MARTIN BUBER'S DIALOGUE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IN A PLURAL SOCIETY

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Abstract

Martin Buber, a Vietnamese Jewish thinker, in his philosophy of dialogue, identifies a two-fold attitude of man, which can either make or mar relationships. He cites them as I-Thou and I-It outlooks, and that while the former promotes mutual respect and accommodation, hence peace; the latter can lead to hostility, incitement, provocation, conflict, violence and even wars. Consequently, this work argues that failure to check conflict situations and ensure peaceful coexistence in Nigeria is as a result of wrong attitude of the actors involved. Another problem is the improper and/or inadequate employment or application of "genuine dialogue" in checking potential conflict settings. Our findings include the fact that dialogue, implied in the I-Thou theory, has enormous social benefits for man in terms of achieving a peaceful and harmonious co-existence – particularly in a plural society like Nigeria. Despite various efforts, theories, suggestions and policies, conflict seems to be on the increase in Nigeria and Africa, in general. The objective of this work is to contribute towards a possible reduction of conflict, through proper management and to further peaceful coexistence in Nigeria, using the bird-eye view of Buber's philosophy of dialogue.

Keywords: Buber, Philosophy of Dialogue, I-Thou, I-It, Coexistence, Plural Society.

Introduction

Nigeria, as part of a continent bedeviled by conflicts of various hues, has had its fair share. As of today, the country has experienced all manners of violent confrontations resulting from communal/boundary disagreements; interreligious hostilities; labour disputes; political quarrels, and so on. The result has been a fragmented nation always in row, either on religious scores or on socio-political issues, among others. Consequently, there is so much distrust growing across Nigeria and everything is seen through compartmentalized lenses by the component groups and ethnic nationalities.

It may be said that some of the clashes are inevitable in a multi-cultural; multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation like Nigeria. This is premised on the fact that man cannot avoid relating with a fellow mankind and in the process, there has to be disagreements since they are of diverse makeup. However, that realization on its own is one of the reasons we need to work more on how to avoid situations that may eventually result in violent conflicts. It is to be noted that the worst of peace is always better than the best of violent clashes. When rumpus and confusion ensue, democracy, security and national progress are highly threatened. Hence, we need to work at peace for, according to

Shittu (2013:45), "peace and tranquility can be ensured only by tolerance and peaceful co-existence". This work seeks to argue that peaceful coexistence can only be possible if the citizens, groups and even governments adopt the right attitude, that is, Buber's I-Thou approach. Ultimately, we need an attitude that would take into cognizance Nigeria's plural nature.

Nigeria and Its Plural Nature
Nigeria is generally held to be accommodating about 250 ethnic nationalities, speaking over 520 dialects. However, some documents disagree on that statistics. For instance, one of Nigeria's leading newspapers, *Vanguard*, insists that Nigeria has about 371 ethnic groups.(www.vanguardngr.com/2017/05/full-list-of-all-371-tribes-in-nigeria-states-where-they-originate/). Attempts to manage the situation to engender the feeling of accommodation has only led to segmentation of the nation, structurally, into 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory; 774 local councils and 37 LCDAs in Lagos.

What is clear from the above scenario is that with such a wieldy number of groups, each with different preferences, problems and idiosyncrasies, there is bound to be distrusts and disagreements. Consequently, some scholars argue that Nigeria's greatest problem has been the number of ethnic nations in its enclave. Iruonagbe and Egharevba (2015:146) specifically insist that "disagreements are often expressed through violent acts which have given birth to a violent culture in some parts of the country today thereby threatening the socio-economic development of Nigeria".

So far, distribution of national wealth and even the fight against corruption have always been problematic "as persons indicted often whip up ethnic sentiments in defense of their position" (Iruonagbe and Egharevba, 2015:146). To ensure national growth, cooperation and peaceful coexistence, therefore, according to Tinubu (2011), "we must ensure that we respect these differences and also ensure they are not exploited as a basis for discrimination or cronyism".

