

A portrait of modern Nigeria

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By Okey Ndibe

Here's one of the central facts of life in Nigeria today: citizens of the world's sixth largest exporter of crude oil can hardly find fuel to buy. "Sometimes we queue up all day at a filling station, and then go home without getting a drop of petrol," a frustrated relative told me a few days ago. "The streets of Lagos are empty of cars. You won't believe it."

I believe it. The latest chapter of the fuel crisis began several weeks ago, before the Christmas holidays. During the Christmas holidays, passengers who took public transportation to long distances were forced to pay fares that were sometimes quadrupled. As usual, transporters took advantage of the fuel scarcity to, as the expression goes, make a killing. They never flinch from profiting obscenely at the expense of hapless commuters betrayed yet again by their rudderless government.

A few months ago, besotted officials of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (a disaffected party member recently told me the party should be renamed People Deceiving People) declared President Olusegun Obasanjo "the founder of modern Nigeria." The grandiloquence of the title was calculated, fittingly, to evoke an appropriate comical effect.

What kind of Nigeria is Obasanjo the founder of? A partial picture should suffice. The man has birthed a nation

where voter registration equipment belonging to the (again comically named) Independent National Electoral Commission, are allegedly found at the residence of Lamidi Adedibu, a self-confessed genius of political thuggery. OBJ's modern nation is one beset by the blight of erratic power. It is a nation in which the Ore-Benin road, a major artery linking the southeast and southwest, is for months abandoned in an impassable state. This so-called founder of modern Nigeria has, as his legacy, universities that are ill-funded, a healthcare system rated by international agencies as among the worst in the world, rampant and rising crime waves, blatant manipulation of elections, the misuse of the police to further illicit private or political goals, open disdain for the judiciary, cities bereft of pipe borne water, and a deep, deepening culture of corruption. To this anthology of disasters must now be added the return to an intractable fuel shortage.

In 2002, I was invited as an interview guest on AIT's Kakaki program. The network's studios are located on a stretch of road that runs to Otta, the president's home and the location of his farm. Driving to the station, I was shocked by the road's ghastly state. It was rutted and gutted. Was this not the road plied by Obasanjo whenever he retired to his country home, I wondered? How, then,

was it permitted to deteriorate to this eyesore, this veritable death trap? Once at the station, I put the same questions to one of the show's producers. He informed me that the president no longer traveled to Otta by road but flew in his helicopter.

In the course of the interview, I could not resist remarking on the state of the road. Looking the camera in the eye, I inveighed: "Any president who would leave the road leading to his own home in this terrible shape is running a bankrupt, irresponsible administration."

Just before I sat down to compose this column, I read a news item entitled "Nigerian Diaspora honors Obasanjo, others". The story's opening paragraph read: "The Nigerians in Diaspora Organization (NIDO) has honored President Olusegun Obasanjo with an 'Exemplary and Visionary Leadership Award'. NIDO in America's Chairman, Ola Kassim, announced the award at a dinner in Toronto, Canada, to end the four-day First Nigeria Worldwide Diaspora Conference."

On reading such news, one always wonders what universe the Kassims in our midst inhabit. On what criteria would any sentient being associate the Obasanjo presidency with "exemplary and visionary" leadership? It all reminds one of the asinine assaults on language mounted by royal "farters," political parasites and even some certificated sycophants who made brazen trips to Sani Abacha's court. The same shameless encomiums were lavished on that ex-dictator, disgraced in death and, in the memory of Nigerians, consigned eternally to infamy. Given the acidulous attitude to Abacha's name and memory,

it is often hard to believe that some so-called prominent Nigerians once hailed him as a patriot and the only worthy leader of the nation.

Many of the same elements that committed this rape of language, decency and logic are, ironically, presiding over the apotheosis of Obasanjo, a man possessed of little sense of irony and seemingly incapable of a sense of shame. Were he equipped with a sense of irony, Obasanjo would long have recognized that his true enemies are those hoisting his meager accomplishments as works of unparalleled genius. Had he a sense of shame, he would have demurred when his political party, on the strength of his mediocre performance, broached dressing him in the robe of "founder of modern Nigeria."

Sadly, the farcical idea that Obasanjo is the central catalyst of modern Nigeria has found ventriloquist parrots in all kinds of places, including among the Kassims of the Nigerian Diaspora. At NIDO's Canada jamboree, Frank Nweke, Nigeria's Information Minister, was all too ready to voice the catechism of a deified leader. Accepting NIDO's award on the president's behalf, Nweke thanked the organization for "giving honor to whom honor is due." Not content to stop there, the minister waxed with sycophancy. The honor, he said, "demonstrated that Nigerians in Diaspora recognize 'excellence and hard work,' describing the president as 'the father of modern Nigeria and the savior of the country'". Notice how, in speaking about a president who is baffled by a problem as relatively simple as fuel shortage, Nweke reaches unctuously for divine metaphors. In Nweke's warped

calculation, Obasanjo is nothing short of a god.

It doesn't matter that this god continues to invest all his energy in a power feud with his deputy, ignoring the ubiquitous hardship inflicted by the fuel crisis. The Nwekes and Kassims of the world are in a hurry to forget that the president, until a few weeks ago the nation's petroleum minister, must be held directly responsible for the latest fuel mess. Those trumpeting the president's extraordinary gifts strike me as allergic to the truth. Ask them to enumerate the basis of their inflation of the president and they are apt to respond that he paid off the Paris and London Clubs, that he husbanded \$40 billion naira in foreign reserves, that he has earned praise from G-8 leaders, that he inaugurated a war against corruption, and that he courted sound technocrats, inviting the likes of Charles Soludo, Dora Akunyili, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Nuhu Ribadu and Nasir el-Rufai to serve in his administration.

The falsity of this conception of greatness is easily exposed when these alleged achievements are juxtaposed against the administration's many manifest failures. What is the sense in handing off billions of dollars to the Paris Club in settlement of questionable debts when your nation's roads are in awful condition? How do you justify keeping \$40 billion in foreign bank vaults when Nigeria's infrastructure remains inferior to Ghana's, the Congo's and Uganda's, and closer to those of war-torn Liberia, Sierra Leone and Somalia? How committed is this anti-graft crusade when one of the president's aides is permitted to ferry huge caches of cash on presidential jets? And why hasn't the president responded to grave accusations, by his deputy no less, to the

effect that Obasanjo has engaged in corrupt self-enrichment? Finally, while this president has brought in a few bright stars, is it not curious that the likes of Adedibu and Emmanuel Nnamdi (Andy) Uba, with little proven vision or technical prowess, exercise far greater influence on the president than, say, a Soludo?

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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*.

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