

A nation of big divine thieves

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By Okey Ndibe

What would it take to get Nigerians hopping mad about the treachery and idiocy of its ruling elite? Try this for size. A week ago, World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz disclosed that Nigerian officials had stolen more than \$300 billion of their nation's wealth over the last forty years. And this in a nation where, again as Wolfowitz pointed out, seventy-five percent of Nigerians live on less than one dollar a day. How many civic groups were scandalized by this disclosure? Not a whole lot, thank you.

In fact, for all the attention this revelation has elicited, Wolfowitz might as well have said it was a mere three naira, not three hundred billion dollars, that went puff into thin air. Not one member of the National Assembly, as far as I know, has felt outraged enough to call for public hearings. None of the nation's law makers seems curious to find out who stole all this staggering amount, how it was all diverted, and where some of it may be found. I have heard no disenchanted murmurs from student union activists, or from labor cadres. Told that the sound we'd been hearing for forty years was that of three hundred billion dollars of public funds zipping away into private bank accounts, some of us, it seemed, yawned and went to sleep.

There is something perverse about this silence, this calmness in the face of monumental betrayal. Would it be preposterous to speculate that some morons basked in the news, seeing in it proof of their nation's grandeur? The tribe of stealers and their dissolute fans are likely to regard the news of their gargantuan plunder as flattering. We are, after all, a nation of bigness. We speak big, dress big, spend big, and rig elections big. So, what's so bad about stealing big? Yes, one gets the impression that some of us would have been indignant if the stolen figure were some humble pittance.

There is a cottage industry of veneration around our thieves-in-chief. Visiting Nigeria this past summer, I met many professionals who duly informed me that Ibrahim Babangida, Atiku Abubakar and Buba Marwa were the only serious presidential candidates. How so, I asked? "Because they're the only ones who have what it takes." And what does it take, I enquired. "Money," the simple answer came. How did these juggernauts make their wealth, I wanted to know. "That's beside the point," one interlocutor, a lawyer, told me. When I pointed out the three men's huge deficits in vision and moral capital, I was scolded for being "unrealistic." And so it goes!

We have a nation trapped in a tragic cycle. Those who presume to lead us quickly transform themselves into rulers. They disdain voters, choosing to be “elected by god.” They preach the catechism that all power comes from god, but take care not to warn us that they regard themselves as gods. As a Fulbright scholar in 2002, I had an enlightening encounter with students during a session on corruption. When I made it clear that each citizen had a duty to challenge corrupt leadership, one of my students raised a principled objection. “Sir, it is wrong to attack anybody who has been given power by God. It’s only God who gives power.”

Overcoming my initial amazement, I wanted to discover how widespread was this pernicious doctrine. “How many of you believe that only God gives power?” I asked. By my estimation, about eighty percent of the class raised their hands. I then proposed a hypothetical electoral scenario. “Let’s say there’s an election with two candidates, A and B. Let’s say that A gets seventy percent of the votes, but B bribes the electoral officials to declare him the winner. In that case, would you say that God gave power to Candidate B?” Hands went up with a swiftness that suggested they were in no doubt as to what the answer must be. Then one of the students stood up to speak. “Yes,” he asserted, “I can say that God wanted B to win. If not, God would have killed him.” Many in the class raised their hands to indicate their agreement.

That response haunts me as I meditate on the significance of our collective serenity in the face of news that several hundred billion dollars have been lifted from our patrimony. It bothers me that many of those who pilfered that wealth are still

among us today, preening like peacocks on the national stage, far from penitent or ashamed. A number of them are even insisting that it is their turn to be elected once again by god (read: themselves) in order to preside over the purloining of billions more from our depleted harvest. Each year, many of these thieves line up to receive national honors and other accolades. Everywhere you look, they are being invested with one grandiose chieftaincy (read: thieftaincy) title or another. In the press, they are identified as stakeholders, prominent Nigerians, big shots, godfathers. Instead of being called what they are, plain thieves, the going parlance is that “god has blessed” them.

These exalted thieves spend their days pursuing trysts with virgins young enough to be their granddaughters and other people’s wives alike. Then they devote their nights to demonic conclaves where the nation’s treasury is divided. Uglier than vampires and colder than snakes, these men suck the blood not just of individuals but also of a whole nation. They are Frantz Fanon’s classic example of the contemptible bourgeoisie.

Sadly, Wolfowitz’s revelation does not mean that the era of mindless stealing has ended. Nigerians don’t need a Nuhu Ribadu to tell them that the current crop of “god-elected” rulers are stealing a lot of what is in sight, and much of what isn’t. Ribadu’s exposes, extraordinary as they may seem at first glance, amount in the end to a thin scratch of the corruption that still bedevils Nigeria at all levels, from the Presidency through state Government Houses to local government secretariats.

Why, then, is there such resounding quietude on the \$300 billion heist and

other heists-in-progress? Is it because Nigerians have reconciled themselves to the mad theology that power comes from God, and that the so-called divinely anointed have God's permission to raid the treasury and rape the rest of the citizenry? Is it because this dispensation has emasculated the nation's students, workers as well as the peasants, rendering them mute? Is it because we have all succumbed to despair, incapable of mounting opposition to impunity? Is it because we are enveloped by darkness so unalterable that we have embraced apathy and resignation? Or is the nation quietly seething, incubating some volcanic rage whose final explosion is bound to cause unimaginable consequences?

This much is true: Nigerians inhabit an interesting time. Their travails have hardly been starker, nor has the culpability of their rulers been more graphically evident. Wolfowitz's praise of President Olusegun Obasanjo for combating corruption strikes me as unearned. Obasanjo deserves credit for inaugurating the current war against corruption, but recent revelations about his financial dealings do not inspire confidence in his cleanness. He has been rather shameless in honoring some certified rogues, empowering some corrupt cronies and shielding others from prosecutorial attention. In short, he has made the war far less principled and effective.

Before now, Nigerians had to appeal to their educated hunch when asked to adduce proof that their political leaders were mired in graft. But today, (divine?) confusion has been sown in the midst of thieves. Multiple fractures have appeared in the fold of the fraternal order of

thieves. But unless the rest of us who are being disinherited confront the thieves with decisive action, unless we insist on retribution, our nation may well prove that evil pays.

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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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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