

THE BEGINNING

I talk about my experiences in places in this book. But this book is not about me. It is about you. Or, better still, it is about us. You and me. But, just before I talk about you, permit me to say a few things about me.

I am Allwell Uwazuruike. I am the second child of my parents. I am a lecturer (or teacher, whichever you prefer). I trained as a lawyer. I also like to think of myself as a Doctor of Laws—that is what is written on my PhD certificate.

Why did I write this book? You may ask. I will answer that question shortly. You see, I am not quite used to writing books of this sort. I usually write ‘serious’ books. Books that professors and other doctors of law analyse. I also write articles—or journal articles as they are called. (I cannot begin to explain to you what those mean and what they are used for. I am not even sure I know the answers.) I have also written some fiction in the past—short stories here and there. But never a book of this sort.

Permit me, however, to begin with a background. I’ve spent most of my life studying human rights. My father was, and still is, a human rights activist of sorts. His is a peculiar sort of activism: freedom fighting. Like Mahatma Gandhi. Like Nelson Mandela.

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Like Odumegwu Ojukwu. These three names, these three persons are his greatest heroes. One day, I will write a book about my father. But this particular one is not about him. It is about all of us.

Very much like his heroes, my father, the freedom fighter, never really had much freedom in the early years of his fight for Biafran independence. I grew up, as a child, to the familiar scene of the police breaking into our family home and bundling my father and, sometimes, even my mother away. If I have time, I'll speak a bit about these arrests later on in this book. Otherwise, I will speak about them in another book.

As I progressed through secondary school, I nurtured the idea of becoming a lawyer. Maybe it was because my father was a lawyer. Or maybe I was just intrigued by the intricacies of the cross-examination process as depicted in movies. Whichever was the case, I always had concerns about justice and human rights at the back of my young mind.

I enrolled into the university to study law and was called to the Nigerian bar in 2010. From that point up to the start of 2012, I worked as a solicitor and barrister with Festus Keyamo, one of the country's leading activists. Even though Keyamo's activism was of a different kind—speaking up against government abuses as opposed to freedom fighting—he too tasted prison a few times. At the time of writing, Keyamo is the country's Minister of State for Labour and Employment.

A little over a year later, I became disillusioned with legal practice and left Keyamo's firm to pursue postgraduate education in the UK. One qualification led to the other and, by the end of 2013, I had commenced a PhD in human rights. I spent the next three years writing a thesis on the practice of human rights in Africa, a venture that led to the publication of a book on the subject—the sort of book a doctor of law should write.

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Now I will get to answering that earlier question on why I am writing this book—this kind of book.

Having finished my PhD and received that accolade—yes, Doctor of Law—I pondered on the practical utility of my degree. Indeed, it was useful to the extent of landing a lecturing job at the university where I taught a range of law modules, including human rights. But I wanted more. I did not want to rest on my laurels or simply write academic books and articles that are almost exclusively read by academics. The kinds that are full of legal jargon, references, and complex theoretical analyses. The kind you, and even us, do not like to read.

No.

For some reason, I felt that a lot of academic knowledge was wasted this way. What was the point of all the research and knowledge if I was unable to share them with people outside of academia? What was the point of spending three and a half years writing and revising a thesis on the practice of human rights in Africa only for the people about whom it was written never to read it? What was the point of boring the few interested people with sections on *literature reviews* and *theoretical frameworks* that we academics are, for some weird reason, obsessed with?

I wrote this kind of book because I do not want you shutting and flipping it across the room after reading only two pages. I do not want you to be bored by sections like *Introduction* and *History of Human Rights in Nigeria*.

Nah.

I wrote this book—this kind of book—because I want a means of reaching people that I know need this information. People that need to ask themselves salient questions about the way they act and think. I wanted to reach the ordinary Nigerian in the streets of Lagos, the ordinary man and woman in the streets of Owerri.

It was necessary to pass on my burning message, in its most

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simplified form, to you, to us, the people that need it the most—the only ones that can actually do something about it. Hiding my message in expensive academic journals that can be read only by academics or a handful of students—just reading it to pass an assignment and probably getting bored after reading the abstract—just didn't serve my purpose.

So, there you have it. If you have stuck with me till now, then it has obviously worked. If you have not and have flung the book into a corner, well it was worth a try. I will try writing your kind of book next time.

I have left out all the bombast and loquacity of the legal profession in the writing of this book (okay, maybe not all, but most). I have also left out all the unnecessary technicalities of the PhD. I have done all of this to ensure that my message is clear.

And what is my message? It is a very simple one. Human rights. But probably not in the way you have been told about it.

Yes. Mine is a message of human rights. Human rights at their highest level but in their simplest form. Human rights as the solution to the many problems of Nigeria—human rights as a solution to Nigeria itself. Remember those PhD years I spoke about? Yes. After nearly four years of intensive research, I came to the conclusion that most of Nigeria's problems, even the economic ones, could be properly identified and solved through the lens of human rights.

