

RESTRUCTURING OF NIGERIA AND WEST AFRICA:

ROLES OF BENIN AND ITS DIASPORA

BY

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The twenty-first century bears the character of uncertainty. With its rapid changes in technology and radical changes in political orientation in developed and developing countries, the global community appears to be heading for major conflicts. World powers readily apply military means instead of diplomacy to achieve their goals in Europe, the Middle East and Latin America. In these circumstances, Sub-Saharan Africa appear vulnerable and helpless as it contemplates the future. Depending on the geopolitical and ideological decisions she takes, the future holds either political collapse accompanied by re-colonization or wise geopolitical restructuring which facilitates rapid economic development. It is important to emphasize that countries and their leaders of thought should strive to outline realistic models of national development instead of mimicking in a selfish manner the ideological models of developed countries.

In this paper, we explore how the long awaited restructuring of Nigeria and West Africa can create an environment for the emergence of a supra-national polity that is significantly viable, self-sustaining and stable. We shall also identify the colonial and post-colonial factors that have frustrated development and outline an alternative which takes into consideration some of the philosophical ideas and principles of governance developed by the Benin people and its world-wide diaspora. Similar ideas developed by other ethnic groups can also be outlined and synthesized to provide building blocks for the construction of an Afrocentric principle of governance and supra-national economic, political and security system in West Africa.

CURRENT IMPEDIMENTS

In contemporary discussions of African problems, the mistake is often made that the continent is made up of young developing countries that attained independence in the 1960s whose history starts from that period. Such analysis deliberately ignores the following; that these countries were the result of the European "Scramble For Africa" in 1884-1885 during which many previously independent nations were forcibly incorporated into new European Protectorates and colonies. During the colonial period, a few of the nationalities that cooperated with colonial powers were more favourably treated by the invading empire builders. It is in this regard that the principle of indirect rule was introduced not only to reduce the cost of colonial administration, but to reward ethnic nationalities that supported the new system through providing them opportunities to dominate their regions as major ethnic groups. Those nations that militarily opposed colonial rule were either incorporated into regions dominated by the favoured nationalities or dispersed among the initial favoured nationalities of Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the West, and Ibo in the East. It is evident that the principle of linguistic affinity instead of ancestral/historical origin was used to determine majority or minority status of ethnic nationalities. But there was a major difference in the way this principle was applied. In the North, where Hausa was almost raised to the status of "lingua franca", political power resided within the Fulani. While the other ethnic nationalities spoke Hausa, they also retained their local language and culture, and did not identify themselves as Hausa. Similarly, the Hausa ethnic group did not claim Hausa - speaking Northerners as Hausa.

The situation in the 2 Southern Regions was radically different from that in the North. As they did in the North, British colonial Administrators chose Yoruba in the West and Ibo in the East as official major languages. But there was a problem which was deliberately ignored by British colonial Administrators and their post-colonial politicians. There were significant numbers of people in the West who were not Yoruba but were Benin and Edoid, who wanted to maintain their ethnic identities. Then there was the wide-spread ignorance among the Yoruba that any territory East of Ore was Ibo. This was the major factor that led to the creation of the Mid-West Region in 1963. Similarly, they had in addition to the Ibo, several other ethnic groups including Efik, Ibibio, Ijaw, Igala nationalities. Some of these groups agitated for an Ogoja, Rivers and Calabar Region which did not materialise. It is evident that British colonial Administrators sought to make the 2 favoured languages lingua franca. They, in collaboration with religious organisations and educational institutions and deliberately organised migration partly succeeded in border areas. The vast majority of the so-called minorities refused to be re-colonised and assimilated by any of the 3 ethnic oligopolies.

The simplistic assumption that Nigeria is made up of 3 major ethnic nationalities is the major cause of political instability in Nigeria. The irony here is the uncritical acceptance of this fallacy by most of the marginalised ethnic groups themselves who sheepishly attach themselves to one of the 3 ethnic oligopolies. In a ground-breaking research project carried out by the late Professor Ongu Otite at the University of Ibadan in the 1970s, it was established that there were 384 ethnic groups in Nigeria and that some of these ethnic groups were

wrongly grouped with one or the other of the 3 oligopolies simply because they could speak their languages or were colonised by them during the colonial period and beyond.

