

Penury for our best and brightest

Thursday, 26 January 2006

By Okey Ndibe

How a society treats its most learned citizens holds a mirror into the society's soul. By that measure, Nigeria, it appears, is nothing short of soulless. A report in *The Guardian* of January 18, 2006 buttressed the callous fate that has befallen Nigeria's academic pensioners, men and women who have given of their best to the nation but are today abandoned to penury, destitution and humiliating death. Captioned "Varsity dons protest unpaid gratuities", the report began: "Exasperated by years of 'waiting for Godot,' the

Association of Retired Professors, University of Ibadan chapter, has sent a passionate appeal to the Federal Government to pay their entitlements in their lifetime."

The details of the plea, made by Professor Ayo Bamgbose, chairman of the Association, were nothing short of heartrending. Bamgbose, who led a delegation of other retired professors to the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) House, Ikeja, revealed that, as at

December 2005, pensioners from Nigeria's premier university were owed the "equivalent of 23 full months of pension arrears totalling N1.56 billion." In addition, Bamgbose disclosed, retired

academics from Ibadan had not been paid their gratuities for four years, beginning from 2002 to 2005.

The protesting professors told the press that close to two thousand pensioners from the university had died in poverty, unable to afford their medical expenses. Their sorrow was illustrated with the case of Professor Fatai Giwa, a recent casualty. A retired professor of physics, Giwa's health troubles necessitated a pacemaker to ameliorate a heart condition. But with mounting medical bills compounded by his unpaid pensions, Giwa was reduced to casting about for a means to provide for his family and to meet the financial demands of his treatment. Stretched to desperation, he finally accepted a job at the University of Maiduguri. But a mere two weeks into his new employment, he succumbed to death. He died a broken, betrayed man. The nation he had served selflessly, and by some accounts with distinction, had utterly failed him.

Giwa's grim fate besmears Nigeria. A nation that would consign a man who invested his energies and skills towards shaping a better future is guilty of many things, among them heartless philistinism. A nation is exalted by what and who it exalts. It is elevated to the extent that it champions noble, salutary

values. In keeping its compact with its citizens, a nation brings itself honour and inspires patriotic fervour among its citizenry. By contrast, a nation that is bereft of a soul is wont to disdain lofty values and to mock that segment of its populace that is most richly deserving of dignity and gratitude.

Even if Giwa's case was an isolated one, his doleful story a solitary exception, it would still be a scar on the nation. But the evidence points to a pervasiveness of such maleficence, the pauperization of retired academics. One is aware, of course, of the fact that other sectors of the professional ranks are subjected to the same dehumanising and abject treatment. The Nigerian state is simply hostile to the idea of rewarding people for their labour. Six years into the 21st century, many Nigerian employers, in both the private and public sectors, still view the payment of salaries as a philanthropic notion. Workers are deemed beneficiaries of largesse, and employers perceive the payment of salaries less as an obligation than a nuisance. To get a job in Nigeria is a

Sisyphian task; to get paid for work done is often akin to bearding a lion.

By treating its academics in a tattered fashion, Nigeria has encouraged a culture that devalues intellectual input. That culture has festered into contempt for intellectuals in particular and the high-minded in general. I remember the days when professors commanded social prestige. Those days, I suspect, are gone. A friend told me of a professor who got up to speak at his home town's

fundraiser. Somebody from the audience shouted that the microphone should be wrested from the academic. "We're here to raise money, not for grammar," the heckler shouted. The hapless professor was then hounded from the stage.

Take a quick look at the rosters of those decorated with national honours. Men and women who have made sound academic contributions are thin on the rolls.

Instead, the lists drip with the power-crazed, including serving and retired military officers whose qualification often rests on their role in violently seizing power and gutting the national treasury. Then there are reams of money bags, many of them notorious for vulgar displays of wealth acquired through questionable means. Occasionally, a few academics defy the massive odds to make it to the list. Even so, a good deal of such recognised academics often come from the ranks of those who, seduced by the lure of power, had made the choice of lending intellectual respectability and imprimatur to the cynical policies pursued by the men of power.

As the son of a teacher-mother, one is aware of the joke that the teacher's reward is to be claimed in heaven. It is a familiar joke of Nigerians, and it is a bad joke. True, teaching is hardly the first career or vocation for anybody whose primary drive is the accumulation of riches. It is also true that the societies that make the most impressive strides, the ones that produce the goods and services that the rest of us consume with conspicuous passion, invariably

distinguish themselves by placing a high stock by their teachers as well as the broad class of their intellectuals. Singapore, China, South Korea, Japan as well as the juggernauts of North America and Europe are good examples of the connection between intellectual investment and economic as well as technological transformation.

By contrast, Nigeria and most African nations excel in exiling, hanging or otherwise exporting their best minds. It is instructive that Bamgbose and his fellow unpaid pensioners had their teaching address at Ibadan, one of the most important centres in Nigeria's intellectual history. What is happening in Ibadan today? A self-confessed thug named Lamidi Adedibu has just "installed" his personal assistant, a near-illiterate, as deputy-governor. This in a state awash with stellar intellectual material. The same

Adedibu, who may never have read a book in his life and who by no stretch can be mistaken for an intellectual adept, is a close confidante of President

Olusegun Obasanjo. Adedibu, who has not held any defined job apart from the amorphous career of "political godfather," can count on making millions of naira each month from the coffers of Oyo state. And these are unearned millions handed out in the crudest, most primitive fashion to a man who doesn't and won't do an honest day's work. Meanwhile, Bamgbose and his retired colleagues, after years of grooming the nation's future, have to make plaintive pleas to reporters to spread the word that their

pensions have not been paid for close to two years. Enough said!

Until a nation invites its best and brightest to be at the forefront of national life, such a nation will continue to play in the minor leagues, indeed to flounder in the squalid ghetto of failed and failing nations. Nigeria has a long list of IOUs to settle, few more important and more urgent than the obligation owed to its long-suffering academics. A nation demeans itself when its academics are shabbily treated, when its retired teachers must raise a cry before they are paid their entitlement.

Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
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Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

Speaking Engagements

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