Nigeria's plural nature has been variously blamed on the arbitrary foisting of national entities into one geopolitical unit called Nigeria, by the colonialists. As often argued, this was done by Lord Lugard and his co-travelers without due regard to affinity of language, culture and other uniting peculiarities. Thus, the nation has been subjected to conflicts of various kinds with devastating human and material losses since flag independence.

However, it behooves on postcolonial Nigeria to exploit the concept of pluralism to its advantage by adopting a positive attitude of dialogue. Pluralism, according to Ogbule and Ogunrinade (2013) "is a framework of interaction in which groups show sufficient respect and tolerance of each other and they fruitfully co-exist and interact without conflict or assimilation". This supports Buber's notion of dialogue and his I-Thou model of attitude, which he argues will ensure mutual respect, accommodation and peaceful coexistence. Usually, what gives birth to rancor in a society is when the actual is disappointingly lower than the expectation.

Expectations and the Reality in Nigeria's Plural Society
The concept of plural society defines our diverse identity on the grounds of ethnicity, religion and geography. Nigeria as a "plural society" means a nation with an organized group of persons associated together for religious, economic, benevolent, cultural,

scientific, political, patriotic or other diverse purposes. As stated somewhere else, plural society "entails different people in general, thought of living together in organized communities with shared laws, traditions, and values. Plural society also stands for or defines a community of people with diverse values, cultures, languages, religions, traditions, origins, among others" (John and Usoro, *Developing Country Studies*, 2016:140). For Furnivall (2009:2), a plural society involves two or more distinct social orders, living in parallel within one political entity, without much intermingling. It is also "exploitative of the individual and destructive of group values found in traditional society, while at the same time falling far short of those believed to be ideally distinctive of modern democratic societies ... characterized by some overriding moral or political principles that alone could transcend the divisive forces of material self- seeking inevitably generated in the plural society and that would command the common allegiance of all its sub- divisions" (Fortes, 1970:10).

For Furnivall, therefore, a plural society is in the strictest sense a medley of peoples, who "mix but do not combine". Each group "holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its ideas and ways" (1984:27). The image one develops from the above is that of a "salad bowl" as against the idealized notion of the American "melting pot" in practical terms. Plural society in the Nigerian context is found in the multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-linguistic nature of the society. What it means is that apart from sharing the common geographical expression or entity called Nigeria, each ethnic group is distinct in culture and social make-up. Furnivall's description of plural society as a "medley of people" who "mix but do not combine" aptly describes the Nigerian situation. Hence, we see Nigeria as a plural society where there is intermingling of differences in subjugated political environment, in which the politically powerful groups usurp all and the weaker groups live in penury and frustration.

The effect of such insensitivity, bigotry and poor accommodation of all interests is Nigeria is currently assailed by a curious and depressing distribution crisis triggered most often by a dubious and unacceptable formula for the sharing of the somehow elusive national wealth, which many prefer to regard as the "national cake". Further, there has been disregard for the expected mutual respect for cultural and religious differences; egalitarian distribution of national wealth and political inclusiveness. Thus, the post-independent Nigeria, over the years, has witnessed friction and tension among the ethnic nationalities. This explains why Oladesu (2002:15) submits that the cultivation of national outlook by many has inadvertently given way to a continued lukewarm attitude towards nation-building by the frustrated groups within Nigeria. We have also argued elsewhere that as a result, some negative emotions are stirred by the clandestine tribal organizations, culminating in the hot race for relevance within the nation's political and socio-economic equations.

In more succinct terms, the problem is that since the independence era of the 1960s to the beginning of the Civil War on July 01, 1967, Nigeria had witnessed a low degree of national cohesion. Its diverse ethnic nationalities, in response to this low level of integration, have decided to look inwards (among themselves) for political succour and survival in an incoherent polity. The Niger-Delta insurgency and its attendant crisis, the uproar by the O'odua Peoples' Congress (OPC); the outrage by the Movement for the Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), and the recent terrorism masterminded by the Boko Haram sect in parts of Northern Nigeria, are all form of

expression of anger, frustration and incoherent nature of the political integration of Nigeria (John and Usoro, 2016:139).