It is necessary to address the confusion introduced by employing linguistic affinity instead of ancestral and historical commonality. The analysis can be carried out in a number of key ethnic groups whose roots go back thousands of years. Examples are the descendants of the Nok culture, the Kwararafa, States that migrated northward and eastward, the descendants of Uhe and their Idu ancestors who migrated southwards to the Ubini and Igodomigodo and who over the centuries migrated westwards towards the plains of Accra in present day Ghana.

THE BENIN FACTOR

There are important and historically verifiable facts about Benin which are either ignored or forgotten by Nigerian leaders which are critical to the resolution of recent and current Nigerian problems. First, Benin is one of the oldest kingdoms in Africa which has succeeded to preserve important features of its civilization. Second, it traces its history from Lower Egypt thousands of years ago through migration to her present location in the plains of Ubini, when hostile military actions forced her leaders to explore the options of migrating from Egypt. Third, in the process of migration, the people settled for some time in Uhe, a location North-East of Benin before the final move. It was in this location that its ancestral father, Idu lived and died; hence, the annual pilgrimages to Uhe by Obas of Benin until the 15th century when Ewuare I stopped the practice, replacing it with the annual Igue festival. Fourth, Benin has strong ancestral links with other ethnic groups during its Uhe experience

such as the Igala and Olukumi who also migrated from Uhe. Fifth, there also occurred sustained migration of Benin people over centuries to several Edoid nationalities in Southern Nigeria and the establishment of polities such as the Ga nation in the 12th century. Sixth, and most important for this discussion, Benin was one of the few African nations that militarily opposed British colonial rule. It is for this reason that British Empire builders destroyed Benin City in 1897 and introduced policies designed to wipe it off human memory of the Benin Empire which enjoyed global acclaim as a civilized medieval polity. In pursuit of this objective, they placed Benin in the Western Region, grouped some Edoid people in the Eastern Region and joined ethnic groups with Benin ancestral links such as Igala and Igede to be so-called minorities in the North.

The most spiteful act of the British against Benin occurred in 1914 during the Amalgamation Document which joined Northern and Southern Nigeria. Obviously, selection of the signatories of the document was intended to document in an unmistakable manner the final demise of the Benin Empire. Out of the 26 signatories, 20 were British Colonial Administrators, 6 Nigerian Traditional Rulers as follows:

The Sultan of Sokoto, the Emir of Kano, the Shehu of Borno, a private Nigerian lawyer representing the Colony of Lagos and the Obong of Calabar. It is in this way that the Benin Empire was comprehensively marginalised to the status of a "minority" in present day Nigeria.

It is, indeed, ironic the way Benin reacted to these existential tragedies. She did not fight back immediately, rather, it adopted a policy of insularity, largely ignoring colonial organs of governance, it concentrated

its efforts of governance at the ethnic level as it considered British colonial Administrators as hostile to her. It would not be far of the mark to conclude that Benin, more than any other part of Nigeria, was and still remains, a "Kingdom unto itself".

CURRENT INSTABILITY

It is true that the collapse of 1897 adversely influenced the pschre of Benin up till 2026. Disregard for her continued existence by the British was painful enough. But the grouping of Benin into the Western, Northern and Eastern Regions was deliberately done by the British to reduce her from the status of an empire to a minority group. Some have argued that if Benin had allowed other nationalities within its spheres of influence to speak Edo, that language would have become the lingua franca in Lagos (Eko) and many of the Eastern Yoruba Kingdoms which Benin army supported during the Ekiti-Parapo war of the 1880s and 1890s. In that war, Benin supported the Ekiti Parapo composed of Ekiti, Ijesha, Ilaye, Akoko and Ife against the heavy taxation by Ibadan which had by then taken over political and military power from the Oyo Empire. The irony here is that some of the Ekiti Parapo Kingdoms are now among modern Nigerians trying to downplay Edo cultural artistic and administrative achievements in pre-colonial period. It may also be argued that if Benin and Yoruba Kingdoms had avoided wars among themselves in the 19th century, they in alliance would have resisted British colonialism as did the Ethiopians in the same period.

