

**INFORMATION FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF TONY MOMOH'S  
"LETTER TO MY COUNTRYMEN"**

**GIDEON UDECHUKWU ISIKA (PhD)**

**Dept. of Mass Communication**

**Delta State Polytechnic**

**P.M.B 1030,**

**Ogwashi-uku**

**Tel No: +2348036735400**

**E-mail: [lordgid63@yahoo.com](mailto:lordgid63@yahoo.com)**

**&**

**EKENE S. SCOTLAND**

**Dept. of Mass Communication**

**Delta State Polytechnic**

**P.M.B. 1030,**

**Ogwashi-uku**

**Tel No: +2347036457081**

**E-mail: [sekenescot@gmail.com](mailto:sekenescot@gmail.com)**

**Abstract**

*The paper examines the critical role of information management in Nation building, especially the imperatives of reinforcing the status quo or existing pattern in order to promote and encourage a gradual move towards change (which incidentally is the mantra of the government of the day), meant to create new shared convictions and values. Tony Momoh's "Letter to my Countrymen" over two decades ago, brings to memory a once radical attempt as it were, at welding the national ambivalence into a holistic frame through information sharing. Using historical survey approach and tenets in Cultural Norms Theory as framework, the paper contends that the Nation would not have been so divided as generally said today, where the values of this piece cherished and preserve.*

**Keywords:** Information, development, analysis, letter, countrymen

**Introduction**

Information is a sub-set that makes up the larger concept communication. It is an exchange that reduces the measure of uncertainty surrounding a situation. (Littlejohn, 1996,p.52, Danesi, 2002,p.13). The 'Oxford Dictionary of Current English' defines information as "facts or knowledge that is provided." Information is, perhaps, the most important ingredient for the effective functioning of the human society. It is through information that knowledge of every other aspect of life is obtained. We cannot possibly think of a world in which there is no iota of information from any source, as such a place would be so stagnant and impossible to inhabit.

In a world that is globalized, it becomes even absolutely necessary to have up- to -date information to pursue all that is necessary, since information affects the quality of decisions especially in a fast moving society. The growth of knowledge which is consistent with the changing nature of technology raises concerns for knowledge based strategies to overcome socio-political and economic challenges in a complex and multi-faceted society as Nigeria.(Ogayi, 2006).

This was why the Federal Government later realized the need for inclusive information by signing the Freedom of Information Act into law. Section 1(1) of the Act. seeks to:

make public records or information more freely available,  
provide for public access and records ... to protect public  
records and information to the extent consistent with public  
interest and protection of personal privacy....

While appraising the pivotal role of the Nigerian media in the development of the nation, Agbaje, (2015, p.1) observes that the press was equally pivotal to the understanding of the Nigerian society through information exchanges. He noted that the establishment of the press was not by accident but premeditated and conceived to facilitate the development of Nigeria through information gathering and usage.

Thus, the import of the position here is to place the issue of information at both private and public spheres in the right perspectives. As eloquently expressed by Rev. Henry Townsend, cited by Coker(1968,p.1), “ My object is to get the people to read, to beget the habit of seeking information by reading”. This attribute of seeking information through reading is, without doubt, the legacy of the foremost newspaper, *Iwe Irohin*.

This paper intends to do a post mortem of some of the thoughts of Tony Momoh in the series of letters he wrote at the time which are very much in line with the spirit of pragmatism of which Philip Weiner says of American democracy:

... a secular democratic individualism that asserts the rights of individuals to live in a free society, without the sanctions of supernatural, theological and revelation or totalitarian authority. The individualism of the American pragmatics is linked to political tradition that goes back to John Locke, and the enlightenment represented by thinkers from all works of life: John Woolman, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman (Onuoha,2001,p.9).

