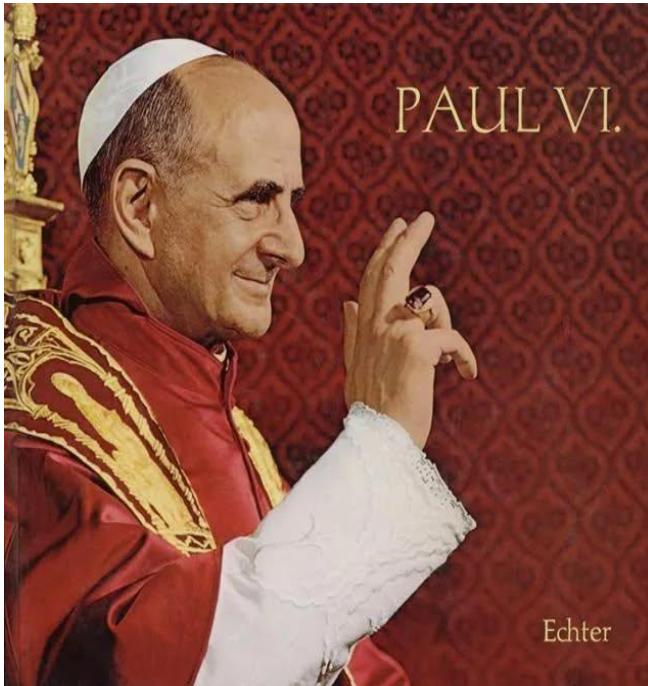


Lessons from an "Unfortunate" Pope

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Yoruba, the major language of South-Western Nigeria, is known to be incisive when it comes to greetings and insults. There's a greeting for when you have a guest, when you sow, when you reap, when you're convalescing or even when you're the one caring for a sick person. There's also an insult for when you've failed gloriously in school. It's called "*olodo*" which loosely translates to "The one who owns the zeros." To rub it in,

some teachers remember to use their pen to insert eyes and nose into your zero score for you so that the space is not entirely blank. There's an insult, too, for taking the last position in class at the end of school term, as there is for the one who takes first position. For opening your mouth to say something and not make good sense, for making noise outside the confines of a market place, for having large eye balls, for being a food monger, for becoming obese, for this, for that, and even a small-sized one for a child who wets the bed at home – it has a cut-down-size syllable befitting for under-eighteen: *Atonle*.

Of the many foul words in the Yoruba language, *Oloriburuku* is the one I dread the most. If it has a German equivalent in terms of sound, it should be something like *Arbeitsunfähigkeitsbescheinigung*. Jaw-breaking. When it doesn't lance through my heart, it goes right into my head and congeals into a tumour half the size of my brain. That is how much weight it carries. *Oloriburuku* is the Yoruba word for an unfortunate human being. One who has tilled the soil in vain and sown in the wrong season, like a fool. An unfortunate fool. I find it difficult admitting to anybody that I've secretly thought about myself as an *oloriburuku* for nearly half my life, even though I have. But you don't say these sort of things in public, especially about a person you love, including yourself – if you love yourself enough. You do

not say this about heroic historical figures, too. You cannot put the word "*Oloriburuku*" and greatness to stand side-by-side. And yet, that word comes to mind when I think about people who became leaders in the most turbulent of times. Pope Paul VI, for example.

There's a reason the shy Pope Paul VI is sometimes referred to as "The lonely Pope". Loneliness, I think, isn't merely a phenomenon of space but also of time. He was Pope in difficult times. 1963 to 1978. To be Pope at such time in history was to be make decisions at your own peril. The world was rethinking the very institutions – including the Catholic Church – that were central to its sense of itself and this was probably not the most exciting time to become Pope.

First Pope Paul VI had the task of bringing the Vatican II council to a peaceful end which had caused bitter divisions among Bishops. Plus the church stood a chance of schism with the implementation of the very difficult decisions of the council. The historic council had altered the very face of the church's two thousand years of history. Introduction of local languages into liturgy, especially in the celebration of the mass was a great step toward progress, but there were drawbacks and resistance in many circles. The talks which began with the council about the reunion of all Christians was another step toward the stability of Christianity worldwide. So in 1965, he flew to Jerusalem to pray at the tomb of Christ, becoming the first Pope after St. Peter to do so. Also, he embraced the Orthodox patriarch of the East. On December 7, 1965 he removed the excommunication pronounced on the Orthodox Church in a joint Catholic-Orthodox Declaration, which was read simultaneously in Rome and Istanbul – a very significant gesture with historical ramifications, for it was in 1054 that Michael Cerularius the Archbishop of Constantinople left the fold of Rome which began the schism of the Orthodox Church.