The current spat of violence in some Northern parts of the country has been attributed to ineffective approach towards giving everyone a sense of belonging. In other words, the aspect of genuine dialogue as a way of generating mutual respect for diverse opinions, cultural and religious peculiarities as well as socio-political differences has always been missing. For instance, the major characters in the *Boko-Haram* insurgency and the herdsmen crisis are from the Fulani-North, who claim fundamentally that they have been marginalized. A similar claim emanated from the Niger Delta in the South-South region of Nigeria a few years back. It only abated when the Musa Yar'Adua-led federal Government initiated programmes seen as concrete responses to the yearnings of the people. However, the fact that such an understanding hardly last goes to show that the attitude employed towards resolving the problems are never seen as genuine. In Buber's terms, it can be said that there was "non-meeting" – a concept which exposes negative and insincere attitude called I-It, instead of I-Thou.

It should be noted that each of Nigeria's regions has, at one time or another, expressed the said frustration in different ways and at different times. The situation, which is largely blamed on lack of cohesion and integration, is further being fuelled by the lack of meaningful and accepted symbols of common heritage and common historical past which could have bound the diverse ethnic nationalities together. The difficulty that confronts Nigeria as it concerns integration lies clearly in the nature of her geographical composition (John and Usoro, 2016: 140). As argued by Ogundowole (76), Nigeria cannot make progress in any direction because she was found on a shaky base of plurality. Consequently, the problem arises on how to achieve solidarity in action and purpose in the midst of hundreds of ethnic nationalities.

For a sense of belonging, therefore, many expected that a system or approach which recognizes the various differences and peculiarities would be adopted by the powers that be. That is why many have advocated for a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) as a way out to discuss and appreciate one another in a complex nation like Nigeria. As argued by Tinubu (2011), any nation that operates with a herdsman mentality will only end up diminishing itself. In other words, it is wrong to expect everyone to tow the same line without question. One directional, selfish approach in a nation like Nigeria is an invitation to disaster. It is equally reprehensible to ignore individual or group peculiarities and not seek to dialogue with them towards entrenching a lasting peace.

According to Osinubi and Osinubi (2006), the failure to resolve conflicts over access to commonly valued scarce resources, and over divergent perceptions of socio-political situations, has the high potential of degenerating into genocide or fratricide. They readily point to the ones experienced at various times between the Ife and Modakeke in Southwestern Nigeria; Zongon-Kataf crisis in Northern Nigeria; Aguleri and Umuleri in Eastern Nigeria, and the Tiv – Jukun of Middle-Belt, Nigeria, among others. The situations which gave rise to those conflicts support our position that genuine dialogue, resulting from the right attitude, can ensure peaceful coexistence. This is because in most of the cases, mutual mistrust, sense of deprivation and dispossession often trigger the crisis. This is where Buber's I-Thou approach to dialogue comes to the rescue.

Buber's I-Thou Concept and *Ubuntu*
Martin Buber (1878-1965), in his philosophy of dialogue, theorizes on the importance of words in the social strata of man's existential experience. He talks about the two-fold attitude of man exemplified in the I-Thou and the I-It models. While the I-Thou relation promotes mutual respect, accommodation and genuine dialogue; the I-It is a subject-object relation, where entities meet but fail to establish dialogue. I-Thou is an encounter of equals, who recognise each other as such (Guilherme, 2011).When rational human beings encounter one another and recognise one another as equals, then a dialogue ensues. However, in the I-It relation, a being confronts another being and does not recognise it as an equal. In other words, an individual in an I-It relation treats another human like an object – only to be used and experienced; the same way he treats things.

