

A Deadly Game

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By Okey Ndibe

I had no reason to suspect that the news of death was in the air when, late on the night of Tuesday, February 7, I received a telephone call from my younger brother in Lagos. I had just finished eating dinner, and was in that mode of habitual reluctance that always precede my sitting down to write this column. My brother and I chatted for about twenty-five minutes, then the call was suddenly cut off. He rang back less than a minute later. Again we talked about this and that, nothing particularly important, just the kind of catching up that close siblings do as a matter of custom. Again the call was disconnected after a few minutes. When he dialed again, his persistence struck me, in some absent-minded way, as somewhat odd.

As I picked up the phone, he went straight to the point. "Okey," he announced, "a great tragedy has befallen us. Uncle died this afternoon. Uncle Linus." I was standing at the time. I felt faint, I reeled, I feared I would topple and fall. Quickly drawing a deep breath, I sank down on a sofa. The merciless reality seemed to sink in as well.

Between deep exhalations of breath and involuntary exclamations of shock, I listened as my brother filled in the blanks left by his shocker. A week earlier, the

man we called Uncle Linus had undergone surgery that, from all accounts, was successful. I had received frequent updates that indicated everything had gone well and he was well on the path to full recuperation. He was in excellent spirits and looked forward to his discharge. Just before noon on that Tuesday, he was discharged after his stitches were removed. Returning to his home, he was in buoyant mood as he received a few relatives.

It was the day Nigeria was to play Cote D'Ivoire in the semi-finals of the African football tourney. An avid fan, my uncle looked forward to watching the game. However, the prospects appeared unpromising. NEPA had done what NEPA does best, which is supply darkness, so my uncle sat with his guests under a tree in his compound and conversed. Shortly after his visitors left, NEPA seemed to get religion. There was now power; the game could after all be watched.

My uncle died, my brother told me, watching that game. He died, my brother and others surmised, of an apparent heart attack. He died shortly after the Ivoriens scored their lone and decisive goal. Nobody can say with any certainty that he died from the stress of watching

Nigeria's Eagles attempting to soar on clipped wings. But we know that the flickering images of fluttering Eagles in their moment of defeat became the last things he saw before he died. It could be said that my uncle watched a deadly game.

With Uncle Linus's death a generation that provided the steeliest metaphors of heroism for my siblings and cousins as well as me had taken a final bow and exited from the stage. Uncle Linus was my father's youngest brother, and exemplified the impressive moral mettle that I saw in my father and his other siblings. He belonged to a quartet of siblings, three brothers and one (surviving) sister. My father, the oldest, was also the first to dance and leave the stage. That was in 1995. My father's immediate younger brother then followed in 2003. And now, on a day with little augury, followed my father's youngest brother.

We were, my siblings and cousins and I, the luckiest kids for the kind of astute moral formation we received from this troika of brothers. My father and his two brothers and sister modeled for us the virtue of filial bonding. Born poor, they realized that they could not achieve much unless they permitted themselves to be cemented by love and pooled their energies. The three brothers built one house together, and for many years we all lived under the same roof, ate from the same table, shared our stories. From the three brothers, my siblings, cousins and I learned that poverty need not sire greed, that men who had to struggle in order to

put food on the table did not have to surrender their dignity and nobility.

In 1972, my uncle graduated from the University of Nigeria with a degree in electrical engineering, becoming the first person from my family to earn a university degree. He returned to his post at the Posts and Telecommunications Department, rising first to the level of territorial manager in Ibadan and Akure, and then deputy general manager in Bauchi, in charge of North-east zone. He retired in 1992. He managed an ample budget and had opportunities to embezzle public funds, but he had too deep a sense of discipline to degrade himself as a pilferer. One of his colleagues once told me that my uncle was loathed by his colleagues because he would return unspent money to headquarters, this while several other controllers and managers were haranguing the authorities with the tune of insufficient funds. When he was in Benin, a relative of ours approached him for help with acquiring a phone line. He told her there was a waiting list, and she should go and add her name to it. She found it hard to forgive him. After all, he could simply have decreed that she be issued a line, and it would have been done—pronto! But she didn't know something about the man's allergy to corruption in all its manifold guises. She didn't know that when my uncle's wife (who lived in Lagos at the time) needed a home phone, he refused to press any buttons for her. He simply put down her name on the list of those awaiting phones in Lagos. It took several years before she got a phone. It was imperative for him

that procedures be followed, in letter and spirit.

There was a time when I, callow and poorly informed, rued my uncle's scruples and moral fastidiousness. Why couldn't he do what many of his colleagues did? Why not steal a little and build an imposing house in the village? Why not divert some of the budget he controlled to buy what Nigerians call exotic cars? Why didn't he want to grab some lucre and lift himself, and our larger family, out of poverty? Well, the man was not tempted, not by my mute fantasies nor by the expectations and demands of friends and distant relatives. He was not materially affluent, but he was spiritually wealthy. He was content to drive the Peugeot 504 he purchased with a government loan, a car he owned for close to twenty years—in fact, unto death.

As I grew up and became morally mature, I came to admire my uncle's moral fibre, his unstinting avowal of a rigorous ethical outlook. I realized in his horror of corruption the same stoical deportment that my father evinced, the same devotion to doing what was right and honourable that I had detected in my other uncle. Their examples, individually and collectively, instigated and animated my own moral insight. They became the clay out of which, in a profound sense, we, their progeny, were sculpted.

My father's death made me aware of my moral and cultural adulthood. With the passing of my last paternal uncle, I have become aware that my siblings and I as well as my cousins must now set our

sights on the challenge of ensuring that the enduring lessons and lofty legacies bequeathed to us by our forebears never, ever die in us. As long as we meet this challenge, as long as we remember, in all we do, that we have been inspired by men who had no wish to smudge their names and themselves with ill-acquired wealth, as long as we never forget that my father and his brothers prided themselves in their accumulation of moral currency, in their investment in the stock of integrity and probity, these truly admirable men, thank God, will never die.

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
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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About Okey Ndibe



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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