There were other problems in the post-colonial period which alienated and further marginalized Benin. Among them were:

- Attempt to impose 2 southern languages to replace Edo;

- Disunity and greed among some leaders who preferred to work with other nationality groups in the marginalization of Benin;
- Promotion of 3 Nigerian languages with a view to making them lingua francas and languages of instruction in educational institutions;
- Neglect of Benin in the location of infrastructural facilities as well as industries;
- Incipient introduction of thugism and some cultic elements which tended to give politics a bad name and made a sizeable number of the intelligents, a land leader of thought to avoid politics.

The period under military rule brought along its own set of problems, among these are:

Preference of Benin educated youths for non-military professions resulted in few Benins attaining military officer ranks as well as leaders in military government. This was a great disadvantage with regard to the people economically and positioning them to venture into politics

During the period of civilian government under the Nigerian Fourth Republic, problems mentioned above became more serious and injurious to the people. To be specific:

- Money politics became more important and electoral success now depended on what god-father sponsored candidates. What now matters is no longer the competence, character and local acceptability but the sponsoring party and god-father
- Increased ability of armed non-state actors to influence outcomes of elections by means of violence;

- Deliberate attempts to politicize traditional rulers which invariably lead to division in the society and failure to confront problems in a united manner;
- Increasing ability of political parties with the active or covert support headquarters to impose candidates for electoral positions who are either not indigenous to the community or unqualified for office.

There have been other decisions of government that are deliberately aimed at alienating Benin. Among these are:

- Allocation of all key appointments such as minister, commissioner for oil and gas which are located in Benin local governments, party chairman, secretary to the state government, ambassadorial nominees and chief-of-staff to the other senatorial zones which constitute about 40% of the population and less than that percentage of the state's land area. This is in spite of the fact that Benin politicians initiate transfer of power to the other senatorial zones

Probably, the most important developments deliberately introduced to undermine the population are the following:

- Failure to prevent political hoodlums to harass and embarrass international tourists and local academic experts;
- Allowing market agents from other political zones to replace their centuries-old Iyeko system with strong relation to ethic traditional institutions to collect market dues from hard-pressed market woman;

- Government agents and their contractor being allowed to demolish iconic and historically important buildings owned by important Benins under the guise of expanding roads;

Instead of agitating for creation of more states, the federal and state governments give the impression that they don't oppose two portions of Benin in the proposed Anioma and Ijaw states. It is interesting to note that Ughoton, the old Benin port that connected the Benin Empire with Portugal and other countries, and which incidentally is my great-grand-mother Emiokun town is being included in the new Ijaw state without any effective opposition by the state and major political parties.

Finally, the government has planned to remove Edo as well as other so-called "minority languages" as subjects to be taught in Nigerian educational institutions.

ALTERNATIVES

In consideration of the future of Nigeria, given the background of her experience during the colonial period, 3 alternatives may be relevant. First, continuing with the current structure where 3 ethnic mutually antagonistic groups are positioned to establish hegemony over 384 ethnic nationalities is bound to be permanently unstable. As happened in the past, the group feeling marginalized would actively or secretly seek to secede. Moreover, the more desperate favoured group would employ religious sentiments and brute military force to stamp its authority on other ethnic nationalities. Indeed, these 3 groups, by seeking to dominate or secede, will in effect be establishing domestic empires incorporating distinct ethnic nationalities that prefer to remain in Nigeria.

Such a polity is unstable. At a point in the future when the centre can no longer hold, it dramatically collapses in an orgy of bloody violence.

The second option is political disintegration. The main problem is modality for demarcating the new countries. In the North, there could be the problem of separating "new countries" taking into consideration religion, ethnicity and pre-colonial history in the West, the supremacist orientation of the Yoruba will clash with the pre-colonial imperial interest of Benin and several Edo nationalities in the Niger Delta and parts of Eastern Yoruba land and the old Lagos colony.

Moreover, establishing boundaries between the South-West, Kwara and Kogi will be problematic. In addition, creating Biafra will be creation of a new empire made up not only of Igbo, but other nationalities like Efik, Anang, Ibibio, Igala, Ijaw and Benin. We may not be far off the mark if the option of disintegration will be immediately followed by several multi-front civil wars. This option should be avoided by all means.