According to Watson (2006:4), Buber's life experiences and education played a major role in shaping and defining his work. Born in Vienna in 1878, he is reported to have lost both parents when he was three years old. And Simon (1973), his close associate, suggests that his "... search after his long lost mother became a strong motive for his dialogical thinking - his I-Thou philosophy" (359). In *Between Man and Man*, Buber (1969:19-20) talks about three kinds of dialogue: genuine dialogue, technical dialogue, and monologue. The genuine dialogue may be spoken or silent communication. But the important thing is when it happens, "each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them". The technical dialogue is a conversation founded on the need for acquiring information and objective knowledge. And monologue, though disguised as dialogue, is merely "a conversation characterized by the need neither to communicate something, nor to learn something, nor to influence someone, nor to come into connexion with someone, but solely by the desire to have one's own self-reliance confirmed ..." This is completely self-gratifying and pretentious. It goes against the tenets of genuine dialogue. While genuine dialogue corresponds to I-Thou relations, technical dialogue and monologue relate with I-It relations.

The point to note here is that Buber has drawn our attention to the fact that ontologically, man is by nature a relational being. He is only given to two kinds of relationships – either as an I-It, to be used and discarded; or as an I-Thou, which he cannot do without, if he must grow. I-Thou relation, for Buber, therefore, is a necessity. Interestingly, this concept is akin to the African concept of *Ubuntu*, which recognizes the importance of the other in every human's existence. *Ubuntu* is a philosophy uniquely identified with the Africans because of their culture of accommodation, communalism, hospitality and brotherhood. Sadly, these are gradually being eroded through the infiltration and adulteration of African culture by the western model. The western culture, contrary to the African background, is individualistic as against the communal and accommodating spirit of *Ubuntu*.

To the African, the I-Thou philosophy can be summarized in the saying: "I am because you are". The African holds that "the meaning of an individual's life is founded in and through his relationship with the other or others. In fact, it is meaningless to ask oneself 'who am I' without having a complete knowledge of the other, from whom in the final analysis one expects the answer" (Archibong and Usoro, 2014:29). To put it more succinctly: "We need other human beings in order to be human" (Tutu, 2004: 25).

Indeed, it should be noted that Buber's I-Thou philosophy ultimately moves

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towards a community. As mutual respect, tolerance and accommodation are guaranteed in I-Thou philosophy, a peaceful community begins to develop. For Buber and for us, the full essence of human existence plays out when we engage one another in genuine dialogue, thereby forging understanding, reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Only in I-Thou relation are we sure of genuine dialogue because of the presence of the speaker and the listener. Every encounter must attract a response for there to be a dialogue; and, this can best be achieved in a peaceful atmosphere which supports coexistence.

Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence
In today's world, dialogue, according to Patricia Romney, has become the rallying cry of our day and we see it taking place around the world. This is so because while debate and controversy have been the norms, an increasingly diverse and conflicted world calls upon us to collaborate with one another in order to survive and share the planet as one humanity. Dialogue therefore, says Romney in an article entitled: "The Art of Dialogue", "must address issues of equity before it can be successful" (www.Americansforthearts.or2012). She defines dialogue as:

> … Focused conversation, engaged in intentionally with the goal of increasing understanding, addressing problems, and questioning thoughts or actions. It engages the heart as well as the mind. It is different from ordinary everyday conversation in that dialogue has a focus and a purpose … Dialogue, unlike debate or even discussion is as interested in the relationship(s) between the participants … (2012: 2).

The writer also took us to some dimension of dialogue such as civic dialogue which has to do with people exploring the dimensions of a civic or social issue, policy or decision of consequence to their lives, communities, and society. She listed some prominent names with respect to theories of dialogue to include Mikhail Bakhtin, Paulo Freire, David Bohm, William Isaacs and ending with Martin Buber and their contributions to the discourse on dialogue. Though Romney's work focused to art and culture, dialogue can be applied to other aspects of human endeavour. It can be applied to conflict or crisis situations. It can also be applied to even peace situation, for dialogue ensures that human relationship is at its best and finest.

