takes place, it will be the third under military dictatorship (1979, 1989, 1994). It appears to be the thinking of the new regime that a constitutional conference will be more effective than the national conference. But a "sovereign national conference" may, from experience, be very much different from a constitutional conference. This may become clear in this review article.

In his book, *Les Conférences nationales en Afrique noire*, Eboussi Boulaga treats the issue at length. The book was prompted by the national conferences held in Franco-phone Western and Central Africa (Mali, Niger, Togo, Benin Republic, Congo and Zaire). The on-going crisis in some of these countries shows that holding a conference is not like swishing a magic wand. However, the experience in itself, Eboussi argues, must be recorded and its potentialities for

renascent Africa entrenched in the political culture of Africa as we make the difficult journey towards nation-hood in the modern world.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first part, Eboussi chronicles, in the style of the journalist, the origin of this novelty, the "sovereign national conference", in Benin republic. The Benin assembly appears in many ways to be a rebirth of traditional African pattern of dialogue (African palaver). In the second section he takes the reader through a "philosophical trip", in order to situate the foundations of the national conferences which had taken place in Mali, Niger, Benin, Togo, Congo and Zaire. It is in this philosophical meditation that Eboussi teases out the root causes of the unparalleled cruelty and State terror that characterize post-colonial Africa, and the salvific lessons to be drawn from the national conferences. In an appendix the editors incorporated some texts of the resolutions of the national conferences.

1. The Experience of Benin Republic.

The immediate motivators of the national conference in Benin are the mass of people who have seen through the phoney of Marxism copied from Albania: civil service employees whose salary arrears remained unpaid, students demanding bursaries that are unremitted, teachers, and trade unions established by government. These and many more who were paying the heavy prize for the economic indiscipline of the ruling class trooped into the streets, defied bans on assemblies and demonstrations, and burnt effigies of their president (Kerekou). There were other groups who made an impact, directly or indirectly, on the convocation or the realisation of the aims of the conference. Top on the list of these are Beninois living in exile and religious leaders.

Beninois living abroad or in exile used their connections to influence international finance houses to force Kerekou to make concessions, democratize, and grant amnesty to all exiles. Religious leaders, and religion itself, played a non-negligible role in all the national conferences. With the exception of Niger, all the other conferences were chaired by catholic bishops. In Benin the chairmanship of the conference

by the auxiliary bishop of Cotonou - Isidore de Souza - saved the conference from certain disaster. In addition, the insistent preaching in the churches on pardon, repentance and reconciliation, especially in Benin and Congo, was the crucial means of appeasing a people enraged by the revelations of cruelty, brutality, murders, elimination of opponents, embezzlement of public funds etc., which emerged during the sitting of the national conferences. According to Eboussi, "People never prayed so much in Benin and Congo as they did during the national conferences" (p. 50).

The anti-government uprising whose immediate cause was the unbearable economic conditions testifies to the collapse of the institutions of governance because of the loss of credibility. Kerekou could have followed the advise of the hawks - hard-core communists - to crush the rebellion. But he decided to "invent" the "national conference" which would assemble Beninois from all walks of life to discuss the national question. The expression "national conference" came from Kerekou himself (p. 66). In his opening address to the conference, Kerekou insisted that the assembly was not a tribunal nor should its convocation be interpreted in terms of victor-vanquished. Rather, the conference should set up a political platform for the emergence of a consensus on issues affecting the nation.

What irked the assembled Beninois representing various groups and segments of society [groups whose voice has been more or less suppressed throughout the 17 years of Marxist dictatorship], is how a government with such a stinking record of decay, inhumanity, robbery of the treasury, etc., could behave as if it is indispensable. Consequently the preliminal, though crucial and radical, question was posed as to the power of the national conference. Alexis Hountondji, a medical practitioner with little political experience, proposed the motion to the assembled delegates, "The national conference proclaims its sovereignty and the supremacy of its decisions" (p. 72). The statement was not part of the standing order. The debate was stormy. Supporters of the old regime attacked the motion ferociously. Then, Kerekou himself decided to appear before the assembly to answer its questions: there was no question of his government resign-

ing; but the cabinet could be reshuffled. Besides, what did a person like Nicéphore Soglo do as World Bank administrator to help shore up the economy of Benin which he now feels justified to sit in the conference and judge as a wreckage? It was the critical and opportune time for Soglo, thrown into the limelight by the president's outbursts, to score a major political gain. His response to the president's attack was respectful, moderate, but forceful. He had warned Kerekou about the on-coming economic disaster; had given his advice, but it was not heeded!

