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The Missing Ingredient in Nigeria's Success Story

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Nigeria does not lack raw talent, ambition, or adaptability. What it lacks are the institutions and shared civic foundations that allow those strengths to compound.

On any weekday morning in Computer Village, the technology bazaar in Ikeja, an iPhone screen replacement happens faster than it does at most Apple Stores. No appointment, no warranty, no insurance form. A young man on a stool diagnoses the crack, names a price in naira, walks two blocks to a wholesaler, returns with the part, installs it on the spot, and tests it against the WhatsApp call quality of whoever is standing nearby. The transaction settles in cash or a bank transfer that clears in under thirty seconds through the Nigeria Inter-Bank Settlement System, which most users have never heard of and which works better than the equivalent in many richer countries.

Lagos is full of small miracles like this. They happen despite, not because of, the state. Six thousand miles away, across the industrial cities of southern and eastern China, a different kind of miracle is in progress. According to BloombergNEF, lithium-ion battery pack prices have fallen 93 percent in real terms since 2010, to a record $108 per kilowatt-hour in 2025, with Chinese-made packs averaging just $84. That decline has done more than any climate treaty to make the energy transition mathematically possible. One Chinese company, CATL, accounted for 39.2 percent of the world's electric-vehicle battery installations in 2025, the only manufacturer above the thirty-percent mark. Behind that scale sits state industrial policy, a supplier ecosystem, a grid build-out, and a port and rail network that were not stitched together by accident. None of it would exist without an extraordinary capacity for coordination.

These two scenes belong to different evolutionary architectures. China has organized itself for coordination. Nigeria has organized itself, if "organized" is the right verb, for exploration. The interesting question is not which is better. It is which is more adaptive to what is coming.

> *Ant colonies are systems of coordination: many actors moving through shared signals toward collective scale. Butterflies are systems of exploration: many small, independent movements creating variation, adaptation, and unexpected beauty. China has built more*

> *of the ant colony's coordination. Nigeria has more of the butterfly field's improvisation. The prize is not to become one or the other, but to combine exploration with rails.*

For Nigeria, the question has new urgency. Three years into a reform program that lifted fuel subsidies and unified the exchange rate, the country has absorbed the first shock of a macroeconomic reset, and moved in the right direction. The floating naira ended an arbitrage that had hollowed out the real economy for a decade. The end of the subsidy fiction freed fiscal space that had been quietly bleeding into private pockets. The Central Bank's bank-recapitalization drive is forcing the financial sector to grow into its own balance sheet. The political cost has been real, but the boring foundational work has finally begun. What remains is harder still: building the institutional and civic architecture that lets brilliance compound from here, and sustaining the same political will through the next, longer phase.

It is tempting to caricature the comparison. China is not only an ant colony. Shenzhen exists because Deng Xiaoping's 1980 experiment with Special Economic Zones was, in its own context, a wild exploratory bet, and the township-village enterprises that powered the 1990s were entrepreneurial improvisation at scale. DeepSeek did not emerge from a five-year plan. The coordination story is real, but it sits on top of a country that has been willing to run enormous bets into the unknown. The most successful coordination civilization of our era has also been a serious exploration civilization, which is part of why it has been so hard to compete with.

Nigeria's exploration, by contrast, is mostly involuntary. The country experiments because nothing else works. The trader in Computer Village improvises because the formal supply chain is broken, the power supply is intermittent, and the courts will not enforce a warranty in any reasonable timeframe. Nollywood became one of the world's largest film industries by output without studio financing, distribution infrastructure, or meaningful copyright enforcement. Afrobeats conquered global charts through SoundCloud, WhatsApp, and informal promoter networks. The energy is real and the talent is extraordinary. So is the cost. Capital that should compound stays trapped in defensive postures. Entrepreneurs who should build national champions burn out building substitutes for the state.

Coordination failure is not a charming national characteristic. It is why a country of more than 230 million people generates about 5,400 megawatts on a good day: less than half what New York City and Westchester County draw at summer peak. The development worth watching is that, for the first time in modern history, the technology that lets societies coordinate at low friction may not require an authoritarian state to install. India Stack is the case in point. Aadhaar gave more than a billion people verifiable digital identity. UPI gave them interoperable real-time payments. The account aggregator framework is now giving them portable consent over their financial data. These were built by a democratic, fractious, decentralized country that looks more like Nigeria than like China, and they are doing for Indian commerce what the interstate highway system did for the American economy. Kenya did something narrower but no less

consequential with M-Pesa, turning a mobile telecom into a parallel banking system that reached unbanked populations faster than any formal bank ever could. But digital public infrastructure is not magic. It rests on a political bargain: citizens must trust that the state will use their data to enable them, not to prey on them. India built that trust unevenly and with real costs. Nigeria has yet to fully test it.

The pieces are in place. NIBSS clears trillions of naira daily through real-time bank transfers most Nigerians now take for granted. The Bank Verification Number created a serviceable banking identity layer, and the National Identification Number program is slowly extending toward something closer to comprehensive digital identity. The eNaira has struggled in practice, but regulated naira-backed stablecoin experiments such as cNGN suggest that the country is still searching for the next layer of programmable financial rails. The components exist; the integration does not.

