

Our laughing president

Wednesday, 15 November 2006

By Okey Ndibe



President Olusegun Obasanjo

Improbable as it may seem, President Olusegun Obasanjo is in a jovial mood. Mired in an ethical sludge deep enough to sink his presidency ten times over, Obasanjo is exuding mirth. And this information comes to us on the good authority of Kunle Fagbenle, a U.S.-based attorney who recently announced that he's been retained as the president's "personal legal counsel on international matters."

In the wake of a cash exportation scandal engulfing the presidency, Obasanjo's response, according to his lawyer, is to cackle with laughter. Which raises the question: Is this president capable of shame? If he is, then what would it take for him to experience shame?

Last week, Nigerian newspapers as well as Internet outlets were awash with details of the embarrassing financial transactions by Mr. Andy Emmanuel Uba, the president's special assistant on domestic affairs. In 2003, Uba used the presidential jet to ferry cash of \$170,000 into the United States. The money was not declared to American officials, a breach of U.S. law. As court documents showed, Uba then handed the funds to one Loretta Mabinton, a Nigerian woman resident in Oregon. Ms. Mabinton, who identified herself to American investigators as Uba's fiancée, then spent close to \$100,000 of the exported funds to buy a Mercedes Benz SL 500 that was shipped to Uba.

The scandal touched the president, and in a direct manner. U.S. authorities found that Mabinton devoted more than \$45,000 of the funds to the purchase of equipment that were sent to the Obasanjo-owned Ota Farm. In simple language, the president was a beneficiary of this most unseemly of transactions.

A president who makes verbal hay out of his ostensible war against corruption has found no reason to explain this contradiction to Nigerians. Or, wait, a minute: he has explained it, by proxy, and after his bizarre fashion. The spirit of his response is conveyed in the headline of a newspaper report: "Uba's saga, plan to destroy my name—OBJ." The report quoted Fagbenle (yes, the president's lawyer) as expressing the following sentiment on behalf of his client: "the president thinks nothing of the whole thing, but he sees it as a calculated attempt to tarnish his good name."

To read that opening salvo, one would expect that the president was about to

produce incontrovertible proof that the whole scandal was some jiggery pokery, the handiwork of the fecund imagination of his unreformed traducers. Instead of which the president's lawyer himself made a damning confession, namely, that the president's farm had indeed benefited from Uba's haul.

To quote the newspaper, "President Obasanjo, according to Fagbenle, explained that the farm equipment was 'unsolicited.'" Then the ever dutiful but insouciant lawyer added, according to the news report, "that the president could not understand how a farm equipment worth about \$45,000 matter (sic) so much in his farm where millions have been spent." Fagbenle, whose client may need a quick brush-up on ethics, then asserted that "there was no illegality on the part of the president' and that Uba who made the purchase was already a wealthy man 'who happens to be the president's assistant.'" This was the context in which the president, according to his lawyer, "joked" about being roped into the financial mess involving his special assistant.

Why would a president caught in this manner of moral quandary want to let the world know that he is having one heck of a jocular time? What does it say about this president that he would make light of, even scoff at, the scandal swirling about him and his most trusted aide?

One answer may lie in the president's confidence that the National Assembly, the body charged with the constitutional mandate for investigating presidential infractions, is too comatose to ask questions. Surely one thing this president has done superbly is to demobilize the legislature, turning most of its members

into a choir for every inane and evil hymn Obasanjo wants sung. Were the nation's legislators possessed of a sense of their sacred duty to secure the republic from executive harm and impunity, they would long have insisted that the president answer for his manifest ethical contradictions.