The timely intervention of Mgr Isidore de Souza with the president, saved the conference, and brought it to a successful end. A vote was taken on the issue of the sovereignty of the national conference. There were 370 delegates in favour and 17 against. The sovereignty of the conference was to ensure that action followed discourse. At the conclusion of the conference which had been sitting for twelve days, the resolutions were presented to the president. Kerekou, finally, declared his commitment to carry out the resolutions of the conference on February 28 1990. On August 1, 1991, Nicéphore Soglo took the oath of office as the elected president of the republic.

2. Foundational Questions About the Sovereign National Conference.

Eboussi felt the need for a philosophical reflection on the national conference and the issues raised during its sitting so that such a momentous event may not be reduced to the banal, to mere prattle. In words drawn from the world of symbolism he describes the conference as the "revelation of a new spirit, a flashing flare, a luminous signal that the future projects". Consequently, it harbours amazing possibilities for interpreting or unveiling our history (p. 9). The memory of cruelty and inhumanity conjured during the sitting of the conference is described in Marxian terms as the "expression of total alienation and an equally radical protest against such an alienation, its disclosure" (p. 20). Following the prevailing mood of the conference, Eboussi's philosophical meditation on the conference is from the under-side of history: i.e. the

poor, the silenced beasts of burden, the sufferers of incredible human cruelty, those who bore the burden of the State. They are the "radical witness" of a history of unjust, useless and enormous human suffering stretching from the period of slavery through colonialism to the post-colonial period. The reality of a terrible past of which we are accomplices.

The shocking revelations of cruelty during the sitting of the national conferences make one to reflect on the enormity of "man-made" evil in sub-saharan Africa and to wonder at the insensitivity of the African elite to this evil situation. Why is it that the ruling class has to be coaxed and cajoled, pressurized and threatened to respect the human dignity of fellow Africans (fellow human beings)? What controlling ideology undergirds the exercise of power in post-colonial Africa to yield this dividend of inhumanity? To answer this question, according to Eboussi, is to get to the roots of the pathological abuse of power and the cultivation of a State of violence. Eboussi unveils the roots of the pathology in four theorems, and then shows how the national conference is the antithesis of the prevailing ideology. (a) African independence was a ratification and renewal of a situation of heteronomy. Ethnic groups were artificially linked. There was no mutual and creative encounter between the groups. Their medium of encounter was their master's language, interests, and values. Unity became weakness. (b) The idealized heteronomy transforms the colonies into ideological States. The emergent States are not living organisms because the history and traditions of African societies are despised as archaisms. Western patterns of government took flesh miraculously (through incarnation or transubstantiation) in Africa. (c) The emergent fetish State which is out of touch with African reality is structural falsehood and murderous violence. The State defines itself without and against the people. A deep misunderstanding reigns, leading to the destruction of the very basis of human and political life: a distortion of language or speech, taboo or law, resulting in loss of trust or credibility. (d) Consequently, the fetish State is a return to the state of nature. In the situation of domination by the privileged few and the servitude of the majority, barbarism reigns supreme: the rulers ratify and

renew slavery and colonization through their actions. The army is effectively used against the society. With the depersonalization of humans in Africa, any level of social or political evil is taken to be normal. Such an enthronement of structural evil makes the fetish State irreformable. Only a revolution like the sovereign national conference may establish a new beginning.

