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Open Letter to My Father

By Senator Iyabo Obasanjo-Bello, PhD

The great man is he who does not lose his child's-heart

Mencius, Chinese Philosopher of the 4th century

It brings me no joy to have to write this but since you started this trend of open letters I thought I would follow suit since you don't listen to anyone anyway. The only way to reach you may be to make the public aware of some things. As a child well brought up by my long-suffering mother in Yoruba tradition, I have been reluctant to tell the truth about you but as it seems you still continue to delude yourself about the kind of person you are and I think for posterity's sake it is time to set the records straight. I will return to the issue of my long-suffering mother later in this letter.

Like most Nigerians, I believe there are very enormous issues currently plaguing the country but I was surely surprised that you will be the one to publish such a treatise. I remember clearly as if it was yesterday the day I came over to Abuja from Abeokuta when I was Commissioner of Health in Ogun State, specifically to ask you not to continue to pursue the third term issue. I had tried to bring it up when your sycophantic aides were present and they brushed my comments aside and as usual you listened to their self-serving counsel. For you to accuse someone else of what you so obviously practiced yourself tells of your narcissistic megalomaniac personality. Everyone around for even a few minutes knows that the only thing you respond to is praise and worship of you. People have learnt how to manipulate you by giving you what you crave. The only ones that can't and will not stroke your ego are family members who you universally treat like shit apart from the few who have learned to manipulate you like others.

Before I continue, Nigerians are people who see conspiracy and self-service in everything because I think they believe everyone is like them. This letter is not in support of President Jonathan or APC or any other group or person, but an outpouring from my soul to God. I don't blame you for the many atrocities you have been able to get away with, Nigerians were your enablers every step of the way. People ultimately get leaders that reflect them. Getting back to the story, I made sure your aides were not around and brought up the issue, trying to deliver the presentation of the issue as I had practiced it in my head. I started with the fact that we copied the US constitution which has term limits of two terms for a President. As is your usual manner, you didn't allow me to finish my thought process and listen to my point of view. Once I broached the subject you sat up and said that the US had no term limits in the past but that it had been introduced in the 1940s after the death of President Roosevelt, which is true. I wanted to say to you: when you copy something you also copy the modifications based on the

learning from the original; only a fool starts from scratch and does not base his decisions on the learning of others. In science, we use the modifications found by others long ago to the most recent, as the basis of new findings; not going back to discover and learn what others have learnt. Human knowledge and development and civilization will not have progressed if each new generation and society did not build on the knowledge of others before them. The American constitution itself is based on several theories and philosophies of governance available in the 18th century. Democracy itself is a governance method started by the ancient Greeks. America's founding fathers used it with modifications based on what hadn't worked well for the ancient Greeks and on new theories since then.

As usual in our conversations, I kept quiet because I know you well. You weren't going to change your mind based on my intervention as you had already made up your mind on the persuasion of the minions working for you who were ripping the country blind. When I spoke to you, your outward attitude to the people of the country was that you were not interested in the third term and that it was others pushing it. Your statement to me that day proved to me that you were the brain behind the third term debacle. It is therefore outrageous that you accuse the current President of a similar two-facedness that you yourself used against the people of the country.

I was on a plane trip between Abuja and Lagos around the time of the third term issue and I sat next to one of your sycophants on the plane. He told me: "Only Obasanjo can rule Nigeria". I replied: "God has not created a country where only one person can rule. If only one person can rule Nigeria then the whole Nigeria project is not a viable one, as it will be a non-sustainable project". I don't know how you came about Yar'Adua as the candidate for your party as it was not my priority or job. Unlike you, I focus on the issues I have been given responsibility over and not on the jobs of others. It was the day of the PDP Presidential Campaign in Abeokuta during the state-by-state tour of 2007 that Yar'Adua got sick and had to be flown abroad. The MKO Abiola Stadium was already filled with people by 9am when I drove by (and) we had told people based on the campaign schedule that the rally would start at noon.

At 11 am I headed for the stadium on foot; it was a short walk as there were so many cars already parked in and out. As I walked on with two other people, we saw crowds of people leaving the stadium. I recognized some of them as politicians and I asked them why people were leaving. They said the Presidential candidate had died. I was alarmed and shocked. I walked back home and received a call from a friend in Lagos who said the same and added that he had died in the plane carrying him abroad for treatment and that the plane was on its way to Katsina to bury him.