But there was more. As Pope, he was expected to have opinions and react to nearly everything of global consequence from the murder of John F. Kennedy in 1964 to the troops sneaking into Vietnam in 1965 (a threat to global peace) and the ongoing civil war in Nigeria from 1966 to 1970 during which he twice met representatives of both Nigeria and Biafra in Uganda, in an unusual but futile bid to bring about reconciliation. On declaring on 21st July 1968 that food and medicine had been flown into blockaded Biafra, he received harsh criticisms from the Nigerian government. Needless to mention that the British who supplied the

Nigerian side with arms was on the watch. The New York Times headline of 12th January 1970 read "Pope prays that Nigerians won't massacre Biafran Rebels". This sparked outrage. There were charges of Catholic support for the "breakaway state of Biafra". Next, Catholic relief agencies in Biafra were attacked in their numbers. The atmosphere tensed up, so much so that Nigerian Bishops Conference had to release statements rejecting claims that Pope Paul VI was politically involved in the Nigeria-Biafra war.

Already in 1966, communist Poland had refused Pope Paul VI from visiting them. It owed to a clash between the state's atheistic policies and the Pope's religious authority. The Polish government aimed to present the Christianization anniversary as a secular event, leading to tension with the Vatican and ultimately making a bold statement by denying the Pope's visa.

Then two years later, Paul VI released an encyclical, "Humane Vitae", widely criticized across the globe, sparking protests even in the Vatican, under the Pope's very nose. "Humanae Vitae," according to an atheist friend of mine, is the encyclical she detests the most. Issued on 5th July 1968, it states that methods such as birth control pills, condoms, and sterilization were morally unacceptable. This stance was controversial, especially during a time when many were advocating for more liberal attitudes towards birth control. The Pope had gone too far this time, they said.

In the meantime, the resulting consequences of the second Vatican council were still far-reaching in some aspects of the church. So many priests and religious abandoned their calling. Pope Paul VI became the Pope who received about 30,000 resignations of priests – the highest number of resignations to be received by any leader in the 20th century – which must have caused him immense sorrow.

Finally, the year he died, Italian prime minister and old friend of the Pope, Aldo Moro was executed by a left-wing Italian terrorist movement after being kidnapped 55 days earlier. His public plea for Moro's release had been ignored and his presiding at Moro's funeral would be the last time he was ever publicly seen alive. It was at that funeral a Pope openly said, for the first time, and in a breaking voice, that God didn't answer his prayers. Pope Paul VI died of a heart attack on 7th August 1978.

Born in 1897, in the Montini family of Concesio, ordained a priest at the age of 23, everything must have seemed fairly normal at the start. Ten years into his ordination and he had begun his work in the Vatican secretariat, worked for thirty-two years in the curia, and that is as seamless a biography as biographies can get. But his story started to take on a different turn the moment the Pope at the time, Pius XII, removed him from the curia and instead made him the Archbishop of Milan in 1954 “because he did not support Pius XII’s anti-communist policies,” some analysts opined. It marked the first time in 600 years that the Archbishop of Milan was not a Cardinal; Pius XII refused to give Montini the Cardinal’s hat, which people largely perceived as the Pope’s way of punishing him. He would only become a Cardinal when John XXIII was elected Pope. Seemed like a story that ended well, until he made the ultimate progress / “mistake” that would ironically plunge him into the biggest hurdles in his life when he got elected Pope on 21st June, 1963. He was a good man, but those were not the best of times, if ever the best of times truly exist.

He would abandon the papal tiara after his 1963 coronation, symbolizing a move towards a more humble papacy and setting a lasting precedent, as none of his successors have worn the tiara since – he was himself. He looked like he should be leading penitential services, with his tiny voice of entreaty, with a synced clarity of why mercy is important, sitting at a confessional and gently granting absolutions for one penitent after another. His demeanour was that of a person whose actions you would expect not to be consequential, yet he stood gallant, steeped in a whirlwind of criticisms and drawbacks, without necessarily exuding too much charismatic energy – he was himself while the world was also consistently itself: adventurous, chaotic, changing, surprising all at once.

We almost never reign at the right time – and it doesn’t matter what your personal circumstances are. We sometimes don't even give birth to the "right children". Often, the times that we are not in the wrong places, someone shows up from nowhere and proves to us that we are there at the wrong time. Isn't that what *Oloriburuku* means? I always think about Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" as a title that carries existential weight. Things, at every turn of our lives, always seem at the brink of falling apart.

There always seems to be a cloud of omen hovering over our heads. We might be good, better, even close to faultless. Our intentions might be perfect. But then we are flung into a

chaotic world. Fate, as old as it is, has always remained a senseless and unmalleable thing. But we haven't lost our sanity yet. The reason is because we are not people of results but of efforts. Quality efforts. The resilience of the human spirit and the humility to receive grace, these are the real achievements of our collective humanity. After all, you don't own the world as an individual. If it's God's, then it's God's alone. Celebrate your resilience, your faith, your small wins, your kindness, your goodhearted nature. You would never reign at the right time. You would never live with all the right people. The best of days have probably come and gone, and the better days might never come. All of us are "unfortunate" to some degree, as was Pope Paul VI.

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On the death anniversary of Pope Paul VI.