



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 3 · THURSDAY 18 JUNE 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 3

SAY ETHNICITY, NOT TRIBALISM

Europe has as many ethnic groups as Africa. The difference is not number — it is who finds them useful.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 3 — the week the pushback began.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Say Ethnicity, Not Tribalism

A viewer asks about tribalism in Africa and gets the word itself taken apart — then an evening on who is allowed to have ethnic groups, what a five-hundred-year debt could possibly settle, and why the backlash arrived within a fortnight.

The third episode, recorded a week after Session 2, built entirely from viewer questions carried over from Facebook, YouTube and Slido. The moderator puts them; Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi answers. **His opening move sets the tone for the whole hour: nobody calls the Scots, the Welsh or the Bavarians tribes. Europe has the same multiplicity Africa has. The difference is not the number of ethnic groups but who finds them useful.**

An archive edition, recorded 18 June 2020 — two days after President Trump's police-reform executive order, days before John Bolton's memoir was published, and while Covid-19 lockdowns were being lifted across three continents. Events are described as they stood that week.

01 · THE WORD IS DOING WORK

The first question asks about tribalism in Africa. The Professor accepts the substance immediately and rejects the vocabulary. The word, applied to Africa, is meant to degrade: nobody speaks of tribes in Scotland, Wales, Ireland or England. He asks for ethnicity instead, and notes that in teaching he often reaches for nationality, because there are several nations inside a single African state.

Pressed on whether the problem is simply that Africa has more groups, he says no, and answers with Europe. There is no European country without a multiplicity of ethnic groups — they are just called

national groups instead. Switzerland has several. Italy has them. Germany's federal structure is built on them, and the country itself was the merger of them.

The difference he identifies is external. In Africa, ethnic groups have been identified by outside powers as agents through which a country can be destabilised. Nobody, he observes, is going to use the Scots or the Welsh to destabilise the United Kingdom — though he allows, in an aside that reads differently now, that some people say foreign interference in campaigns does happen.

“They will not use tribalism to refer to the Scots in Scotland, or the Welsh in Wales, or the Irish in Ireland. But they use it to refer to Africa.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 · TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

Having disposed of the word, he refuses the comfort that might follow. Racism and ethnic discrimination are two sides of one coin. If Africans are asking Europe and the United States to address racism, they must be prepared to say that Africa has a problem with ethnicity and must address it too.

The standard he sets is symmetrical and unqualified: unjustified discrimination against anyone because they belong to a different ethnic group is unjustified. The remedy is the same in both directions — inclusivity practised in political, economic and cultural life, not as a favour but as a step towards dealing with the thing itself.

Three numbers he reached for

Figures the Professor used to settle three separate arguments in one evening

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POPULAR-VOTE MARGIN

Clinton's lead in 2016 — his evidence that there is no hidden Trump majority to fear.

3

STATES THAT DECIDE IT

Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Michigan. Deny Trump these, he argues, and the rest follows.

500

YEARS OF DEBT

The span he says no corporate donation can settle — the Middle Passage included.

“I don't know whether that debt can really be fully repaid.”

Figures as the Professor cited them on air, in June 2020. The popular-vote margin is his round number; the certified 2016 figure was about 2.87 million.

SESSION 3 · SAY ETHNICITY, NOT TRIBALISM

As argued on this broadcast

Three figures from a single broadcast, each doing argumentative work rather than decorative work.

03 · THE UN'S MOMENT, BECAUSE NOBODY ELSE CAN TAKE IT

Asked whether the United Nations still has a voice, he makes a case that is specific to the moment. Covid has grounded diplomats and turned foreign ministries inward, and yet dangerous issues are surfacing anyway. India and China have a problem. North and South Korea have a problem. The states that normally mediate cannot.

The United States is disqualified twice over on his account — by its own bad relationship with Beijing, and by the failure of its diplomatic opening to Pyongyang. That leaves the Secretary-General, whose job in this window is to step up, mediate and de-escalate while the world reassembles itself. His framing is modest and urgent at once: this is not the moment for a military conflict to break out anywhere.