Now, before you shrug and say *well, that is something for the government and courts to deal with*, let me point out that I do not mean human rights simply from the legal perspective or as a subject or area of the law. No. The human rights I mean and advocate throughout this book, go beyond legal theories. I mean human rights as principles. Human rights as culture. Human rights as religion. Human rights as a way of life.

I mean human rights as a new beginning.

Human rights as a movement.

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Human rights as revolution.

Now if I were writing an academic book—that other kind of book—I would have had to define what human rights are. I would probably need an entire chapter of thirty pages dedicated to analysing the various definitions of human rights. I would have needed to quote the Aristotles and Socrates of the field. I'll save you all of that. Human rights are those rights we have simply because we are human. Okay, I'll put it another way: Human rights are rights and standards that are generally recognised as owed to us by the state or our countries. These rights are inherent. We have them simply because of our existence and regardless of who we are, our sex, colour, status, and other classifications. These rights (well, some of them) are recognised in international treaties and many national constitutions.

As we go on this journey, I will explain to you what these various rights are and how efficiently implementing them could drastically reform Nigeria.

If we were in one of my lectures, I would have asked you an interesting question. I would have asked you whether, in your view, human rights exist in Nigeria. But we are not in class (or maybe we are, only that I cannot see you), so, I'll go ahead and answer my own question.

Do human rights exist in Nigeria? Well, yes and no. It depends a lot on who you are, which state you live in, whether you are rich or poor, whether you are *guilty* or innocent. The sad reality, however, is that these rights do not exist for the majority of people, and it is not entirely the government's fault. We, the people, are also culpable. I'll explain this in a bit.

It is probably safe to say that many of us do not know what human rights are, let alone know that we are entitled to them. We grow up fearing the police and other security agencies. If a military man orders you out of your car on a cold, rainy Sunday, for driving

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on the wrong side of a one-way road, and orders you to frog jump in front of your bewildered wife, you just have to obey. Hard luck. The police can make you swim in the dirty gutter for violating COVID-19 lockdown rules. And what will people say? *Eiyaa, poor boy. But wait. What was he doing on the road sef when government ordered everyone to stay at home? It's his fault. I don't know why some people cannot follow simple instruction. Next time, he'll hear word.*

God help you if indeed you are 'guilty' of a real *offence*, for instance stealing. The police can hit and kick you as they bundle you off to prison. And that's if you are lucky. Interestingly, you, the person that is hit, and kicked, and bundled away accept, deep within you, that you deserve it. It is how criminals are treated you say to yourself. You eventually end up in a tiny cell you share with twenty other inmates, without being charged to court for months, or even years. And you spend all that time regretting that you were caught. Your friends and family share in your sentiments: you are reaping the fruit of your crime.

But, even there, in your tiny cell, you know you are among the lucky few. Things could be worse—way worse.

You could already be dead.

Yes. A mob could have descended on you as soon as the alarm that you were a 'thief' rent the air. You would have been punched and kicked. Car tyres would have magically appeared from thin air and taken residence around your neck. A minute later, you could be in flames.

For stealing a purse.

Who killed the petty thief? Who clubbed the suspect to death? Who set the witch ablaze? Who mobbed the 'blasphemer'? Was it the evil government? Was it the soldiers or the police? No. It wasn't them. It was us. You and me. See? It is not just the corrupt officials that are dragging us backwards. You—we—have a hand in it as well. We are all culpable.

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I shall talk more about this sad culture of jungle justice later on in the book when I explore the right to life in Nigeria. Let's let ourselves off the hook for the moment and switch back to the police.

Should you be lucky enough to find yourself in police custody, regaining your liberty is a whole different ball game. The Nigerian police do not understand, at all, the concept of human rights, particularly the right to liberty (another right I explain later). This is especially the case when you are poor because the existence of human rights in Nigeria is highly dependent on your social and financial status. As a poor man or woman, the police will keep you locked up until your relatives come begging. The police will then demand thousands of naira as bail. This, in spite of inscriptions all over the police station that 'bail is free'. And—note—you have to beg. You have to plead with them to accept the small *change* you have. You don't come asserting authority except you are rich and influential or have some powerful lawyer. And how the police hate seeing lawyers! Hang on, I will share some of my personal encounters with the Nigerian police soon.

It is important to note that, once you get into police custody, *guilty* or not, whether for an offence or not, you are generally expected to 'bail' yourself out with cash. It is an anomaly to leave prison custody without paying up, except of course you are a big man, in which case you wouldn't be in prison at all (except a bigger man put you in there).

Innocent and harmless people have been arrested on flimsy grounds or simply for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. I know tenants who got thrown into jail by their landlords because they could not pay their rent. You may know some too. I have read stories of young men arrested simply because they had laptops or 'strange' hair styles—the ultimate evidence, at least to the police, of *yahoo-yahoo*. You may have read them too.

