

Now, what?

Wednesday, 27 September 2006

By Okey Ndibe

It is a pity that some self-styled elder statesmen are publicly (and doubtless privately) entreating President Olusegun Obasanjo and Vice President Atiku Abubakar to still their voices and abort their feud. These vendors of peace pretend that their solicitude is dictated by a desire to rescue the nation from potential harm and to preserve the dignity of the nation's two most exalted offices. That's bunkum. A nation founded on lies and fraud by its leaders can only postpone its inevitable demise.

The exposure of Obasanjo and Atiku's grave misdeeds is the best thing that happened to the nation in a long time. Until now, Nigerian leaders (including the worst of its military dictators) passed themselves off as patriots and visionaries seized by the impulse to serve. Yet, they invariably left the nation more pauperized even as they bask in opulence. While in office, they regale themselves with national honours. Out of office, they continue to profit from their treachery. Their predecessors garland them with unearned encomiums, conferring more prestige and pecuniary rewards on these ex-rulers whose place should be in gaols.

The Obasanjo-Atiku tiff has, for one, blown the cover of the immediate

principal combatants. It has also offered Nigerians a rare peep into the larcenous ways of their so-called leaders. Thanks to these presidential gladiators, we have come closer to understanding the greed at the heart of most of our public officials. We have gained a glimpse of the perfidious mode employed by the likes of Sani Abacha, Ibrahim Babangida, Obasanjo and Atiku to accumulate their Olympian wealth.

Even if nothing else came out of this mauling spree between OBJ and Turaki, we can bank this much: those entrusted with being stewards of the nation are often lucre-minded men, their fingers calloused with the stain of thievery. Let Obasanjo and Atiku (and their coterie of foot soldiers) fall deaf and dumb if they so wish. But they have already provided an unintended public service, and that strikes me as being of inestimable value. Their gratuitous exchange of damaging information is undoubtedly stuff of great theater. It is tempting to picture the president and his vice as two warriors marching furiously to a marketplace, at once deafened and fueled by the raucous praise songs of their supporters. Once at the hub, the combatants proceeded, as the parlance goes, to "naked each other."

Ordinarily, such spectacle is inelegant, relished only by voyeurs of the macabre and the gory. But when the pugilists are tearing each other apart over an issue that bears on their grand betrayal of their (sacred) mandate as national stewards, then it behooves people of prudential taste not to avert their gaze. If anything, we should be more than riveted; we should stoke the fight. We ought to encourage the fighters, who are more our enemies than they are foes of each other, to slug on. We should egg on the antagonists. We must goad them to approach the fisticuffs with an implacable spirit and an unyielding ferocity. And when some self-arrogated peace mongers step onto the charged ring of battle, pleading the cause of peace, we should scold them. We should scatter their placards and shoo them off the arena.

Why, one wonders, do the "peacemakers" rue the prospect of the combatants' official diminishment but spare little thought for the Nigerian people whose resources have been so prodigally purloined by the president and his chosen assistant? Is it the case, perhaps, that those hoisting the banner of a false peace are scared of the broader implications and consequences of this festival of dark exposures and seamy disclosures?

Nobody who is allergic to corruption and deeply troubled by the relentless abortion of Nigeria's promise would expend energy in search of a ceasefire in the Obasanjo-Atiku duel. If this war is bad, it is bad primarily for the pugilists. In the final reckoning, it is likely to prove a beneficent feud for the rest of us. When a fight breaks out in the ranks of those who have helped hold Nigeria's progress captive, we ought to celebrate the breach

in their iniquitous alliance. My hunch is that, for all their savage sallies against each other, Obasanjo and Atiku are more alike, driven by shared negative impulses and interests, more bound together than the public may ever realize.

Our central concern ought to be this. Now that Obasanjo and Atiku have offered us a small dossier on their unseemly secrets, what next? To what use can these revelations be put by the enlightened sector of Nigerians? For even if the missionaries of peace were to conjure cessation of hostilities today, there is little question that both men have already inflicted considerable damage on each other.

Two lines of action, one short term, the other long term, seem apposite. For the immediate, Nigerians should form a broad alliance of workers, students and the professional ranks to support an exhaustive investigation of both men. Nigerian students are well suited to catalyze this objective. They and their future are most directly harmed by the kind of unfettered, promiscuous raid of the nation's treasury of which Obasanjo and Atiku accuse each other. Nigerian students have only to look back to find a robust and proud history of salutary student activism, dating back to the darkest days of military dictatorship, from which to mine. Their silence in the face of this scandal has been nothing short of scandalous. By voicing their outrage, they would serve notice that this is one scandal that must not be swept under any carpets.

In the longer run, the revelations rocking Aso Rock ought to ginger Nigerians to shake off their accustomed complacency concerning the caliber of people in whose

hands the affairs of the nation are to be entrusted. Despite its rich harvest of enlightened men and women, Nigeria's public space is still dominated by rustics, clowns and mediocrities. During a visit to Nigeria this past summer, I heard many people contend that no "clean" or "decent" person would be able to win elections in 2007. It is time, I suggest, to wage war against this paradox, this tragedy of a nation endowed with surpassing intellectual and moral resources but continually hijacked by those of their number who happen to possess the lowest moral fund and mental capital.

If there is one inescapable lesson from the brawl that embroiled the president and his estranged sidekick, it is this: that both men should never have found themselves at the helm of the nation's affairs. Morally malnourished and deficient in vision, they apparently substituted their fantasy for a nation's dreams. It is time truly enlightened Nigerians woke up from their slumber of indifference, apathy and self-emasculation. It is time they challenged the nation to attempt, for the first time, to rise to our fullest potential. It is time to recruit future leaders from among the nation's best and brightest, to sell them to the Nigerian electorate, and to serve notice that the 2007 elections won't be permitted to become the usual riggers' fair.

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2. The war we ordered is here
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4. Murder Incorporated
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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
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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*.

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