If exploration civilizations can plug into coordination infrastructure they did not have to build from scratch, the historical tradeoff between adaptability and scale begins to soften. A butterfly field with shared rails is a different kind of system than a butterfly field alone. What would have to be true for Nigeria to make that leap? At least four things, none of them easy. Digital identity has to be trusted enough that strangers can transact at distance, which requires both technical reliability and the absence of state predation on the data. Payment rails have to extend into the productive economy, not just the consumer economy, which means the pension funds and insurance pools that hold the country's long-duration capital must be able to deploy at digital speed into SMEs and infrastructure. Contracts have to be enforceable on a timeline that matches the speed of the rails, which is fundamentally a courts problem and the hardest of the three to engineer.

The fourth is harder still, because it is not really engineering. Rails do not coordinate societies on their own. They need a moral substrate: a shared sense among strangers that cooperation has weight, that obligations beyond family and tribe are real, that the long project of building the country is worth deferring private optimization for. Economists call this trust. Sociologists call it social capital. Robert Bellah, writing about America in 1967, called it civil religion: the network of stories, rituals, and unspoken obligations that lets a plural society act as one without coercion.

This is the layer where Nigeria's situation is both promising and unevenly precarious. Promising, because the underlying moral seriousness exists in extraordinary depth: in the Pentecostal churches of the South, in the northern Sufi orders and scholarly traditions, in the Igbo apprentice system, and in Yoruba cultural ingenuity. Few societies have this much organized moral energy outside the state, and most of it has been remarkably productive. Precarious, because that energy is mostly bonded within communities rather than across them. Where the state has failed and resource pressures have mounted, the gaps have produced specific violent formations: Boko Haram in the Northeast, a Salafi-jihadist current that mainstream northern

Islam has itself resisted; the herder-farmer killings in the Middle Belt, at root a collapse of state security rather than a religious project. The traditions themselves are not the problem. The absence of a civic frame that runs across them is.

These are not folkloric inheritances. Nigerian Pentecostal networks now run global ministries from Lagos to Houston. The Igbo apprentice system has moved capital and skills across generations more efficiently than most formal vocational systems anywhere. Northern Islamic scholarship produced the Sokoto Caliphate, one of pre-colonial Africa's great states, and a juridical tradition that shaped Sahelian governance for two centuries. The Edo Kingdom of Benin sustained one of West Africa's most centralized polities for centuries, exchanged ambassadors with Portugal from the 1480s, and produced the bronzes whose recent return from European museums has become a defining global restitution movement. Yoruba civilization built one of pre-industrial Africa's largest urban networks and exported its religious and philosophical systems across the Atlantic, where they survive today as Santeria, Candomblé, and Lucumí. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, under Obafemi Awolowo, the Western Region became the most rapidly developing in Africa, launching the continent's first free primary education program, the first television station, and what was then the tallest building in tropical Africa. At the analytical core of Yoruba civilization sat Ifa: a 256-odu binary divinatory system that organized coordination across rival pre-colonial polities through a protocol no king could control, centuries before anyone in the West described what it was doing.

The countries that have managed something like coordinated emergence under pluralist conditions did not get there by sacralizing the nation. Singapore built a deliberate civic frame on top of Confucian, Malay, Tamil, and Christian traditions, a moral grammar everyone could speak without anyone owning. Indonesia did something similar through Pancasila, with all the contradictions that come with it. Post-apartheid South Africa tried for a generation to make the rainbow narrative do this work, and the recent fraying of that project is a warning about how fragile civic stories are when economic delivery fails. The lesson is that the moral substrate cannot be commanded into existence, and it cannot privilege one tradition over the others without breaking. But it can be cultivated deliberately by elites who decide it matters.

China shows the other end of the spectrum. The coordination myths of civilization, continuity, and national rejuvenation are real and powerful, organizing sacrifice and aligning effort. They are also what makes Xinjiang possible. A sacred story without pluralist guardrails becomes the rhetoric of strongmen. Any Nigerian version has to be civic rather than theocratic, and pluralist by construction rather than by aspiration.

If the twentieth century rewarded the civilizations best at coordinated execution, the twenty-first may reward those best at coordinated emergence: societies that can absorb extraordinary individual variation without crushing it, and channel it without commanding it. The rails are necessary but not sufficient. The civic story is necessary but not sufficient. Together, in

a society that already has the human energy, they form the only configuration that scales without breaking.

Nigeria has the butterflies. It is starting to have the rails. What it has not yet built, and what cannot be imported from China or India or anywhere else, is the shared civic story that lets strangers in Kano and Port Harcourt and Lagos act as though they are building the same country.

The young man on the stool in Computer Village already knows how to solve the problem in front of him. The country's question is whether it can build institutions worthy of that intelligence, so that millions of private acts of brilliance stop disappearing into survival and start compounding into something a country can stand on.

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By the same author: "Why Biomimicry (or Natural Systems Thinking and Application) Should Be the Foundation of Africa's Educational Revolution."