The third option was considered for a brief period after the second Nigerian coup in 1966. At that time, leaders of thought were formed by the 4 Regions to suggest a suitable constitutional framework for Nigeria. After widespread consultations, the 4 regions agreed that confederation was the best option. A major meeting of delegates from the 4 Regions was fixed for Lagos. On their way to Lagos, the Mid-West delegates met with academics of the Region and after careful deliberation, decided to change its brief from "confederation" to "federation". They rationalized that confederation was too close to separation. However, what the Mid-West meant by federation was continuation of the loose federal system introduced by the 1960 Independence Constitution where the principle

of derivation ensured that the lion's share of revenue generated by the Regions was retained by them. Unfortunately, the other 3 Regions disagreed with the Mid-West, a move that led to the abandonment of a confederal system. The tragedy was that the prolonged period of military rule with its centralized command system extended to the political systems transformed Nigeria from a properly functioning federation to a unitary system where political and economic power was rigidly centralized. The irony of this development was that the Mid-West became the major victim of centralization along with the 81 other ethnic groups that were marginalized in this manner.

The confederation option is designed to correct the injustice done to several ethnic nationalities and return a sense of belonging to them.

To be specific, the confederation option provides for the protection of the rights of all ethnic nationalities in the sense that they have a sense of belonging. It is important to point out this will not be another exercise in sheepish copying of constitutions from other parts of the world. Rather, it is based on rigorous conceptional thought arising from pre-colonial political concepts and the need to avoid wrong orientations introduced during colonial periods and after. Concretely, it is based on the theoretical foundation laid by the concept of Afrocentricity which highlights values and morals distinguishing Africans and her world-wide diaspora from the rest of the world. In effect, the distinctions between left wing, central tendencies and right wing political formations are meaningless as they arise from the historical and economic experiences of foreign countries. In addition, confederation in the African context recognizes the fact that a number of ethnic groups in West Africa migrated from historically verified areas in the past but are now

incorporated in other countries created by European colonialism. Such relationships are strong arguments for political and economic integration into confederalism. There is a distinction from the Western concept of interest groups. African pre-colonial politics like Benin emphasized professional groups or guilds as the major building blocks in social. To them, the distinction between owners of capital (as employers of labour) and suppliers of labour services (as employees) was alien and unreasonable as each member of a community was his or her brother's keeper. There are other factors that distinguish Afrocentric politics from other world systems. According to Benin pre-colonial principles, these are strict impartiality and respect for the land, natural environment and elders.

What then are the major principles of Afrocentric and integratist confederalism? We outline below the major building blocks as it is expected that other thinkers from other parts of Nigeria, and other West Africans have additional relevant ideas in this matter.

To be specific, the most important principles of Afrocentric confederation are the following:

The Importance of the Community

The local community is the basic unit of the political system. Members of the local community derive their existence from one source acknowledged as ancestor. They own the resource endowment of the community and though they are expected to treat migrants justly, such migrants are not expected to take over political control. Local communities with the same ancestor are grouped together to form local government empowered to collect taxes and legal dues a specified (agreed) portion of which is contributed to the next higher tier of government which we may call the state to which constituent local government belong. The function of the state is not to control local governments but to provide missing instructional links for constituent local governments. Similarly, the states will provide an agreed percentage of its revenues to what we may call region made up of ethnically and historically related people, whose revenue may be largely contributed by the states. The functions as determined constitutionally, will be largely limited to provide large-scale projects which are larger than the capacities that can be provided by the states. Under no circumstance will one regional government be in a position to marginalize any of its constituent states. Finally, the regions will integrate into a confederation whose revenues will consists of contributions from the regions and constitutionally agreed percentages of revenues derived from import tariffs and its investment in commercialized profitable enterprises in the confederation. In this fiscal arrangement; the lion's share of revenue is raised at the local government level. It is expected that citizens at the local government level are not tolerant of corrupt politicians. This bottom-up approach to

fiscal arrangement will frustrate attempts of politicians to enrich themselves at the expense of the people.