I called you, and told you the information and that the stadium was already half-empty. You told me to go to the stadium and tell the people on the podium to announce that the Presidential candidate had taken ill that morning but the rest of the team, including you and the Vice-Presidential candidate would arrive shortly. I did as I was told, but even the people on the podium at first didn't make the announcement because they thought it was true that Yar'Adua had died. I had to take the microphone and make the announcement myself. It did little good. People kept trooping out of the stadium. Your team didn't arrive until 4pm and by this time we had just a sprinkling of people left.

That evening after the disaster of a rally, you said you had insisted that the Presidential candidate fly to Germany for a check-up although you said he only had a cold. I asked why would anyone fly to Germany to treat a cold? And you said "I would rather die than have the man die at this time". I thought of this profound statement as things later unfolded against me. Then I thought it a stupid statement but as usual I kept quiet, little did I know how your machinations for a person would be used against me. When Yar'Adua eventually died, you stayed alive, I would have expected you to jump into his grave.

I left Nigeria in 1989 right after youth service to study in the US and I visited in 1994 for a week and didn't visit again until your inauguration in 1999. In between, you had been arrested by Abacha and jailed. We, your children, had no one who stood with us. Stella famously went around collecting money on your behalf but we had no one. We survived. I was the only one of the children working then as a post-doctoral fellow when I got the call from a friend informing me of your arrest.

A week before your arrest, you had called me from Denmark and I had told you that you should be careful that the government was very offended by some of your statements and actions and may be planning to arrest or kill you as was occurring to many at the time. The source of my information was my mother who, agitated, had called me, saying I should warn you as this was the rumour in the country. As usual you brushed aside my comments, shouting on the phone that they cannot try anything and you will do and say as you please. The consequence of your bravado is history.

We, your family, have borne the brunt of your direct cruelty and also suffered the consequences of your stupidity but got none of the benefits of your successes. Of course, anyone around you knows how little respect you have for your children.

You think our existence on earth is about you. By the way, how many are we? 19, 20, 21? Do you even know? In the last five years, how many of these children have you spoken to? How many grandchildren do you have and when did you last see each of them? As President you would listen to advice of people that never finished high school who would say anything to keep having access to you so as to make money over your children who loved you and genuinely wished you well.

At your first inauguration in 1999, I and my brothers and sisters told you we were coming from the US. As is usual with you, you made no arrangements for our trip, instead our mom organized to meet each of us and provided accommodation. At the actual swearing-in at Eagle Square, the others decided to watch it on TV. Instead I went to the square and I was pushed and tossed by the crowd.

I managed to get in front of the crowd where I waved and shouted at you as you and General Abdulsalam Abubakar walked past to go back to the VIP seating area. I saw you mouth 'my daughter' to General Abdullahi who was the one who pulled me out of the crowd and gave me a seat. As I looked around I saw Stella and Stella's family prominently seated but none of your children. I am sure General Abdullahi would remember this incident and I am eternally grateful to him.

Getting back to my mother, I still remember your beating her up continually when we were kids. What kids can forget that kind of violence against their mother? Your maltreatment of women is legendary. Many of your women have come out to denounce you in public but since your madness is also part of the madness of the society, it is the women that are usually ignored and mistreated. Of course, you are the great pretender, making people believe you have a good family life and a good relationship with your children but once in a while your pretence gets cracked.

When Gbenga gave a ride to help someone he didn't know but saw was in need and the person betrayed his trust by taping his candid response on the issues going on between you and your then vice-president, Atiku Abubakar, you had your aides go on air and denounce the boy before you even spoke to him to find out what happened. What kind of father does that? Your atrocities to some of my other siblings I will let them tell in their own due time or never if they choose.

Some of the details of our life are public but the people choose to ignore it and pretended we enjoyed some largesse when you were President.

This punishing the innocent is part of Nigeria's continuing sins against God. While you were military head of state and lived in Dodan Barracks, we stayed either with our mum in the two-bedroom apartment provided for her by General Murtala Mohammed or with your relatives, Bose, Yemisi and your sisters' kids in the Boys Quarters of Dodan Barracks. At Queens College, I remember being too ashamed to tell my wealthy classmates from Queen's College, Lagos we lived in the two room Boys Quarters or in the two room flat on Lawrence Street.