It is this politics of exclusion and misinformation of the society that denies the citizenry the right to understanding the national dynamics that Momoh sees as “no less a cheerless index of Nigeria’s festering sore, too sterile for the flagging tendrils of democracy to flower and blossom into exuberant foliage”. Given the nations’ heritage of failures, it would have been fair if Momoh’s successors in office had continued with this solo campaign; for not even the institutional vestiges of military dictatorship could dare to stop him. The reason that underlie his resolve, form the basis for aligning the views here on the side of this ideological imperative. (Agbedo, 2001, p.109).

### **Information and National Development: a Conceptualization**

The importance of information in decision making has been mentioned in the preceding pages. Not only is decision hinged on transmitted information, it is to an extent instructive to seeking information. But within this context, is the need to understand social reality that places information and national development in implicit relationship.

However, it is not strange for those in other fields of study such as Mass Communication to recourse to Sociology to make sense of issues, including the information they have. This is because Sociology as a field of study is grounded in basic theoretical and empirical cum scientific traditions. In other words, Sociology is engrossed in social life and its processes much as it is concerned with goal attainment that underlies the view of the burgeoning study.

Talcott Persons’ cognitive, cathartic and evaluative approaches that seek to explain the reasons for given social actions by actors and their choices stresses that the ‘cognitive’ captures the ideas, information and data an action in a given social setting or (situation) holds about the objects which are relevant to the goal; the ‘cathartic’ embodies the sum of actors feelings and emotions about the object and his needs, and the ‘evaluative’ component implies the fact that the actors must make choices between alternatives as well as possess certain standards for evaluation and selection of information (See Persons 1951).

Persons also maintain that it is the cognitive domain that stresses the need for adequate information and data, and one can only put the information to use for national good depending on his subjective feelings and fantasies. He maintains that it is not enough to have information, but this must be weighed against the individual's feelings and emotions. As it applies to the study, information is critical to building a vibrant society where every section of the polity needs to put the larger interest of the nation forward by subordinating the individual or group interest to that of the nation as a patriotic duty.

The many inconsistencies and reversals in its development policies and plans make Nigeria a practical example of trial and error. No matter how clearly stated, policies and programmes are hardly pursued to their logical conclusion because of the lack of energy and cognitive values. Changes as in policies are not properly communicated while careful assessment of results is hardly made, and if at all, this is dependent on the whims and caprices of which leader is in power. It is a known fact that those policies which were originally intended to launch the nation into a new phase of development could not be pursued because information necessary to their access were not privy to everyone. This information was only open to a few at the time who took advantage of it for their personal needs and how far this has affected national development remains to be said.

From the above insights, one cannot help to say that the problem of Nigeria's development is not the lack of information or development strategy but partly in the lack of political will and commitment of honest national interest by those who are at the helm of affairs. There is a link between information, knowledge and national development as have been well established here. Whatever way development is seen, a sociological insight into Persons' contribution to Sociology is a sine qua non in our social reformation (Abrahamson, 1990). This is where Tony Momoh's understanding of contending issues is relevant in presenting a holistic national strategy to mend the broken chalis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The cultural norms theory which provides the framework for the study is said to selectively present a tendentious media theme, giving the impression that this is how the audience sees such themes or that they are clearly defined cultural norms of society (can you spot the relationship with agenda-setting theory?) Marshall McLuhan who proposed the theory in 1964, according to Folarin (1998, p.69), sees the media as a double-edged sword from the perspectives of negative consequences as well as the potentially beneficial influences of media uses. Folarin maintains that on the positive side, exponents of the mass media can cite positive changes during social mobilization, while the negative aspects may be due to unintended effects of passing around ideas or information (more information on crime increasing crime related incidence).

