

# Looking up to Ghana

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*By Okey Ndibe*

For those Nigerians given to boasting about the alleged “dividends of democracy” under the present disposition, I recommend a visit to the neighbouring West African nation of Ghana. Their impression, I confidently predict, is bound to be at once sobering, eye-opening and humbling. I should know.

I arrived in Accra, Ghana, on May 17 to attend the 32nd annual conference of the African Literature Association jointly hosted by the University of Ghana and New York University. It was my second visit to that country in four years. This time, as in 2002, I came away impressed by the nation’s considerable strides both in infrastructure as well as human development.

Ghana’s Kotoko International Airport offers the first glimpse of a nation grounded in civic ethos. Both the immigration and customs officials treated you with a courteousness and cheer that was refreshing and reassuring. Emerging outside, one saw a crowd of people awaiting passengers. Yes, some of them pressed forward to offer you taxi cabs or help with pushing your luggage, but you didn’t feel an overpowering sense of danger. The retinue of would-be helpers retreated when I told them I expected a friend to pick me up. When I couldn’t

find my welcome party, a total stranger generously offered his cell phone to enable me to ring up my friend.

A few years ago, my wife’s handbag had been stolen Murtala Muhammed International Airport. The bag contained my wife’s and son’s passports, my green card, all the money we were going to spend on our vacation as well as more than three thousand dollars some acquaintances had asked me to deliver to their relatives. Executed with stunning speed and disarming efficiency, the operation left us at the mercy of philanthropic friends and relatives. One of them even replaced the money I had agreed to carry for others. Once preyed upon, I learned to gird myself around airports. Arriving in Accra at night, I saw a calmer, less chaotic scene than I was used to in Lagos. Even so, I didn’t permit my attention to wander.

It turned out that I hadn’t seen my friend because he had been caught up in a meeting and had, instead, sent his driver. It’s become my wont, whenever I visit an African nation, to inquire about the state of power supply. I put the question to the driver as we drove to my hotel. His report was delivered in a dour tone. Power outages, the driver said, occurred once or twice a week. In the five days I spent in Ghana, I attended events in two

hotels as well as the University of Ghana in Legon. I also visited a private home. At no time and in no place did I witness any power outage. Not once did I hear the drone of a power generator.

Nobody would credit Accra with having some of the best roads in the world. But this much must be granted the city: Its roads are in far better shape than what one sees in most Nigerian cities. Even more impressive is the relative cleanliness of Accra streets. There were patches of eyesore here and there, but the city left the impression that its residents cared about the look of their surroundings.

On the third night of the conference, several hundred participants gathered at PAWA House, the modest quarters housing the Pan African Writers Association. The occasion was the bestowal of this year's Nichols-Fonlon Prize on Nigeria's own Femi Osofisan, one of Africa's outstanding dramatists. It was a stirring celebration, highlighted by Osofisan's acceptance speech, a compendious commentary on the challenges facing Africa's tribe of creative artists and scholars, and also filled with poetry and palm wine, dancing and laughter and good cheer. The event lasted till late at night. Afterwards, a Nigerian-born businessman drove Osofisan, Biodun Jeyifo, Abiola Irele and me to our respective hotels. There was nothing of the sense of apprehension, even of terror, to which one is accustomed while traveling at night in, say, Lagos. Ghanaian police stopped us twice. They demanded and looked over the driver's documents. To my pleasant surprise, they conducted themselves in an entirely

professional manner. There was no attempt to shake down the driver and his all-male passengers. There was no ploy to invent a "crime" and hoist it on the driver. No appeal, direct or covert, was made for the driver to "drop" something in exchange for our freedom to navigate the streets.

This sense of professionalism pervaded every aspect of Ghanaian life. Immigration officers did not bear a snarl on their faces, ready to welcome you, not with a smile but with barks. Customs officers did not threaten to confiscate your personal effects unless you forked over some cash. When a doorman held the door for you at a hotel, he did not make you feel you owed him money for doing his job. When you used a bathroom, the janitor did not ambush you, metaphorically hanging on your shoulder, bowing his head obsequiously and wishing you God's prosperity, all in an effort to ensure that you "settled" him. It was a relief to visit a country where a smile was not paid for, where a bathroom run carried no price tag, where the police did not use their uniforms and guns to fleece innocent citizens.

Ghana chastened me. It brought home the reality that Nigeria, with all its bountiful resources, lags tragically behind. It forced me to ask the question whether oil wealth has not, after all, been a curse on Africa's most populous nation. By most accounts, Ghana is a poor country, perhaps even poorer than the net worth of one or two of Nigeria's ex-military rulers. Why then is this nation able to achieve so much with its humble resources while Nigeria, exponentially richer, continues (in the

inimitable words of Chinua Achebe) to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory? Ghana has been led by a succession of educated as well as highly enlightened, even if imperfect, politicians. By contrast, many a Nigerian derides enlightened, morally astute seekers of elective office as not possessing “what it takes” to be elected. And what it takes, when you ask, happens to be a lot of cash stolen, in the first place, from the public treasury. Why do too many of us deify mediocrity, ascribing wisdom to men and women whose expertise is simply in thievery?

Ever ready to wallow in self-delusion, Nigerian officials routinely wax about producing another Nobel laureate in a few years or putting a Nigerian on the moon or rivaling China’s economic strides. Dreaming is not only good, it is a concomitant of any real and substantial progress. But there’s dreaming and then there’s delusion. The two words begin with the same letter, but we must not confuse one d for the other. Until Nigerians realize that we must get the small things right; until it dawns on both the Nigerian leadership and citizenry that we must first strive to be like Ghana before we can hope to be like China; unless we humbly acknowledge that we are now in the bizarre position of looking up to Ghana, all this talk about adventuring into remote space and mass producing laureates and out-shining China is a whole load of (you fill the blank)!

## 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

To discuss a speaking engagement, please contact Okey Ndibe by e-mail ([okey@okeyndibe.com](mailto:okey@okeyndibe.com)) or by phone (860.306.7843).

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