Another reason for Obasanjo's hauteur may well spring from his handlers' idea that the best way to erase a scandal from national consciousness is to engage in obfuscation and outright dissembling. That posture can be reduced to this simple formulation: if we lie enough about the Uba mess, the scandal will die. This must explain all the fervor with which the media is being cajoled by the president and his embattled aide to view what was an embarrassing legal defeat for Uba as something of a triumph. We're reminded that the U.S. authorities ultimately released the Mercedes Benz to Uba. We are reminded that the settlement did not allege that Uba acquired the \$170,000 illegally. The EFCC's Nuhu Ribadu, a man who seems to have mastered the art of averting his gaze whenever the president's minions reek of corruption, has proclaimed that nobody has come forward to allege that Uba stole the funds. In documented filings, Mabinton identified the married Uba as her fiancé, but she has now hired a Nigerian lawyer to threaten legal action against newspapers resistant to the revised standard script she, Uba and the president wish to sell. And by the way, she now wishes to be identified, not as Uba's love interest, but as a family friend.

At bottom, the most telling detail about the legal resolution of this whole case is that Uba and Mabinton agreed to pay a fine of \$26,000 to the U.S. government.

Their new-fangled hubris is a pathetic mask for the fact that they were caught, to use a hackneyed phrase, with their pants down. Guess what? Defendants convinced of the strength of their case would have asked their lawyer to wring an apology out of the U.S. government. You don't consent to part with a hefty fine of \$26,000 unless you harbored the fear that your backside could get quite kicked in if the trial proceeded. The revisionist efforts to reframe the meaning of Ubagate, and to present Uba, Obasanjo and Mabinton as victims of some diabolical plot, politically engineered, is, put quite baldly, balderdash.

Uba and Obasanjo have a ton of questions to answer, and if they don't answer them now, then they will be compelled to do so in future. How many times has the presidential jet flown cash sorties to foreign lands? Who benefited from such carting away of stupendous sums of cash? Explaining why he needed to carry such cache of cash, Uba told American investigators "it is difficult to send funds via wire transfer from banks in Nigeria (which operates largely on a cash economy) to banks in the United States." Does the president agree with his aide's claim? When Obasanjo gallivanted around the world (allegedly) scouting foreign investors, did he sell them the wonderful fiscal vision of hauling away their profits in cash? Are Nigerians to assume, going by Uba's assertion, that their president has a special cargo hold reserved for dollars whenever Obasanjo travels around the world? Would Nigerian entrepreneurs, who transact businesses in America and numerous other foreign nations, corroborate Uba's assertion that cash runs are not just commonplace but the norm? Has the president considered the chilling

implications of his aide's suggestion that Nigeria is a nation where cash must be physically flown abroad?

It remains to examine the president's blasé response to the \$45,000 equipment Uba's cash bestowed on Ota Farm. Does the president hope to be taken seriously when he states that Uba was wealthy prior to working for him, and so could easily afford to hand out such an extraordinary sum? Is he willing to persuade his special assistant to produce details of his tax returns both in the U.S. as well as Nigeria? By disclosing how much he was paying in taxes in the U.S., and how much he's paid in Nigeria, Uba could put to rest any lingering questions about his wealth and its source. Pray, what explains Uba's apparent choice to keep his "wealth" in cash, ala Barkin Zuwo, the late Kano state governor?

It is instructive that Obasanjo has contrived a new ruse for his ethical lapses and possible felonious enrichment. Here is a man who, on Nasir El Rufai's authority, owned less than twenty thousand naira after his release from Sani Abacha's gaol. Yet, he is today rich enough to, as his media spokeswoman claimed, make a gift of fifty million naira to Vice President Atiku Abubakar. The self-same El Rufai recently revealed that Obasanjo's 200 million shares in Transcorp were paid for by a loan taken out by the three of the president's corporate admirers. It was not corruption, we were told, since Obasanjo did not solicit the "help." Now, in the Ubagate case, the president's lawyer has said pretty much that corrupt-enrichment isn't exceptionable if the president didn't go begging for it. Some crusader against corruption!

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?

Read or download more titles at
<http://www.okeyndibe.com>

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) or by phone (860.306.7843).

PDF conversions done with Adobe Acrobat Professional 6.0 (US & International Patents) under license to All Hands Business Solutions, Inc.