Thus, with the cultural domain, referring mainly to the content transmitted, it has not been easy to separate the cultural values and artefacts as well as other cultural value forms such as cultural institutions. For instance, 'official' cultural policies can support different kinds of cultural quality. Although some theories recognize equal rights of cultural expressions and tastes, there have been heated discussions and little agreement on what it should be (Mc Quail, 2006). The principle of cultural (information) quality is likely to be advanced but is not enforceable. The position is that there is rarely a consensus. Even so, information remains the most controlled and regulated element, implying that it is relevant to current and typical social experiences. The theory makes some demands:

- a. That the educational role of information should be utilized to express the best practices in the cultural heritage of the society.
- b. Create originality instead of artificiality and encourage voluntary and self-chosen expressions in moral and social order
- c. The need for media contents to reflect the language and contemporary culture( artefacts, and way of life) of the people which the media serve
- d. Cultural provisions should be diverse, thus reflecting the diversity of demands including the demand for good governance

### **The Context of the Writings**

It is important to explain the circumstance of this writing in order to help the reader who may find some difficulty in situating the issues of the study due to generation gap. As a result of consternation of views in favour of J.S. Cooley Report that recommended two party system of government in place of the non-ideological multi-party structure that was seriously lampooned for constituting a major clog to the wheel of democratic progress of the country under the Babangida administration, Prince Momoh who was then Information Minister touted that since Nigerians were going to embrace the dawn of a new political culture, a reorientation would be necessary.

Writing in the *Nigerian Tribune* of Saturday August 18, 1991, Lam Adesina, former Governor of Oyo State, paints a clear portrait of the multi-party system:

in a multi-party system the leaders of the system strive very hard not only to perpetuate themselves in power but also ensure that power remains within their circle. This is what is militating against the orderly growth of democracy in Nigeria in particular and Africa at large (Adesina, 1991, p.38).

It is not just about perpetuating themselves in office, those who started the political parties (the majority were businessmen, traders, traditional rulers and lawyers), and the open and continued use of party patronage to secure contracts and economic benefits from the leadership groups and their clients illustrate the function of these parties. In an undeveloped society with stunted economic growth and with relatively few opportunities for rewarding investment in the industrial sectors government patronage inevitably becomes a major source of benefit in trade and in other commercial activities. (Balogun, 1980.)

It was this trajectory that the government was about to change with the adoption of two new parties established by the state, where everyone is a joiner. Since Nigeria has never been able to forge consensus for nation building, Momoh's letters soon became the toast of readers, including the popular free readers' association that flock the newsstands for inspiring messages. Beer pallor debates were often triggered by new and insightful issues harping on the need for a renaissance. They were moments of soul-searching with Momoh lending voice to contending issues of unity and national integration akin to the voice of John the Baptist in the holy book.

Not a few Nigerians of age who witnessed this can be consoled. They are those still wondering when the nation will come back to her senses; for it is hard to believe, having found a cure for an ailment, to continue the search over and over again. Prince Momoh was the perfect midwife of this golden era. His eruditions on wide-ranging issues were clear and precise. He told the government to be honest to itself and the people. Although his critics say he wanted to achieve a goal that Nigeria did not qualify for because the people in power are in murky waters, he tried to change the course of the nation's history through writing.

### **The Letter and its Intimacy**

The statement that "the medium is the message" is true of Momoh's letters and why he considered letter writing most appropriate in addressing the issue of good governance which the nation earnestly yearned for. Letter writing, according to him "has a unique impact, depth and intimacy for more than any other medium of communication can offer." Since his audience were ordinary Nigerians- the peasant farmer, the market women, artisans, the local teacher and so on, across the nooks and crannies of the society, it was his view to speak to their mind through his letters. (See p 3.)

Influence by the letter writing culture growing up in his native Auchu community at the time, Momoh recalls how often he used to write letters for his elders in the family and the kind of sense of expectation experienced whenever the reply to those letters were delayed in coming. Writing letter was then the in-thing unlike the present day where people maintain contact through phone and short message services (SMS). It was a culture of writing letters, "where young people try to outdo each other and the smarter writer emerging the toast, in a healthy atmosphere of intellectual intercourse." (p.32.)

Momoh's desire was to infuse the nature of his medium in dynamic and self-evident truths, not a priori truths, based on what the people consider as workable for the society. His re-orientation message was aimed at a kind of development that lends itself to a process in which power and political parties carry out many of the supportive functions (Elekwa, 2001). The letters were meant to present a catalytic impetus for mass mobilization and participation in national development struggle since Nigeria notoriously emerged as a nation where nothing works.