In the paper titled "Dialogue and Difference: 'I and Thou' or 'We and They'", Seymour Cain directed his thoughts and ours to the I-Thou model of human realm of ethnic, national, religious, and ideological differences. He opines that any honest and wide treatment of how we believe in such circumstances is bound to cause some discomfort, since we may recognize ourselves in some of the horrible examples on non-dialogical relatedness. He made this point very succinctly when he avers:

> I am talking about us, about you and me. Indeed, what I have to say applies to Buberians as well as non-Buberians or anti-Buberians. We cannot enter the kingdom of dialogue by a rote recitation of phrases from Martin Buber's works while engaged in non-dialogical relations with our ideological adversaries in politics, religion, and philosophy (2011: 129).

Cain's " dialogue and difference" is what the deep existential and phenomenological thinkers call "otherness". To him Buber wants us to see the other person in his particularity, in his difference. The dialogical relation then should be one of "I" – "We" in our own cultural and spiritual heritage to "Thou" or "We" versus "They" stance. The way of dialogue points to the meeting of two realities – two selves or two communities – each in its ownness, its concrete particularity. Cain further gives us something to think about, thus:

> I am afraid many of us act badly most of the time when we meet persons with radically different commitments and allegiances. We seek to subdue rather than to understand. Often what moves us are the intense passion, resentment and hatred evoked by dialectical differences. How dare this other person believe utterly different than I do! Let's demonize the bastard. That is our kneejerk response to a radical difference in opinions (2011: 131).

Even though the writer focused on religious, liberal and humanistic dialogue, his emphasis was on actual dialogue leading to understanding and self-realization. In coming to understand and appreciate the other in his part, under religious existence, we may come to realize what we are in ours. This is the way, according to Cain, "to do away with the dividing, distorting stereotypes which proclaim the defects and shortcomings of other faiths and extol the virtues and perfections of our own" (2011: 133).

The most important application of Buber's philosophy of dialogue to group relations was to the conflict between the Jewish resettlers of Palestine and the residents of the land. Buber insisted that the Jewish resettlement must ultimately be judged by moral norms, not by the purely pragmatic standards of power politics. His advocacy incurred great disfavour among the leaders of the Jewish settlement. However, it is worthy of note that the impulse to engage in dialogue is a fairly common one, impeded though it may be by contemporary society, culture and ideology and this current research is walking in that path of Buber.

Going by Buber's elucidation and as shown in a study by Cuesta Duarte Institute(2011), dialogue allows all actors to appreciate the interests of others and to convey their perspectives in a substantiated manner. The study entitled: "Impact of Social Dialogue On Development and Social Inclusion in Uruguay", submitted that accommodation of diverse interests is fundamental to good policymaking, its social legitimacy and the desired peaceful coexistence. For Buber, dialogue is not only about uttered words for a genuine dialogue can also be done in silence. What is important is the attitude of the actors involved in the dialogue. Zimmermann and Morgan agree to that assertion, adding that "some silence is necessary in order to create a dialogical condition" (2015: 6). Since we can learn from dialogue with others, speech presupposes a system of relations between speakers and listeners, where each is open and vulnerable. In genuine dialogue, speaker and listener are caught up in the same experience. But, whether speaking or listening, we establish a bond through which the other's words have impact.

Central to the ethics of dialogue is the issue of mutuality which foster equality and active reciprocity. The equality here refers to both dialogue partners being concerned with what motivates the conversation about the subject matter; its meaning and the questions it

intends to address - in a similar way. Dialogic understanding comprises our being-in-the world and serves the ends of being and action. Gill, for instance, talks about how Aristotle and Gadamer based their philosophy on "how we relate to things in the world and ground our relationships, including social life, political institutions and economics (2014: 24).

Dialogue, as argued by Serriere, et al, can be a shared inquiry on a matter of importance, including learning how to engage with people who hold different opinions, backgrounds and culture(2017:11). And philosophers of dialogue like Buber, Levinas, Freire and Habermas can be classified as moral, social and pedagogical thinkers. They had no inter-religious relations as their primary focus in their reflections on dialogue. But their philosophies of dialogue and communicative action have caught the interest of people who have been involved in and/ or tried to understand the dynamics of inter-religious dialogues (Leirvik, 2011). The writer introduces in the article what he calls 'spiritual' and 'necessary' dialogues. He defines the two as follows:

> Whereas spiritual dialogues are based on personal motivation and are guided by an expectation of being enriched by other spiritual traditions (a typical example would be Christianity and Buddhists meditating together), necessary dialogues are driven by a felt socio-political need to prevent or reduce religion-related conflict in society by fostering peaceful interaction between representatives of different religious groups (16).