No, we did not have privileged upbringing but our mother emphasized education and that has been our salvation. Of my mother's 6 children 4 have PhDs. Of the two without PhD, one has a Master's and the other is an engineer. They are no slouches. Education provided a way to make our way in the world.

You are one of those petty people who think the progress and success of another takes from you. You try to overshadow everyone around you, before you and after you. You are the prototypical "Mr. Know it all". You've never said "I don't know" on any topic, ever. Of course this means you surround yourself with idiots who will agree with you on anything and need you for financial gain and you need them for your insatiable ego. This your attitude is a reflection of the country. It is not certain which came first, your attitude seeping into the country's psyche or the country accepting your irresponsible behavior for so long.

Like you and your minions, it's a symbiotic relationship. Nigeria has descended into a hellish reality where smart, capable people to "survive" and have their daily bread prostrate to imbeciles. Everybody trying to pull everybody else down with greed and selfishness — the only traits that gets you anywhere. Money must be had and money and power is king. Even the supposed down-trodden agree with this.

Nigeria accused me of fraud with the Ministry of Health. As you yourself know, both in Abeokuta and Abuja I lived in your houses as a Senator. In Lagos, I stayed in my mum's bungalow which she succeeded in getting from you when you abandoned her with six children to live in Abeokuta with Stella.

I borrowed against my four-year Senate salary to build the only house I have anywhere in the world in Lagos. I rent out the house for income. I don't have much in terms of money but I am extremely happy. I tried to contribute my part to the development of my country but the country decided it didn't need me. Like many educated Nigerians my age, there are countries that actually value people doing their best to contribute to society and as many of them have scattered all over the world so have many of your children.

I can speak for myself and many of them; what they are running away from is that they can't even contribute effectively at the same time as they have to deal with constant threats to their lives by miscreants the society failed to educate; deal with lack of electricity and air pollution resulting from each household generating its own electricity, and the lack of quality healthcare or education and a total lack of sense of responsibility of almost every person you meet. Your contribution to this scenario cannot be overestimated.

You and your cronies mentioned in your letter have left the country worse than you met it at your births in the 1930's and 1940's. Nigeria is not the creation of any of you, and although you feel you own it and are "Mr Nigeria" deciding whether the country stays together or not, and who rules it; you don't. Nigeria is solely the creation of the British. My dear gone Grandmother whose burial you told people not to attend, was not born a Nigerian but a proud Ijebu-Yoruba woman. Togetherness is a choice and it must serve a purpose.

As for Nigerians thinking I have their money, when it was obvious I was part of the Yar'Adua (government's) anti-Obasanjo phenomenon that was going on at the time. The Ministry of Health and international NGOs paid for a retreat for the Senate Committee on Health. The House Committee on Health was treated exactly the same way. The monies were given to members as estacode and the rest used for accommodation, flights and feeding. While the Senate was on the retreat in Ghana, the EFCC asked the House Committee to return the monies they received for their retreat and asked us in the Senate to return ours on our return which I refused, as it was already used for the purpose it was earmarked for in the budget that year which was to work on the National Health Bill.

The House Committee had not gone on their retreat. I did nothing wrong and my colleagues and I on the retreat did our work conscientiously. I asked the EFCC not to drag my colleagues into it and I am proud I suffered alone. As is usual in a society where people who are not progressive but take pleasure in the pain of others, most Nigerians were happy, not looking at the facts of the matter, just the suffering of an Obasanjo.

As the people that stole their millions are hailed by them the innocent is punished. When the court case was thrown out because it lacked merit even against the Minister, no newspaper carried the news. The wrongful malicious prosecution of an Obasanjo was not something they wanted to report; just her downfall. But it really wasn't about me, it was about right and wrong in society and every society gets the fruit of the seeds it sows.

How do you think God will provide good leaders to such a people? God helps those who help themselves. I have realized that as an Obasanjo I am not entitled to work in Nigeria in any capacity. I am not entitled to work in health which is my training, or in any field or anywhere in the country or participate in any business. I have learnt this lesson well and there are societies that actually think capable, well-educated people are important to their society's

progress. Apparently, unless I am eating from the dustbin, Nigerians and possibly you will not be satisfied. I thank God it has not come to that based on God-given brains and brawn.

