

A tragedy and the birth of hope

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By Okey Ndibe

I was settling down to reflect on the woeful condition of Nigerian politics when it struck me that we're on the cusp of the first anniversary of the Sosoliso Airline crash in Port Harcourt. It seemed meet to seize the occasion of this dark anniversary to memorialize the tragedy and offer a personal anecdote of hope.

One remembers the Sosoliso disaster as if it were yesterday. I had called Emeka Izeze, this paper's managing director, to chat on a number of issues. It happened that the news had just reached him about the crash of the DC-9 airliner. He shared it with me in a weary, rueful tone. As it happened, Izeze had flown in from Abuja the same day, in fact shortly before the tragic news broke. He continued to monitor updates as we spoke. By the time I hung up, a rather bleak picture had emerged. The odds of finding any survivors were non-existent. It was feared, and soon after confirmed, that all 102 passengers died in the crash, together with seven crew.

Aviation investigators have since determined that the awful crash was caused by a sudden and dramatic change in the speed and direction of the wind known as wind shear. It was, in effect, one of those freak twists of the weather capable of striking and wreaking havoc at little or no notice. But the diagnosis told

only part of the story. The report might have been more honest in admitting the grave technical lapses at the Port Harcourt airport that, at the very least, contributed to the crash as well as made it impossible to rescue any of the passengers and crew. It is a notorious fact that, at the time of the crash, the fire men stationed at the airport possessed only their spittle, no tanks of water, with which to confront the engulfed plane. What is to be said for a nation so far fallen that its fire fighters are reduced, essentially, to using their bare breaths to beg off fiery flares? Is it anything short of tragic?

My sense of sadness at the crash was instant and cut deep. There were several reasons. For one, I incline to the proposition by the poet, John Donne, to that each human's death diminishes the rest of us. The power of this memorable vision of communal loss often hits home on those occasions when death arrives via a natural, man-made or mechanical disaster. One feels a certain emotional kinship with people who perish in a colossal road or air mishap, in an earthquake or tsunami, or else in a genocidal outbreak. In the face of such drastic death, one's response, inevitably, is that one has also died a little. Only those with wooden or stony hearts are capable of nonchalance in the face of

others' calamity. When the casualty list was published, I discovered that I knew two or three of the dead.

Another reason for my deep sense of grief was the fact that most of the victims of the Port Harcourt crash were secondary school students in Abuja who were returning to join their families for the Yuletide. Since the crash happened during the plane's final stages of descent into Port Harcourt, I imagined the horror of parents who looked on, helpless, as their children and other loved ones died in the plane's combustion. As a parent, I can't imagine any sight more haunting and menacing. It is the manner of tragedy that tests the very limits of human endurance. How does one move on after witnessing such an infernal event? Where does one find the inner resilience to plod on, to affect the attitude that life still has some salt to it, that the world still has residual meaning?

My sorrow was also informed by the fact that Sosoliso is my favorite Nigerian airline. On my yearly trips to Nigeria, I have come to depend on the airline to fly me to Enugu, the city that was for several years home to me. While I've had unpleasant and even nerve-wracking experiences with several local carriers, I never once had cause to be dissatisfied with Sosoliso's services. Instead, I always came away impressed by the cordiality of the airline's check-in counter staff. In a nation where flight schedules are often treated as mere suggestions, I admired Sosoliso's dependability, its effort to adhere to its published roster of departures and arrivals. During each flight, I found the courtesy,

responsiveness and general professionalism of the airline's crew a welcome departure from the (Nigerian) norm.

I once mentioned my impressions to a friend, himself a fan of the airline's and a frequent commuter between Lagos and Enugu. The airline's commendable services, he informed me, owed to the vision of the airline's proprietor. My friend had run into the proprietor several times on a flight to Enugu. "He's a genial, unpretentious man. Unless somebody told you, you won't believe he's the airline's owner. He always takes his seat in the economy section." Given his personal example, my friend suggested, the airline staff had embraced a culture of courteousness and diligence, qualities that are still quite rare in Nigeria's public sector but increasingly cultivated by a growing number of private enterprises in Nigeria.

One experience stands out for me. Last year, visiting Nigeria to celebrate my mother's 80th birthday, my youngest brother, my best friend and I boarded a Sosoliso flight from Lagos to Enugu. Upon disembarkation in Enugu, we were picked up and traveled by road to Anambra. It was not until the following day that my brother realized that he'd forgotten to pick up one rather important piece of luggage. The bag in question contained some gift items as well as money and medicine a friend of his resident in Atlanta had begged my brother to deliver to the man's ailing father. My brother was a portrait of desperation. Gripped by a palpable panic, he wondered how he was going to

explain this gaffe, this serious lapse of attention to his friend. As far as my brother was concerned, the bag was as good as lost. Irretrievably.

I had no reason to disabuse him of his worst fears. Like him, I believed it was highly unlikely to ever find the bag. Even if we found it, there was little chance that the money (in dollars) as well as the medication would remain intact. I shared my brother's sense of anxiety, especially given the fact that the designated recipient of the money and medicine was fairly sick. Who would wish to be burdened with the guilt of being responsible for a sick man's worsening condition, perhaps even death?

In the midst of our dolefulness, my best friend stepped in as a reassuring voice. Aware of the airline's reputation, he confidently predicted that Sosoliso's baggage staff in Enugu would safely keep my brother's bag. We received his assurances with cautious hope verging on dubiousness. With nothing to lose, we hopped in a car and sped in the direction of Enugu. Once at the airport, we identified ourselves to the airline's staff. They led us to a room where, lo and behold, we found and reclaimed the prized bag. With alacrity, my brother ruffled through the bag. To our great relief, nothing had been tampered with, not the money nor the medicine.

It was a morale-boosting moment for me, one of those seemingly small events that manage to reinforce one's faith in the ethical capacity of one's people. In a nation whose leaders steal unconscionably, poaching as much from

what's within sight as what's out of sight, a polity that bestows national laurels on men and women who deserve the appellation of thieftains, a country in which primitive accumulation is the disorder of the day, it was refreshing to encounter an airline whose staff conducted themselves with probity. The airplane's crash brought home to us the precariousness of air travel in a nation whose airports are fitted out with antiquated aviation equipment. Even so, I can't easily forget that the airline also awakened feelings of hope in me.

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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