

Crime and punishment

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By Okey Ndibe

Last Sunday, several Nigerian newspapers reported the booning humiliation meted out to Joe Irukwu, the sit-tight “president” of Ohaneze Ndigbo, as well as other Igbo architects of President Olusegun Obasanjo’s doomed third term project. Irukwu, a former insurance guru turned presidential stooge, had gone to Owerri, the Imo capital, to attend what was styled as the Igbo Political Summit at Concorde Hotel. But a shocker awaited Irukwu as soon as he was called up to speak. The delegates at the meeting heckled and booed, shooing him off the platform. Despite the plaintive pleas of the host governor, Achike Udenwa, the audience remained defiant. They did not want to hear from Irukwu’s ilk.

Sensing the absolute contempt in which the delegates held those of them who brayed in support of the iniquitous agenda of third term, such notorious targets as Senators Arthur Nzeribe and Araraume made their inelegant, hasty retreat from the venue.

I exulted at the public humiliation of these renegades and fifth columnists. The audience’s action represents, I hope, the inauguration of a new ethos in contemporary Igbo political and moral affairs. It served notice, I believe, that the

Igbo collectivity is about to use their ancient, effective instrument of sanctions. Crimes against the communal will ought to invite appropriate punishment. In the Igbo domain, few sanctions are as salient as withholding a man’s privilege to speak at the public square. Make no mistake, then: Irukwu’s punishment was a devastating snub.

About time, I say. Last year, the Igbo Union of Atlanta invited me as one of the speakers at their annual convention. Rather than dwell on the external antagonists of the Igbo, I chose to speak on the enemies within. I reminded the audience that the mess in Anambra, culminating in a three-day spree of arson, while supported by Aso Rock, was actually financed and executed by a few reprobate Igbo elements. I reminded my audience that, first in 1999 and again in 2003, Igbo politicians in the ruling Peoples Democratic Party were the first to vote against Dr. Alex Ekwueme, a candidate who towered intellectually as well as morally over the party’s eventual presidential nominee. Were these Igbo supporters of Obasanjo actuated by any vision of the man’s superior mettle? Banish the thought: most of them were simply swayed and bought by the candidate’s rain of cash. I told my audience that, as long as the Igbo

condoned impunity rather than execrated it, our lives were bound to remain, well, hellish.

A few months ago, Joe Irukwu stood up before a joint committee of the National Assembly on constitutional amendments and stated that he supported the odious third term project. If Irukwu had spoken in his personal capacity, he would be entitled to his grave error. But the man had the cheek to announce that he'd been empowered by "50 million" Igbos to back the amendment. When a friend asked what I thought about Irukwu's posture, I shook my head and retorted that Irukwu must see fifty million images of himself when he peered at the mirror! Well, the voices he essayed to appropriate and betray have risen up in Owerri to menace him, banishing him from the communal banquet.

Irukwu is far from the only Igbo occupant of the hall of shame. The two Nzeribes in the National Assembly, one an old fox incapable of lending himself to any impressive cause, the other a younger facsimile who basks in turpitude, brought their acts to new levels of infamy during the fight over third term. Festus Odimegwu, the Managing Director of Nigeria Brewery Limited and by all accounts a brilliant corporate manager, turned himself into a proselytizer of third term. In this, he tragically misjudged the interests of his biggest corporate sponsors, those who made him such a phenomenal success in the first place by consuming his products. His board has sent him on an extended study leave, hopefully with the expectation that he would learn to separate his personal

interests from those of his employers and sponsors. I hope that the board intends to send him off after his stint of studies. If the board fails, Nigerians ought to boycott the company's brew to force the issue.

Kelechi Nwagwu, speaker of the Imo State House of Assembly, was so desperate to register in the contemptible company of third "termites" that he called a press conference and vowed his willingness, as one newspaper reported, "to die for the actualisation of the third term bid of President Olusegun Obasanjo." Aware of the gains of absurd sycophancy in Obasanjo's Nigeria, the speaker ramped up the rhetoric and took political servility to another notch. According to the "Independent" newspaper, the speaker "insisted that anyone who means well for the country must support and join the ranks of those urging Obasanjo to continue beyond 2007." Then it quoted the speaker: "If I have my way, I would advocate life presidency for him because in his economic programmes for the country he saves lives. Therefore, by the special grace of God, if given the opportunity to be there, nobody would be talking of travelling to Europe, everybody would be here because things would be working very well." Nwagwu "added that the pro-third term campaigners have resolved to die to ensure that Obasanjo continues in office beyond 2007."

The Nwagwus in our midst are able to stand on the dais and make absolute fools of themselves only because, all too often, they get away with it. If he suspected for a moment that somebody might take him

up on his offer to “die for Obasanjo,” Nwagwu, I predict, would quickly turn coward. But where moral auditors are asleep, the Nwagwus who infect the body politic are apt to prowl with profane gusto. It is in this context that I celebrate the moral awakening manifested in Owerri. It was such fitting and poetic justice that men like Irukwu, Nzeribe and Araraume who shamelessly fibbed about their “people’s” support for third term, have been reduced to voiceless pariahs at the communal gathering. In the war to recuperate an ethical outlook in Nigeria, men and women who wallow in filth, actors given to mortgaging their people’s corporate interests to advance their own narrow agenda, those whose odoriferous antics pollute the political atmosphere, ought to be certain that punishment awaits them. The crowd in Owerri made the point that, where there’s a crime, there must be punishment. If the rest of Nigeria enunciates and lives by this idea, many would-be and actual traitors are likely to see the wisdom in disavowing treachery.

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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