When I left Nigeria in 1989 for graduate studies in America, you promised to pay my school fees and no living expenses. This you did and I am grateful for because, working in the kitchen and then the library at University of California, Davis and later, working on the IT desk and later as a Teaching Assistant at Cornell gave me valuable work ethics for life. I wouldn't have it any other way. As a black woman in the early 21st century, I have achieved much and done more than most. My wish is that black girls all over the world will have the capacity to create their lives, make mistakes, learn from it and move ahead.

Moving back to Nigeria, thinking I wanted to serve was obviously a grave mistake but one brought about by the tragic incident of April 20, 2003. This was the day five people were shot dead in my car. The mother of the children was an acquaintance I had met only one day before the incident.

We had attended the same high school and university but she was there ten years earlier than I. She had also studied public health in the UK as I had in the US. It was these coincidences that made us connect on our first meeting and then she decided to visit on the Saturday of the election of 2003 when the incident occurred. I am scarred for life by that incident and I know the mother was too as we both looked back to see two men on each side of my car shooting.

I understand her trauma and her behaviour since then can be judged from that. Nigeria is a nasty place that pushes people to lose their compass. I participated in the campaigns leading to the elections that day, more because this was my first experience of electoral process in Nigeria. Growing up there were no elections and I was too young in the 1979 and 1983 elections. It was interesting to see democracy at work. When Gbenga Daniel who I campaigned for offered me a job, I probably would have declined it, if not for the memory of the dead.

I felt I had to engage in making the country progress and to avoid such incidences in the future. I don't need to tell you or anyone what kind of governor and person Gbenga Daniel is. As usual when I found out, you would not listen to my opinion but found out for yourself. I also campaigned for Amosun for the Senate in 2003. I have had some wonderful Nigerians do good to me, I will never forget the then Minister of Women Affairs, who saw me talking in the crowd at a campaign event and was alarmed and said "bad things can happen to you out there, I will give you one of the orderlies assigned to my office to follow you". This was the police man that died in my car that day. I never really thought bad things would happen to me, I moved around freely in society until that shooting scarred me and I accepted a police detail. I was constantly scared for my life after that.

You called me after your vengeful letter as usual, looking out for yourself and thinking you will bribe me by saying the APC will use me for the Senate. Do you really know me and what I want out of life?

Anyone that knows me knows I am done with anything political or otherwise in Nigeria. I have so much to do and think to make this world a better place than to waste it on fighting with idiots over a political post that does no good to society. That letter you wrote to the

President, would you have tolerated such a letter as a sitting President? Don't do to others what you will not allow to be done to you. The only thing I was using that was yours was the house in Abuja where I left my things when I left the country. I eventually rented it out so that the place would not fall apart but as usual you want to take that as well. You can't have it without explaining to Nigerians how you came about the house?

As I said earlier, this is not about politics but my frustration with you as a father and a human being. I am not involved with what is currently going on in Nigeria, I don't talk to any Nigerian other than friends on social basis. I am not involved with any political groups or affiliation. You mentioned Governor Osoba when you spoke to me, yes I was walking down the street of Cambridge, Massachusetts a few months ago, when I looked up and saw him reading a map trying to cross the street.

I greeted him warmly and offered to give him a ride to where he was going. This I did not do because I wanted anything from him politically but because that is how I was raised by my mother to treat an adult who I really had no ill-will towards. Some said he was part of the people that manipulated the elections for me to lose in 2011. I don't have any ill-will to him for that because I think they did me a favour and someone has to win and lose.

I had told you I wasn't going to run in 2011 but you manipulated me to run; that was my mistake. Losing was a blessing. As usual you wanted me to run for your self-serving purpose to perpetuate your name in the political realm and as the liar that you are, you later denied that it was you who wanted me to run in 2011.

In 2003 I ran because I wanted to and I thought getting to the central government I will be able to contribute more to improving lives and working on legislation that impacts the country. I found that nothing gets done; every public official in Nigeria is working for himself and no one really is serving the public or the country.

The whole system, including the public themselves want oppressors, not people working for their collective progress. When no one is planning the future of a country, such a country can have no future. I won't be your legacy, let your legacy be Nigeria in the fractured state you created because, it was always your way or the highway.

This is the end of my communication with you for life. I pray Nigeria survives your continual intervention in its affairs.