### **Tony Momoh and His Thoughts**

Prince Tony Momoh is the 165<sup>th</sup> child of the late King Momoh 1, of Auchi, in Etsako East Local Government Area of Edo State. Born on 27<sup>th</sup> April, 1939 in Auchi, he attended Government school, Auchi (1949-1954) and Anglican School Okpe (1954). He was later at the Provincial Teachers Training College, Abudu, Edo State and Government Teachers College, Abraka, in the then Western Region now Delta State (1960-61), where he obtained his TC11. He rose to the post of a Headmaster before he proceeded to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and University of Lagos, where he obtained degrees in Mass communication and Law. He commenced his journalism career at Daily Times in 1962 and rose through the ranks to become General Manager, before being appointed Minister of Information and Culture in 1985 by the Babangida administration. He is seen by many as a role model and a detribalized Nigerian who has been able to demystify the grandeur of political office in Nigeria. He talked about the rich and diverse Nigerian culture adding that both the British parliamentary democracy and the American-styled presidential system (which is not exactly what is in practice) had failed in Nigeria because they were not compactable with the local cultures. His optimism that with the establishment of a system of grass-roots democracy in the two party structures, Nigerians would begin to experience gradual improvement in her democratization process did not see the light of the day (<http://www.tonymomoh.com>).

It is based on these attributes that many have come to see him as a leader of men, who knows no bound in his social interactions. As a man often described as one who harbours deep seated desire for national development and integration, he once said: "I plead from my heart that we save Nigeria by looking its problem in the face, dispassionately, and solving them so that we can say that though tribe and tongue may differ in the Nigerian arrangement, in brotherhood we can stand. For, the sacrifice we accommodate today will make the difference between joy and sorrow, for our children, and their children and their children. Let us sow joy for posterity, and our offspring shall never reap sorrow" [www.edoworld.net](http://www.edoworld.net).

It is, however, to the credit of the self-styled Present Ibrahim Babangida who announced his cabinet on September 10, 1985- less than three weeks after taking power for selecting some of Nigeria's glittering stars at the time including Tony Momoh to serve. The quality of his government was reflected by those he appointed into important offices. Momoh, showed in his actions and exemplary leadership style that he was a true prince. Indeed, it can be said that he brought the attribute of selfless service to political office which he did communicate through the famous Letter, where he explained issues of national importance to the ordinary Nigerians. He believes that the only way Nigeria can achieve greatness is for every Nigerian to offer selfless service to the country. (Amuta, 2015)

The two party system of government which was the product of ingenuity of these crops of professionals in that government was meant to put an end to the incessant political gerrymandering and summersaults that had become the lot of the nation. The pair of Momoh and Tonnie Iredia, who was the media head of Prof. Humphrey Nwosu's National Electoral Commission (NEC) did their utmost explaining the process(the A4 and others) that culminated in the freest and fairest election in Nigeria's history, the June 12 election which the Buhari administration albeit belatedly accepted was clearly won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola.

When it became obvious that certain cabal in the government were working very hard towards disrupting the political system in order to perpetrate a sectional agenda, Momoh became distraught because he did not acquire the reputation of lying. Here was a new ideology that was not totally strange to the civilized world and he was there at the momentous period in the nation's attempt to midwife this pattern that held such a promise to Nigerians and some others were there trying to unsettle the situation and making

victims of those who wanted a new Nigeria. Perhaps, this will remain indelible for Momoh and his political co-travelers. It wasn't long before he was replaced by Alex Akinyele.

### **The Expectations of the Letters**

Momoh's "Reflections on Letters to My Countrymen" is a 187 page book published in 1993 by EFUA Media Associate which is why it is not that easy to sketch, given the constraint of space. More significant, however, is its powerful push towards national integration that remains probably the single most powerful influence by an individual on the nation's political mobilization.