From the philosophies of Buber and Levinas, the writer was able to assert his own philosophy of dialogue which has such components as dialogue and negotiation; mutual change; the concept of change in dialogue didactics in a quest for theoretical enlightenment with respect to actual practices (2011:22). The writer's reflections have dealt with inter-religious dialogue between pupils in the classroom, between believers in civil society and between the state and the religious minorities. Each of these dialogues has its characteristics and dynamics, and each calls for different types of theorizing. However, the important observation is that each situation of dialogue enforces the will for peaceful coexistence.

Gorzna (2014:46) is therefore correct in asserting that dialogue assumes a conversation and a necessity to listen to the other. He presents dialogue as the only effective form of communication in contrast to one-sided expression of opinion. And for seeing "the relation of human 'I' to the divine 'you' as a foundation of man relation to man", Buber stands out as the father of philosophy of dialogue. According to him, Buber gives us great insights into the ontology of dialogue. Man can either enter into a monologue relation with reality 'I-it', or in dialogue relation 'I-you'. Whatever occurs between people is a sphere of mutual confrontation and constitutes the foundations of dialogism. A real conversation, and at the same time every current fulfillment of the relation between people, means the acceptance of otherness"(2014:48). For Buber, in order to come closer to answering the question "who is man?" we must learn to understand him as a being who participates in a dialogue in which being for the other materializes and is recognized in every encounter of "I" and "you".

Strengthening a personal bond based on trust and confidence is the aim of a dialogue of man with man and with God (2014:53). To this end, a dialogue should be built not necessarily on searching for unity and common truths but on axiological experience of

the otherness. Buber's thoughts on dialogue between men, which can be used to foster good interpersonal relationship and peace is a position consistent with this work. It appropriately provides a plank for the attainment of peaceful coexistence in our society.

Dialogue also acts as a basis of understanding a people's beliefs or presuppositions as either rational or irrational, the truth or falsity of any reality or proposition. With respect to this work, dialogue serves as a catalyst to understanding the basis of peaceful coexistence and how to achieve it. Thus far, what is clear is the fact that dialogue, if properly employed, can create room for serious engagements that can bring about mutual and peaceful coexistence. Hence the need to understand the art of genuine dialogical engagements – even in Nigerian experience.

Genuine Dialogue and the Nigerian Experience.
As it is common in most plural societies, Nigeria has had its fair share of crisis, disagreements and conflicts. While many blame the situation on tribalism; some blame it on religious differences. Yet, there are those who see the problem from cultural, social or political angles. Labour crisis has also repeatedly grounded the nation on a number of occasions. All these and more, when taken together, account for the slow pace of development of Nigeria.

Successive governments have tried over the years to ensure a peaceful, progressive nation but have always failed. The reason for such failure, some Nigerians claim, lies in the insincerity of the conflict actors towards dialogue. For instance, disagreements between Labour unions and government often lead to a negotiation table. And usually, the general expectation is always that an acceptable and implementable understanding should emerge from such meetings but most often, they end in disappointments. Specifically, for years on end, Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has been embroiled in strike after strike in pursuit of actualization of the agreement Nigeria's Federal Government had with it. But owing to insincere and haphazard implementation of the said understanding, the strikes keep recurring. The same is the experience with the Nigeria Labour Congress/Trade Union Congress, over the welfare of Nigerian workers. The obvious conclusion from the masses is that the government has not been engaging in "honest, open and unbiased dialogue about the future of the Nigerian society"(Odunze, 2013).