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I know people that have been arrested simply for embarking on peaceful protests (that is, if they don't get shot). Employees thrown into jail by employers. House helps thrown into jail by madams. In short, it has gotten to a point where a big man can threaten the small man with jail simply for offending him.

And—remember—you have to bail yourself with money.

Now let's go back to the question I asked earlier: Do human rights exist in Nigeria? Yes. Some rights exist in the constitution and law books. Only some (I explain why much later). However, these few rights apply to only a few people for a variety of reasons. The first is that many people do not even know their rights. Even the enforcers—the police and government—do not know, or maybe do not care, about these rights.

The first stage, therefore, is knowledge, and by the time you finish reading this book, it is my hope that you will understand not just the meaning of human rights but also your role in ensuring that they are applied in Nigeria.

A second reason is that these rights, sadly, are mostly available to those that can afford them. Yes. Money buys everything in Nigeria, even human rights. For instance, not having your bail money may mean that you sleep in the prison cell for a little longer. The same way money buys you rights is also the same way it can buy off another person's right. So, a rich man can slap his gateman for sleeping or deny him months of wages for being *stubborn*.

Look, I will set it down simply. The poor have no rights in Nigeria. None at all. And I am not trying to patronise anyone. No one's hands are clean. Even the poor and downtrodden are known to deprive others of their rights. Have you heard of thieves being burnt in the streets? Have you seen pictures of a girl or man stripped naked in the streets because she stole a phone? Is it rich men driving range rovers that are doing the burning and stripping?

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See? We are all in this together—this cycle of violation and dehumanisation.

So, do human rights exist in Nigeria? The answer is: Yes—but only as a mirage.

How can we change it? Well, that is a very difficult question. And one that I try to answer in this book. Part of the problem is that the culture of impunity is deeply ingrained in the Nigerian system and infrastructure. Some of our cultures and beliefs perpetuate the dehumanisation of people because they are from a certain group, or gender, or tribe. And then, there is the system. Nigeria, the country, is hardly set on a foundation of justice and fairness. The institutions are generally in a state of decay. Be sincere—what comes to mind when you hear the word ‘civil service’? Decay? Ineptitude? Corruption? Human rights organs within the country suffer from a similar malaise.

However, regardless of how big the problem is or how complex the solutions are, one fact remains: Only us, you and me, can solve them. Okay, and maybe the government—if they ever get to any good. What this means is that we need to begin a system of learning and unlearning. Yes. Unlearning. We need to reformat our brains and declutter them of some *ideas*. We need to begin a system of acculturation. Don’t worry, I explain all of these later in the book.

And you, the government, you who only work in the three months leading to elections, you have a lot to do too in ensuring this process. I shall tell you some of them, even though I suspect you already know quite a few. Still, I shall tell you.

And the police and army—sadly some of the worst violators of human rights in the country. I have a lot to tell you too. The world was abuzz in 2020 over the killing of George Floyd by a policeman who knelt on his neck for eight minutes. It was a sad video to watch. But I only wonder how they would react to the monstrous acts you mete out every single day to hapless Nigerians.

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If only they knew.

If only they cared.

Now before you turn over to the next chapter, or maybe even close the book, I have a one-minute mental exercise for you—if you live or have lived in Nigeria. I would like you to take thirty seconds to imagine what the country would be like with no police killings. No jungle justice. No burning of thieves in the streets. No stripping of offenders. No harassment of bus drivers for *kola*. No harassment for carrying afro or wearing camouflage. No shooting or harassment because you are protesting for Biafra or your incarcerated leader.

Now try and be a bit more ambitious for the next thirty seconds and imagine again what the country would be like if everyone had the right to health and meaningful access to healthcare. If, no matter your ailment, you are guaranteed access to adequate medical facilities regardless of your financial capacity. Imagine if everyone had access to quality education.

And housing.

And work.

You can stop imagining now, and we can, instead, live it.

This book is a call to national human rights knowledge. A call to modern human rights culture.

A call to a human rights revolution.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Growing up in Nigeria means different things to different people.

If you're very lucky, you are born into that very small percentage of affluent families mainly comprising politicians, oil marketers, and rich pastors. Then you could live on Lagos Island or some cosy mansion in Abuja. You could study at British International School or Lagoon. You could travel abroad for vacations on big airlines like Emirates and KLM. That's if you're *very very* lucky.

If you're *just* lucky, you are born into that small—very small—middle class. You live in a flat with your family and can afford to go to one of the many small private schools, somewhat rated not because they are fantastic but because the alternative—the government-run public schools—are generally in shambles.

What happens when you are not lucky? Well, you have to struggle for your share of the \$1 a day the National Bureau of Statistics says 82 million Nigerians live on.

But this is only the story from an economic viewpoint. What does growing up look like from a political perspective, like when your father decides to *challenge* the government by forming a group that canvasses for the balkanisation of the country? And how much so when this *challenge* is coming barely a few years after a military