"This is not a time for us to have a military outbreak of conflict anywhere in the world."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • A DEBT THAT CANNOT BE REPAYED

A viewer asks when the debt is settled — companies are committing substantial money to black education and black business, so when is justice served? He does not accept the premise that it can be closed out. He asks what sum compensates five hundred years; what sum compensates the millions who died in the Middle Passage; what sum compensates Africa for the inter-ethnic conflicts instigated in order to capture people to sell; what sum compensates those who died on plantations in the West Indies and the United States.

He is careful not to convert this into a rejection of progress. Multinational companies moving on their own to correct the effects of past discrimination is real, and he says so. But the ledger does not balance, and he will not pretend that a donation programme closes it.

"I don't know whether that debt can really be fully repaid."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 • THE PUSHBACK, ONE WEEK IN

This is the section where his mood changes, and he says so: since last week he has become a bit disillusioned. Officers in the United States are resigning rather than conceding fault, and in Atlanta, he understands, some are declining to respond to emergency calls for fear of being accused of racism.

His answer to the officers' defence is factual and narrow. In none of the cases that provoked the protests was the person shot carrying a weapon. The law already permits deadly force where an officer's life is at stake, so the argument that reform puts officers at risk does not reach the cases actually in dispute. Nobody, he adds, has asked the police to take unnecessary risks.

He reads the resignations as part of the predicted dynamic rather than as a surprise — the pushback against gains being made not only by black Americans but by Latino Americans too, since the demonstrations were multiracial throughout. Asked whether the protests will fade, he points to Britain, where they already look like a weekend rather than a daily event, and answers that as long as people are still being killed the impetus will still be there.

"The law is very clear: you are allowed to use deadly force when your life is at stake. Nobody said the policeman should take unnecessary risks."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 • GHANA'S INVITATION, POLITELY DECLINED

Ghana had called on African-Americans to come home. He supports the visit and rejects the migration, and the reasoning is proprietorial rather than sentimental. They built the United States — on the sugar plantations of the West Indies and the cotton plantations of the American South — and the profits of that blood and those tears are theirs. Why should they leave? Unless, he adds drily, the white settlers are also going back to Europe and the country is returned to its original occupants.

The comparison he draws is with Irish-Americans returning to Ireland, and with Kennedy and Obama visiting the countries their families came from. Come and see the motherland; do not abandon what your labour produced.

He makes one exception, and makes it warmly. He has met African-Americans in Africa who said that for the first time in their lives they felt at home. Where an individual's sense of identity is completed

by living in Africa, he has no quarrel with it. What he opposes is mass return as a government strategy — a policy, he argues, that would defeat the whole purpose of the history it claims to honour.

“They built the United States. They should stay and enjoy the profits of their blood, the profits of their tears.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 • HOW BIDEN WINS, AND WHY TRUMP IS STILL THERE

Asked whether Biden can survive the Trump campaign machine, he says there is no reason he cannot, and grounds it in arithmetic: Clinton won the popular vote by around three million. There is no invisible Trump majority to be afraid of. What the campaign must do is concentrate — while not abandoning the rest — on the states that decide it: Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Michigan. The reliable states will be there.

He expects Trump to use every available trick, and offers John Bolton's forthcoming memoir as corroboration: advance copies have reached the press, and the core message he takes from them is that the president will do anything to win a second term. Asked why, if all this is known, Trump is still in office, he gives the mechanical answer — impeachment requires a House majority, which happened; removal requires the Senate, which his party controls.

On the police-reform executive order he is openly suspicious, and quotes the proverb about Greeks bearing gifts. He read the announcement and put his defences up. His reading is that the order served two purposes: to let the president claim he agreed something must be done, and to signal to Republicans in Congress the outer limit of what he would accept. The illustration he gives is the chokehold ban with an exception where the officer's life is at stake — which, he points out, is precisely the justification always offered. He backs the Democratic bill without qualification, expects it to pass the House and stall in the Senate, and hopes the negotiation between the two produces something real.