Whether in communal boundary disputes or herders/farmers crisis or insurgency, we argue that the situations would be different if leaders and actors adopt the approach of dialogue with sincerity. In 2014, when the Boko Haram insurgency gathered momentum with the kidnap of 276 Chibok school girls, the Federal Government proposed a dialogue with the group. But the effort later hit the rock, when the group accused the government of insincerity. A similar claim was made when the group captured three aid workers with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), resulting in the killing of Hauwa Liman and Alice Loksha. They were kidnapped in March, 2018 during an assault on a military compound in Nigeria's northeastern Borno state. According to the Catalyst for Global Peace and Social Justice (CPJ), government's slow response caused the death of the nurses. To the CPJ, a genuine dialogue with the Boko Haram group would have forestalled the death of the aid workers, especially as the adductors gave an ultimatum.

All said, it is evident that the Buberian "I-Thou" attitude is lacking in the Nigerian experience wherever the issue of dialogue or negotiation is involved. To Buber, there can

never be a genuine dialogue where ego, insincerity, rigidity and lack of integrity are allowed to interfere. "Deceitful tactics will come back to haunt you", says Harvey Schachter in an article entitled: "Six Main Reasons Why Negotiations Fail" (. While also warning against Fear, emotion and lack of preparation, Schachter says pride and self-importance kill a chance for genuine dialogue very easily. That supports Buber's position that genuine dialogue only happens in the "between relations", meaning a situation of mutuality – where there is encounter and response from the dialogue actors.

For Buber, there can never be dialogue, in the true sense of it, unless the "I" sees the other as a "Thou". Seeing the other as a "thou" requires humility, accommodation, acceptability, selflessness, among others. It is even in concert with the scriptural injunction to treat the other as you would love to be treated. But, in the event that the "I" sees the other as an "It", Buber says what would result can never be a "genuine dialogue". Instead, expect either a technical dialogue or a monologue. In this case, either the actors are just interested in the show of a supposed dialogue or are just there to pretend they are talking to each other, when in actual fact they are talking to themselves.

It goes without saying, therefore, that dialogues fail in Nigeria because the dialogue-actors approach the table with preconceived notions of the outcome. The aim, as it often turns out, is to "use" or "experience" the other. This is the I-It approach which Buber warns against. And there can never be a genuine dialogue in such a setting. In Nigeria, first, things are allowed to deteriorate over time; then much show is made in the media of the attempt to meet and negotiate. However, the actors know within them that the meetings would be of no consequence. Sometimes, junior officials with no administrative or executive powers to enter into any commitment is sent to meetings. Expectedly, when they refuse to shift grounds, such meetings after a waste of man-hours, often than not, end in deadlocks. That is why many issues remain unresolved because the attitude adopted towards them are the I-It approach; instead of the I-Thou model.

Conclusion

By nature, man is a being drawn or attracted to the other. Such attraction leads to interaction and in the course of it, disagreement and conflicts are inevitable. Since individuals make up the society, that situation of disagreement is easily replicated in the larger space. In a society structured along multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi socio-political lines, dispute and divergence of opinions are bound to be recurring decimals. Nigeria, being one of the plural societies by nature of its over 250 ethnic nationalities and estimated 520 dialects, has had its fair share of differences. However, what is important, according to Buber, is the attitude adopted towards finding a lasting solution to the resulting cacophony of interests. For Buber, to see one another as an object, an "It", only to be used and experience and never to be appreciated on mutual terms, simply worsens human relations. He therefore advocates for the "I-Thou" approach to human relations, in order to nurture peaceful coexistence in the society.

Obviously, that model is appropriate for contemporary Nigeria and we strongly recommend it. That is because the current situation where issues of negotiations and dialogues are approached with negative attitude is not helping national growth. When we see one another as fellow humans who deserve what we also desire, it would make for a peaceful society because inordinate greed will be reduced. However, if we chose to see the others as objects, which do not deserve the good things of life, problem will continue.

Clearly, wrong attitude and approach towards national crisis, governance, labour issues, conflicts, disagreements, and so on, have been the bane of our society. What Nigeria needs now is a change of attitude, where we drop the "I-It" method for the "I-Thou" philosophy. With the right approach, even an enemy can become a friend and we can then live with one another in peace and harmony.

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