The institutional crisis of the African State underlines the objective of the sovereign national conference. Eboussi defines its aim as "establishing individuals and heterogenous groups, [artificially] tied together by a monstrous system, into one community of destiny articulated in the form of word and freedom" (pp. 126-127). The realisation of this objective of the national conference would move Africa out of the jungle of idolatry ("statolatry"), falsehood, robbery and murder. It is a restoration of language and word as means of communication, a reestablishment of credibility and belief in political institutions. In the symbolic language of myth and ritual, the narrative of the negative experiences and its ritualization by the assembled national conference is, according to Eboussi, a victory over idolatry, falsehood, etc. As a beginning, a new beginning, the national conference realises within itself its very objective. The following models, derived from the science of anthropology, may demarcate any national conference which may be held or may have been held in Africa: **festivity** - it is a festival of new found liberty; **play** - every beginning contains the ludic element; as play the conference is its own end; **therapy** - the conference is a ritual which symbolically names the malady in order to heal the whole body and save it from instant death; **palaver** - it is the reemergence of the African pattern of dialogue where all have the right to speak; in this way communal problems are resolved and the communal meal ritualizes the reestablished harmony; **initiation** - the conference is a ritual passage through which the generation gap is bridged, the society is rebuilt on the ancestral foundations, individuals are transformed [through a process of healing and expiation as in the Beti So ritual], illusions are banished and each member of the society assumes his or her responsibility.

The story of the national conferences held in Africa is not

recounted simply to inform. Rather it brings out salient factors or attitudes which constitute Africa, attitudes or values which are foundational to the nature of the African, the cultural matrix which must be taken on board as Africa dialogues with modernity. The sovereign national conference shows us the way to modernize without losing our identity: "The actualization of our culture makes us subjects and agents of the universal civilization of which science and technology are the form and necessary condition" (p. 169). In the national conference the core of a civilization, as described in the myth-ritual and ethical characteristics, become active and creative; and the creative encounter of diverse cultures is shown to be possible. Consequently, as Eboussi concludes, the national conference is a project to be continued.

3. Concluding Reflections.

The convocation and assembling of national conferences are not only good for post-colonial Africa but have been shown to be an imperious necessity. The national conference is not seditious. Incumbent governments, no matter how unpopular, are responsible for their convocation. The greatest benefit derived from the national conference is the establishment of the foundations for the emergence of civil society; a society to which the State is subject and which is served by the State. The emergence of such a society where harmony and consensus may reign must be the result of frank dialogue. Problems which beset us must be off-loaded through free speech and just action. As the African native wisdom insists, one either speaks or dies.

In Nigeria, the military and opportunistic political class, do not see government as under civil society, rather government must hold civil society hostage. Instead of a state of law to protect humane living, we have a state of barbarism where monstrous decrees protect the ruling military elite. In Nigeria the military are scared of a national conference to discuss the national question because such a conference forebodes the erosion of the privileges of the few over against the dominated majority. Some believe that to discuss the national question or

to reevaluate federalism may lead to the disintegration of the nation along ethnic or tribal lines. But they overlook the gross injustice of one or two ethnic groups taking others hostage through the monopoly of State or economic power. Our cohabitation has not been based on core values, mutual interests and objectives emanating from frank dialogue where the freedom of each group is respected.

The time is ripe for all segments of the Nigerian society, all regions and ethnic groups, all associations - religious, professional or otherwise - to assemble and discuss the national question, in order to lay the firm foundation for the emergence of a Nigerian nation. Eboussi has shown us in his book that such a conference, whose agenda must vary in accordance with the divergent situations and histories of the amalgamated societies, has the potentialities of carrying Africa forward. Those who oppose it, and deny the voice of the majority because they hold military power, are the real enemies of progress. Progress in Nigeria and in post-colonial Africa must be built upon the firm foundations of truthfulness and liberty.

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2. Olusegun Obasanjo and Akin Mabogunje (editors), **Elements of Democracy**. Abeokuta, Nigeria: ALF Publications, 1992, xi+212 pages.

General Obasanjo's farm is useful to Nigeria for at least two reasons. First, it helps feed a hungry nation. Second, it provides a haven for creative thinking in the service of the nation. **Elements of Democracy** is a fruit of such a creative thinking. It is the outcome of a number of dialogues, by intellectuals of international fame, on democracy. These dialogues took place when Nigerians were trying to make sense of Babangida's program for transition to democracy. The circumstances of the time dictated the topics discussed by the participants in the Farm House Dialogue; informed the