“Beware of the Greeks even when they bring gifts. The moment I heard Trump was going to sign an executive order, my defences were put up.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 • A WOMAN AS VICE-PRESIDENT, AND WHAT THE OFFICE IS WORTH

On Biden's commitment to choose a woman as running mate he is unequivocal — it is about time, and the absence of a woman in either office is itself a mark of discrimination against half the human race. He extends the point to Obama: a movement in the right direction, certainly, but set against how many white presidents and vice-presidents, those two offices should not be a monopoly.

Asked whether the vice-presidency is worth having, given how peripheral Mike Pence appeared, he gives the constitutional answer and then the practical one. Nothing in the Constitution grants the office independent power. But a vice-president is as influential, as powerful and as dignified as the president wants them to be — Gore under Clinton was no pushover, and Biden under Obama was not either. Both were deliberately brought into policy and strategy. Given the respect Obama showed him, he cannot see Biden failing to extend the same.

On Africa he is warm about Biden's record, and specific: he was with us on anti-apartheid, way back in the seventies, when Reagan was president — one of the most vocal American critics of the regime, and one who confronted the Secretary of State of the day directly. He is realistic about what

follows — an American president must look after American interests — but expects African interests to get a proper hearing.

“Your vice president is as influential, as powerful and as dignified as the president wants him to be.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 • ELSEWHERE: BRITISH AID, KOREA, AND REOPENING TOO SOON

On the United Kingdom folding its development department into the Foreign Office — a move already criticised by three former prime ministers — he sees a retrograde step and predicts a reduction in aid, on the grounds that merging departments is a familiar route to cutting a budget. The deeper objection is about clarity: a recipient country needs to know whether it is dealing with development or with political objectives, and mixing the two leaves it bounced between them while the objectives go unmet.

On North and South Korea blowing up their liaison building, he places it in a pattern he expects to see more of: those who want to exploit the vacuum while the world's attention is domestic, testing what they can get away with.

He closes on the pandemic, and on two observations that have aged interestingly. First, that news of an effective treatment for the critically ill had reached some nations early enough for them to stockpile it — evidence, he argues, that the response will be shaped by who can look after themselves. Second, that reopening in the United States, China and Africa is driven not by any belief that the pandemic is beaten but by the impossibility of letting economies collapse and people starve. Only a vaccine ends it, and he cites economists suggesting two to three years before economies return to their pre-lockdown level.

“It's not that they believe reopening will tackle the pandemic. They just want to open up the economy so that it doesn't get destroyed.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- If ethnic difference is universal but only weaponised in some places, the useful question is not why Africa has ethnic groups but what makes a state vulnerable to having them used. What actually confers that immunity?
- He accepts corporate reparative spending as real progress while denying the debt can be settled. Does an unsettled debt make restitution easier to demand, or easier to defer indefinitely?
- Officers resigning rather than accepting reform is a form of veto. What leverage does a public actually hold over a workforce it cannot replace quickly?
- He opposes mass return to Africa because African-Americans built America and should keep its fruits. Does that argument bind anyone who feels no ownership of what was built?
- Merging aid into foreign affairs blurs development and political objectives. Is a recipient country better served by a donor whose motives are clear even when they are self-interested?

Watch Session 3 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

More analysis: tmeinights.com · profbolajiakinyemi.com

One of the earliest broadcasts in the series; the automatic transcript is correspondingly rough and quotations have been cleaned for readability — punctuation and obvious mis-transcriptions only, never sense — with the raw forms listed in the transcript header. The Reagan-era Secretary of State whom the Professor recalls Biden confronting is not named clearly on the recording and has deliberately not been supplied here. The three-million popular-vote margin is his round figure; the certified 2016 margin was about 2.87 million. His claim that no victim in the disputed cases was armed is his characterisation of the cases then in the news.