

Season of death and folly

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By Okey Ndibe

This December has turned out to be a season of death and folly for Nigerians. Five days before Christmas, my family and I arrived in the Philippines to join other relatives in celebrating the Yuletide. Each time I travel, I permit myself the fantasy that my serenity would not be breached by bad news from Nigeria. Alas, how wrong one is always proved, again and again.

Thanks to telephony and the Internet, it is impossible to escape the stew of disasters emanating from Nigeria. Four days ago, a friend rang me from Atlanta, Georgia. "Have you heard what's happening?" he asked in that tone that conveyed dreadful portents. "In Nigeria?" I asked, my mind zigzagging in all directions, considering a multitude of scenarios. "Yes," came his answer. "Godwin Agbroko, ThisDay's editorial board chairman, has been assassinated."

Something seemed to choke my throat. Words were wrung out of me. Agbroko? I just couldn't make sense of it. Not Godwin! Not this gentle, soft-spoken soul who was incapable of malice. "Are you sure?" I finally managed to blurt out. "Go to saharareporters.com," came my friend's deadpan response. I hung up, plonked down before a computer and called up Sowore Omoyele's saharareporters.com, a website that has quickly established itself as a compelling compendium of breaking news, informed opinion and investigative reports. There

it was! Agbroko was dead, shot by some unknown assailants.

Next, I went to ThisDay's website, a man desperate for perspective, for any angle that would flesh out the senselessness and utter implausibility of Godwin's death. The paper's version suggested that their editorial page editor was a victim, perhaps, of armed robbers. But far from answering my questions, it compounded them. Armed robbers? Then why did they use their arms but meticulously refrained from robbing? Why was nothing removed from his car? Why was his car left running, the man himself still ensconced in it, his seatbelt in place? Have Nigerian robbers taken to shooting randomly without stealing? Has Nigeria entered an entirely new sociology of armed robbery, where life is robbed but property is left well alone?

Agbroko's gruesome killing hit home in a deeply personal way. He and I had been close colleagues at the defunct African Guardian from 1986 until I travelled to the U.S. in 1988 to take up another editorial challenge as founding editor of Chinua Achebe's African Commentary magazine. This past June, I had made a whistle stop at ThisDay to see him and a few other long-term friends who work for the paper. It was an occasion to recall our days working at the Guardian stable, to reminisce about our experiences and retail our pranks.

Anybody who followed Agbroko's career need not be told that he was an extraordinary writer, a man whose nimble mind was capable of astute analysis and whose linguistic flair was impressive. In a nation where too many of his colleagues suborn their vision to the powerful and rich, where many practice cash-and-carry journalism, Agbroko projected a professional integrity that, in turn, lent credibility to his widely read, universally respected column.

Agbroko the man was even more admirable. He was, on the surface, a quiet man but those of us who worked with him came to know about his capacity for humour. He'd tell jokes, or hear one, and unleash this laughter that came from the pit of the belly. A good joke, whether he told it or heard it, would provoke him to a long, loud paroxysm of laughter until tears welled in his eyes. He was also adept at reciting memorised lines from his favourite African writers, among them Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Soyinka, Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah and Kofi Awoonor. In the middle of a conversation, he'd throw in a line from some novel or play he'd read so many times that its witty lines became branded on his mind.

One was still reeling from the death of such a surpassing editor and intrepid commentator when news came of the staggering death toll from yet another pipeline explosion, this time in Lagos. As I write, the estimates from various news agencies range from 260 to 500. Whatever the final count, there is no question that too many Nigerians have been incinerated in such infernos. Of course, the official script from the powers-that-be in Abuja is that the dead are victims of

their own terrible choices. True, nobody should be fiddling with the highly flammable oil pipelines.

Even so, a profounder way to view this latest mass roasting of Nigerians is that it represents the abject failure of the ruling elite in general, and of President Olusegun Obasanjo's government in particular. Instead of managing the nation's oil bequest to spread well being among the citizens, Obasanjo and past rulers have turned an asset into a deadly liability. The president and his cohorts (like those before them) have gorged unconscionably on the nation's oil patrimony. Their greed has left in its wake a pauperised, destitute and desperate people, willing to tempt death in order to eke out a living.

Think about it. A week ago, Obasanjo was in New York squandering the nation's wealth in a ludicrous event concocted by his friend (and beneficiary of his largesse), Andrew Young. In a demonstration of moral shamelessness, he took along with him Nnamdi (Andy), his erstwhile senior special assistant who was recently in the centre of a money laundering and certificate scandal. Worse, with his presidency damaged by documented accounts of corrupt practices, Obasanjo exhibited little sense of irony as Young and others feted him, garlanding him with unearned praise, and even spoke about nominating him for a Nobel Peace Prize!

Talk about cash-induced flattery! To mention Obasanjo and peace in the same sentence is to display a ghastly sense of humour. To describe Obasanjo as a great leader, as speaker after misled speaker did in New York, is to do grave violence to language itself. Obasanjo's Nobel

fantasy is just that: a fantasy. The Swedish are given to atrocious miscalculation now and then, but a Nobel to Obasanjo, I predict, would occasion a mass renunciation by former and future laureates. Many laureates would simply drop off their medallions at the nearest Swedish embassy—or flush them down the toilet.

Were Andrew Young not making a killing in business deals in Nigeria, would he have staked his reputation on such a ridiculous gambit as championing Obasanjo for a peace prize? Would Young have been blind to the massacres that took place in Odi and Zaki Biam at his candidate's behest? Would he have ignored the fact that, while poverty has deepened under Obasanjo, the president and his minions have continued to splurge, metaphorically snatching food from Nigerian orphans, widows, the homeless, the poor of the Niger Delta and the rest of the country?

Young and the rented crowd in New York accused Obasanjo of being a great leader. It is the kind of conclusion easily reached by people with a vested interest in being blind, or who have chosen not to travel around the cities and villages of Nigeria to see things for themselves. By what permutation does Obasanjo emerge as an impressive leader? By leaving the Sagamu-Benin expressway in a gutted, rutted, impassable shape? By flaunting his several presidential jets and helicopters at a time Nigeria's airspace has become perilous? By doing nothing to improve the condition of Nigerian hospitals, satisfied to fly himself to foreign addresses for medical check-ups even as most Nigerians are reduced to disastrous healthcare and visits with

pastors and diviners promising faith healing?

Think about it. Part of Obasanjo's legacy is to have enriched a few at the expense of the rest of the citizens. While the Niger Delta sinks into militancy, Obasanjo has awarded oil blocks to his friends and flatterers, some of them felons. He talks a big game about the impact of his reforms, but Nigerians are beset once again by fuel scarcity. It is nothing short of baffling that a government that can't get a handle of recurrent fuel scarcity prates about his unprecedented achievements.

The nation is paying a steep price for Obasanjo's lapses. Nigeria is caught in the tyranny of armed robbers who use police officers as target practice and breach bank vaults whenever they choose. Hundreds of Nigerians, faced with crushing poverty, are forced to tinker with pipelines in order to feed themselves and their families. Death stalks the land, claiming its best and brightest, like Agbroko. And for this dreadful record, Andrew Young deludes himself that Obasanjo deserves a Nobel?

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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