

# The folly of the Nigerian elite

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*By Okey Ndibe*

Speaking to a well-respected and highly educated Nigerian recently, I made a point I had not expected to be controversial in the least. Given the moral and intellectual mettle of the field of declared presidential aspirants in Nigeria, I suggested that Pat Utomi, who's made a mark both as an entrepreneur as well as public intellectual, struck me as the finest material. "Oh no," responded my interlocutor with reflexive immediacy. "Utomi doesn't have what it takes to be president."

Taken aback by the response, I riposted: "What exactly does it take?" For answer I got a series of hesitations and fragmentary sentences. Then, upon my persistence, the man said, "I don't think Dr. Utomi has the experience." Pressed to enumerate the brand of experience he was referring to, he simply stumbled into incoherence and silence.

The poignancy of this encounter struck me with new force in the course of a conversation with another Nigerian intellectual based in Sweden. Discussing the Nigerian malaise, this social scientist stunned me by making a pointed claim. "Many people think that Nigeria's central problem has to do with the treachery of the political class," he said. "And there's no question that the politicians lack in vision and character. Still, it's the Nigerian elite that has been most disappointing. It's them, the educated class, whose betrayal stands out the most.

The average educated Nigerian has been a net contributor to the travails of the nation. Whenever I think of them, I'm reminded of Frantz Fanon's dismissal of the contemptible bourgeoisie with which the neo-colonial state is burdened."

It was, as I've indicated, a startling, even devastating, indictment. Its accent is at once sweeping and accusatory. My first instinct was to counter that his judgment was a tad too harsh and lacked nuance. But the guy was irrepressible. In fact, the more I listened to his passionate analysis, the more convinced I grew that he was not simply out to be provocative for the sake of it. I came away with the impression that he was on to something. "There are exceptions here and there," he said, "but the fact is that Nigerian intellectuals have neither demonstrated rigor in their historical analysis nor exhibited the intellectual power to match the depth of Nigeria's postcolonial crises."

He went on to insist that Nigerian intellectuals, for the most part, have abdicated the historical duty of fashioning a discourse capable of clarifying the forces at play in the Nigerian polity as well as charting possibilities. "Look," he implored, "the failure of this class to find a language adequate to the task of articulating the nation's predicament and prospects accounts for the confusion at the heart of the project called Nigeria. Most of our

intellectuals have grown lazy, both intellectually and morally. Their first dream is to be invited to serve in the corridors of power. In order to snag an invitation, they're willing to go blind, to lull themselves to sleep. They are willing to broker all kinds of deals with the Devil. Anything for the opportunity to breathe the air polluted by those who wield power."

Nigeria abounds with ample examples of intellectuals ready to abhor principles and betray historical duty if doing so would bring material rewards. One has only to think about the cast of intellectuals who have prostituted for any government in power, be it Shehu Shagari's, Ibrahim Babangida's, Sani Abacha's, or Olusegun Obasanjo's. Recall all the highly certificated Nigerians who have subordinated their social vision to the task of defending the most inane fancy to issue out of any backward despot's mind. Nigeria has seen an unfair share of rabid rulers. But there's not one of them of whom it can be said that Nigerian intellectuals gave him a wide berth. Instead, like marionettes, Nigerian intellectuals have been all too ready to adopt the same shibboleths, fall back on the same crude modes of apprehension, and embrace the same blinkered terms of analysis dictated by the ill-educated.

Nearly fifty years of dependency on an ethno-religious paradigm has got Nigerians nowhere fast. Even so, Nigerian intellectuals retain a fascination for this unserviceable track of analysis. Fifty years of appealing to the same pool of wretched "leaders" has given Nigerians nothing but grief, grief and more grief. Yet, Nigerian intellectuals remain mired in the folly that one must have a certifiable credential as a failed

leader, like Babangida, Abubakar Atiku, Peter Odili and Obasanjo, in order to be taken seriously as a contender. Otherwise, why would an enlightened Nigerian speak disparagingly about Utomi's alleged lack of experience? Or rue his so-called deficiency in "what it takes"?

The paradox of educated Nigerians is that they can be at once sophisticated and well traveled and yet myopic, if not foolish, in their vision of their nation. An anecdotal case in point was brought home after an Oregon-based publication published a detailed report on the scandal stemming from Emmanuel "Andy" Uba's exportation of \$170,000 on a presidential plane. The report included the photograph of Loretta Mabinton, a Nigerian attorney who received the cash in New York and then used most of it to buy a \$100,000 Mercedes Benz for Uba and equipment worth \$45,000 for Obasanjo's private farm.

In the wake of the publication, I monitored some of the thread of discussion on [www.nigeriavillagesquare.com](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com). It was painful to digest what passed for reactions to the story. Many a commentator was content to engage in light-hearted, salacious banter about Ms. Mabinton's physical looks. Many joked about Uba's poor taste in women, wondering why a man who'd accumulated stupendous wealth and political clout would settle for a woman who was less than fetching, whose physical assets were in question. It was as if some of the correspondents wished to impress their fellows that, placed in Uba's position, they would go only after women of unquestionable comeliness, belles of striking beauty. A commentator

who made a case to engage with more substantive issues raised by the report was either ignored or flayed in caustic language. A feeding frenzy was in process, its tone was decidedly banal, and nobody was going to be permitted to spoil the party with any earnestness.

Lost in all the sophomoric glee and risqué exchanges was a sense of perspective, of what truly mattered. I doubt that anybody even bothered to raise the question why Uba, a married man, would have other amorous interests. Few would venture as far as expressing indignation that the president's aide had offered no satisfactory explanation as to the source of the money. As I recall, not one commentator was worried about the signal sent to the world about the way Nigerian public affairs are run. Titillated by trivia, our educated compatriots would not question the propriety of Nigeria's president ferrying cash in his presidential jets at a time when, under his watch, Nigeria's misery index has deepened. As for moral outrage, forget it! There was a party to be had, and inconvenient facts and serious postures were not to be allowed to introduce sobriety to a carnival. With such an educated class, who still wonders why Nigeria is trapped in the mud.

## 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
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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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