Ralph Waldo Emerson had said that "an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man" (Vanguard book of Quotations, p.105). How true of Lee-Kuan-Yew, Former Prime-Minister of Singapore, Nelson Mandela of South Africa, Mao Zedong, Former Chairman of the Communist Party of China and founding father of People's Republic of China, known as 'Chairman, Mao', Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican born political leader, etc. "If these individuals, according to Momoh could cast their long shadows on their nations' affairs at one point or the other why not our people?," Momoh continues:

No one so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state can allow any manipulation of the democratic practice derived from two Greek words, *demos* which means "the people", "the poor people" "the masses" "the mob" and *kratein* which means "to rule". "our leaders pretend not to know that the best government is the one that governs least and that democracy has no alternative form of government in the world..." (pp.54-55).

It is painful to Momoh that the likes of Eme Awa, Humphrey Nwosu and Babangida could not make Nigeria's hall of fame, seeing how their achievements mock them today. This being so, it confirms Pericles statement that third world countries and their democratic institutions see democracy in terms of the end of dictatorship and whatever political system that replaces dictatorship, no matter the tone is erroneously referred to as a democracy.

Nigeria's experience can only be anything but democracy and from how Momoh sees it and how the country has degenerated further from the state it was at the time of this publication, it is obvious that the weakness of Nigerian egalitarianism is being exposed and it is why the country cannot work. Momoh believes that "democracy should not lose its meaning, not even have any continental or national version; and this should have been a food for thought for the present leadership." Momoh says that democracy is not without a prize:

Babangida followed the policy of donating money, vehicles, and offices and so on to local governments, parties, and others in the hope that this would keep them free of influence by the rich and powerful. As Minister of Information I justified the practice that democracy is not as expensive as people are thinking in relation to the alternative. The alternative is to allow one man to dictate to the whole Nigeria because you don't want it to be expensive. If money is not spent on democracy, and a one man dictatorship emerges... it is the same Nigerians who are talking of expensiveness now that will shout that one man is a dictator (p.34).

The myth of democracy is that it is not in the decisions of policies of government as one finds but the rule of the majority- the popular saying that "the majority carries the vote, is the aspect that is of interest to the "pseudo-democrats who continue to play the game of number in Nigeria" (p.89). Thus, the letters seek to improve on the modalities of governance as this affects every other area of the nation's development: poverty level, per capita income, unemployment rate, increased manufacturing opportunities and so on. Some of the consequences of poor leadership on Nigeria's good governance index, according to Momoh is:

a divided, weak and scattered people; sick and impoverished economy; an unjust feudalist oppressors, a dim enclave with opportunities for only a few; a conglomeration in severe bondage (p.91).

In so far as successive leadership continue to play politics with diversification of the economy, “we shall continue to borrow from foreign nations depending on the swing of international oil market prizes.” Momoh avers that he remains a strong advocate of economic diversification considering several opportunities that abound in every community across the length and breadth of the country. He believes that this will make for “inclusiveness as every part of the country will be seen to be making some contribution to the national treasury.” The rhetoric of the political class especially during elections in his view, remains symptomatic of the obvious short-sightedness of the leadership as well as poor exposure and wrong motivation, a factor responsible for good governance being slow to achieve (Marcus, 1985,p.65). p.75

“US have become a Mecca for young and ambitious Nigerian doctors, nurses, lawyers, academics and other professionals hence Momoh queries why his countrymen have refused to ask the question: what makes US tick?” Jaques Marita’s statement appears exact to the point:

As the individual treasures his own personality, so also does a human group which typify America. In this recognition, a nation is defined as “a community of people who become aware of themselves with a kind of introversion to treasure and love one another. And only a beast or a god is made to live a life of solitude without emotional support and being able to recognize that a “collective identity cannot be given on a platter” ( Sobowale ,2019, p.17).