Other principles for a confederal system include the following:

Qualification for political office

- Only citizens from a particular constituency will be eligible for office. Candidates eligible to contest in their ethnic areas cannot contest in a constituency where he is not an indigene.
- Candidate with criminal records or with unknown source of wealth will be disqualified.
- Candidates who bribe voters will be disqualified.
- Candidates will be required to debate their opponents in many fora for voters to have a good idea of their suitability for office.
- Remuneration of political office holders will not be different from constitutionally agreed salary scale. In other words, politicians will not be allowed to fix their salaries and allowances.
- States will be allowed to introduce social and economic policies in line with resources and fiscal strength.
- Political office holders will be limited to a single and non-renewable term in office. At the executive branch, heads of government will be made up of 3 collegiate members to check tendency to dictatorship or ethnic domination. The Swiss experience in this regard is important. To check collusion of officials with terrorist attack on the country, the principle of regimental area command will be adopted to ensure the officers and men of the armed forces

and other security agencies are recruited from and assigned to their ethnic areas of origin to ensure that security agencies are not politicized to become objects of oppression and partners of non-state actors in targeted areas.

- Governments at all levels will ensure that violent support from the Middle East is blocked from fanning religious and ethnic unrest
- As much as possible, political parties will lose the monopoly of being the only platform for nominating candidates. Alternatively, independent candidates will be allowed to contest for political office. As Nigeria has so far failed to outline the role of traditional rulers in governance, traditional rulers may be advised to avoid getting involved in partisan politics to avoid creating disunity in their domains and frustrate the plans of politicians to use and eventually dump them.

LANGUAGE, LAW AND LAND.

There are three other matters to be considered while planning for confederation. These are language, land and law. Carelessness with any of these will create severe political, social and security problems in the future.

Language is one factor that distinguishes one nationality from another. As we have argued earlier, two distinct ethnic groups may speak one language but are different ethnically. Also, as in the case of the Benin Empire, different ethnic nationalities were encouraged to speak and retain their languages because as the Benin people believed and practice, “a ma zevbo omwa tawiri” (we are lost if we don’t speak our

language). This is why Edoid people in Nigeria speak languages that are closely related to Edo. In view of this reason, it will be wrong for a common language to be enforced for these nationalities. In fact, out of volition, some citizens speak more than one Edoid language. What is required is that parents are sensitized to use their language at home. Governments at lower tiers will ensure that local languages are included in curriculum of educational institutions. Under no circumstances will government at higher tiers be allowed to dictate what languages should be included in curricular and examinations.

In addition, local tiers will have the right to select what other languages should be taught in schools based on commercial opportunities and historical linkages. Moreover, local communities and businesses will be encouraged to operate websites, television and radio stations using local languages to ensure their survival.

Another area requiring urgent attention is land matters. The Land Use Act introduced by the military in the 1970s is the product of a minority report which in its pursuit of uniformity, brushed aside different systems in different parts of the country on favour of a uniform system which promotes land grabbing and associated crimes. Local communities should be allowed to return to their land use systems.

A sad aspect of current land use system is systematic abuse of centuries-old historical sites like the Benin Moat and Walls by outsiders who lack understanding of their security and spiritual nature. Return of appropriate supervision to local authorities will no doubt check abuse and destruction of such sites.

Finally, our legal system which is large based on foreign models need to be radically changed to reflect African jurisprudential system. This is an area that requires urgent research and adoption of Afrocentric principles of justice.

CONFEDERATION OF WEST AFRICA

As we approach the climax of this discussion, we may ask ourselves questions about the connection of Benin, either to the survival of Nigeria or the emergence of a confederation in West Africa. It is now increasingly clear that Nigeria organized as an extremely centralized country in spite of its 384 ethnic nationalities cannot survive. It is ironic to note that the 3 ethnic groups promoted by the British colonial administrators as majorities are also the same that have either threatened to secede or have in the past attempted to secede. The other ethnic nationalities contiguously located some of which with close ancestral links are also the areas that contain Nigeria's most valuable national resources. The nationalities realize that a break up will result in the separation of some closely related nationalities into the seceding new countries. Perhaps the most important reasons against the options of secession and Nigeria remaining as constituted by British Administrators are as follows. First, some of the countries now considered as "minorities" such as Benin were for several centuries not only sovereign nations but also empires whose boundaries extended beyond present-day Nigeria. Second, Benin was not signatory to the Amalgamation instrument of 1914. When the opportunity provided itself for either continuation or discontinuation of Amalgamation in 2014, was

ignored by politicians who considered the elections of 2015 more important than establishing consensus, for confederation, continued existence of Nigeria as a country. Perhaps, the most important consideration for supporting confederation by Benin is the fact that the post-colonial rulers have for whatever reason decided to marginalize her by deft policy actions including the dictatorial ceding of thousand-years old Benin territories to Western and South-Eastern states removing the teaching and examination of the Edo language from school curricula, encouraging and empowering politicians from neighboring ethnic nationalities to control political and land allocation matters, and ranking their monarch below others from other parts of the country without explanation. This is why Benin thinkers are beginning to favour the formation of a West African confederation incorporating willing West African states that have engaged in migration and counter-migration for centuries before. The steps for the establishment of a confederation of West Africa are as follows:

- Willingness and agreement of nationalities to join after free and credible referendum/plebiscite;
- Provision for exit of members who so wish and expulsion of nationalities promoting supremacist or domineering tendencies;
- Re-organization of present countries into specified tiers of government based premodial ethnic origin instead of language;
- Political re-education of the people to promote Afrocentric political, economic, social and moral values;
- Identification of African ideas of government highlighting honesty, social cohesion, impartiality in judicial matters and the acceptance

of political platforms other than political parties as vehicles for electoral choice,

- Limiting participation in politics to exposed public-oriented people with visible meaning of livelihood and banning greed, people who wish to enrich themselves at the expense of the people;
- Eliminating terrorism based on supremacist ethnic, racial and religious jingoism and fanaticism. The confederation will be secular and not promote any religion.

At the international level, the confederation will be non-aligned, promoting friendly relations with countries with significant West African diasporas in the Western hemisphere, prospering Pacific island states embracing merit and technology and successful examples of confederalising such as Switzerland, Australia, Canada and Brazil. Concretely, it will be the bastion of peace and security in the world and a pilot in the direction of political restructuring for other African sub-regions.

CREATION OF WEST AFRICAN CONFEDERATION

The creation of the envisaged confederation of West Africa will require planning and diplomatic negotiation by experts in the sub-region. It will not be as easy as early post-Independence leaders thought. Concretely, it will be a bottom-up affairs as local communities will have to give their consent through persuasion, sensitization and referendum. It will not be compulsory for all nationalities to join as there will be provision for rejection. The process will start by sensitization and education of citizens of the need for such political restricting. It will spell out in clear language the specific stages leading to confederation and their sequencing.

We now specify clear terms for the steps leading to confederation:

1. Establishment of pressure groups in each country advocating confederation whose role will be promoting the need for subregional integrations.
2. Choosing the African Continental Free Trade Association (AFCTA) based in Accra as secretariat and co-ordinator of the project.
3. Prospective member-states set up expert working groups consisting economists, political scientists, geographers and experts in international law to produce working documents on different aspects and levels of political economic and monetary integration. Such country experts from prospective members will hold regular workshops on the nature of confederation envisaged.
4. Before any decision on desirability of confederation is taken, each country now bedeviled with terrorism will undertake to take

seriously the fight against terrorism sponsored by countries in the Middle East with jihadist aspiration of dominating Africa. In this regard, countries now experiencing such attacks, especially the AES and Nigeria, should co-ordinate their fight against jihadists.

5. Countries should expedite action on removal of all trade barriers to ensure that customs union is established as soon as possible.
6. Continental financial institutions such as the African Development Bank, Afreximbank, local investors and diasporas repatriated funds as encouraged to invest in projects that promote sub-regional economic growth and trade integration of monetary, budgetary, banking systems leading to the introduction of a common currency. This highly sensitive and technical aspect of integration should be worked out and implanted by experts
7. Introduction of a common currency leads to the bring together of all confederations formed similar to the AES and the proposed Nigeria after detailed negotiations
8. Specifically the proposed confederation will comprise the AES, restructured Nigeria, as proposed in this paper, the Mano River community comprising Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia, and the Bight of Benin countries comprising Ghana, Togo and Benin Republic

CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed the causes of political and security instability in Nigeria and the role Benin may play not only in exposing the futility of sustaining Nigeria as presently constituted or allowing the country to collapse into an orgy of violence among seceded new countries. The task before us is not easy; it will most likely be opposed by Nigerian politicians now pre-occupied with prospects of their individual ethnicities at the next election, but when their scheming and narrowly focused plans fails, the only viable options will be confederation of the agreed. This aspiration may or may not be realized in our lifetime. When it materializes, West Africa will be governed by men and women whose vision transcends local ethnicities and whose wisdom in governance will attain global esteem

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