Momoh urges the media-radio, television and newspapers, to be the tool they were supposed to be “for the promotion of national unity and integration.” He tried to procure radio sets that would receive approved broadcasts from federal and state radio stations in order to ensure that information about the country would be adequately disseminated. From these statements, Momoh, no doubt has paid his dues. The dream of a united Nigeria may or not materialize in his lifetime but that is not the issue. As a communicator his sagacious approach to national mobilization and the choice of the letter is legendary. The achievement of an informed Nigerian society, distant as it seems cannot be written without the mention of Momoh and the philosophy be brought to bear on the task of uniting a totally fragmented polity.

That Nigeria has become more divided today than any other time in her chequered history is an understatement. But sad as it may be, posterity has a way of holding his own. The proverbial expression among *Enuani* language speakers from where the researchers hail, has a saying loosely translated to mean that *na o bu na’ okwu onye nwani no’ gana*: “it is not the fault of one who made every effort but could not succeed”, may be a perfect consolation for Tony Momoh. His reflections on how to realize a united and prosperous nation and the plight of the ordinary people that continues to resonate in public discourse will ever remain his *magnum opus*.

## **Conclusion**

Nigeria has become in recent years one of the keystones of collective national struggle that has received the greatest attention in flood of reports and scholarly documents. The fact is, however, that the “struggle” for all intents and purposes has been by far more related to the nation’s diversity than the secrets of achieving rapid development for the people. It is the baffling that the nation enjoys by being so divided that Momoh attacks in the series of letters he wrote to the people he calls “his countrymen.”

A collection of the contending issues of good governance, is restated in self-evident truth in this piece-why Nigeria may continue in her circular movement (on the barber’s chair) unless she is ready to break this jinx by taking a look at the nation’s problems in the face. While it is difficult to know to what extent his letters might have impacted on the audience, there is no doubt that establishing the missing links in the process, as well as the power dynamics that has failed to offer the nation the much needed relief is of grave concern.

Since information is important in Momoh's view in working around this snarly path and its link with knowledge and national development cannot be over emphasized, it remains improbable much so that the insight that Momoh's letters offer is what has made this piece of document a worthwhile study. The optimism is that the ordinary people who are the audience of the letters would one day heave a sigh of relief and the dream of the nation realized. Can this be? Who knows!

### **References**

- Abrahamson, M.(1990).*Sociological theory: An introduction to concepts, issues, and research*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall p.12
- Agbaje, A. (1992). *The Nigerian press hegemony and the social construction of legitimacy*. 1960-1983. New York: Edeom Mellin
- Agbedo, C.U. (2001). Language as instrument of exclusion: Implications for democratization process in Nigeria in *American pragmatism: An African viewpoint*: Nsukka: AP Express Publishing Company.109
- Anugwom, .E.(1997). Varieties of social imaginations: The place of structural fundamentalism in *The development of sociology*, Nsukka: University of Nigeria
- Amuta, P. (2015). ) “Now more than ever Nigeria needs another Babangida” in *Sunday Vanguard*, Feb.24, p. 17
- Coker,I(1968). *Landmarks of the Nigerian press*. Lagos : international press.
- Danesi, M. (2002). *Understanding media semiotics*, London: Anold
- Littlejohn, S. (1996).*Theories of human communication* Toronto: Wads Worth Publishing Company
- Marcus, H.(1985). *An essay in liberation* Houston: Beacon Press
- Momoh, T. (1993) . *Reflections on letters to my countrymen* Lagos: EFUA Media Associates Ltd.
- Momoh, T. (1993). *Experiment with disintegration*. Lagos: EFUA Media Associates Ltd.
- Ogayi, J.O. (2016). *Mass media organization and structure*. Enugu: Rhyce Kerex Publication.
- Onuoha, J.(2001). *Nigeria: A nation without philosophical foundation in American pragmatism: An African viewpoint*: Nsukka: AP Express Publishing Company
- Person, T. (1951). *The social system* New York: Free Press
- Sobowale E. (2019) ) ) “ A nation is a community of people who become aware of themselves” in *Sunday Vanguard*, Feb.2, p. 17
- Vanguard* Book of Quotationsp.105
- <http://www.tonymomoh.com>( Retrieved, 23/2/19)
- [www.edoworld.net](http://www.edoworld.net)