

Why I Take It Personally

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By Okey Ndibe

A few weeks ago, a senior Nigerian journalist told me in a telephone conversation that my columns seemed to take issues too personally. From his tone, this observation was meant as a mild rebuke. His was a critical comment on my slashing, acerbic columns. Why this persistent recourse to jeremiads? Why do I fling invectives at visionless public officials? Why do I excoriate Nigerian misrulers, from local government councilors to the president? What justifies my habit of ripping into the nation's dream stealers with an acid tongue?

My interlocutor's prescription was clear: he wished that I would distance myself from my columns. In his wisdom, detachment is indubitably the right stance for a columnist, any columnist. In his rulebook, a commentator who hasn't mastered the art of maintaining poise and distance is doing his vocation harm.

I beg to demur. In my light, in my school of public commentary, and especially given the circumstances of Nigeria, detachment is a costly luxury. I am the first to confess to a habit of taking certain (public) issues personally. And I'm not about to apologize for it. That was the retort I gave my scolding pedant.

My surprise (make that shock) is that many of my friends seem incapable of mustering, and expressing, the same depth of moral outrage against impunity. In the face of treachery and evil in the

public arena, why, I often worry, aren't more Nigerians fuming? Why isn't everybody furious as hell?

The call to be detached is not new. It comes in different linguistic guises. Some dub it objectivity. Others invite you to see "the other side." Yet others remind you that Nigeria, whatever its ills, is far from unique in the world. Write about Nigerian corruption and you're reminded that corruption existed in the world before the (corrupt) British cobbled together this incoherent behemoth called Nigeria.

The idea, as some see it, is that a columnist ought to approach his task with the disinterestedness of a surgeon cutting up a patient. The underlying logic is that Nigeria is no more the columnist's personal property than the patient is the surgeon's relation. So, goes the counsel to the columnist, "Loosen up. Take a deep breath. Chill."

To which I say: Thanks, but no thanks. I'd much rather wear my indignation on my sleeves. Or, better still, on the tip of my tongue. In a nation like Nigeria, with its misfortune in leadership and its deep, deepening malaise, the problem lies not in speaking directly and fecklessly but in affecting serenity in the presence of chaos and disorder. Sorry, but I'm not versed in the tradition of massaging evil, of euphemizing treachery, or dishing barbs

and darts with one hand and with the other flowers and garlands.

Nigeria is a nation that lives on ever thinning hope. It is a fractured edifice, a nation sold down the river by too many of its citizens, especially those who presume to be its leaders. Born by British fiat and thus branded by the stigma of bastardy, it remains, in many respects, a fictional construct. Some twenty years ago, the novelist Chinua Achebe told me in an interview that Nigeria as a nation was yet to be founded. A fledging reporter at the time, I was scandalized by the dourness of his statement. Today, however, Nigeria strikes me as farther from, not nearer to, being founded.

It is a country of incongruities held together by its elites' shared investment in pilfering its oil wealth. It is a mad, maddening proposition of a collectivity. Its prolonged defiance of death, its refusal to collapse in a heap, defies all logic. It is an unredeemed promissory note, a hope betrayed. Why should one not take it personally?

If I respond viscerally to Nigeria's travails it is because they affect me in a direct, personal way. Some examples should illustrate the point. From 1999 to 2003, Clement Chinwoke Mbadinuju held the office of governor of Anambra State. He was a metaphor for failure. During his misrule, civil servants and pensioners were not paid their entitlements for upwards of ten months. It was a time when misery stalked the state. Hunger laid siege on the state, reducing human beings to the level of scrounging animals. For one academic year, pupils stayed home because their unpaid teachers went on strike. Meanwhile the insouciant governor kept on mouthing his facile

dictum: "It shall be well with Anambra State." How could one behold gubernatorial folly on that inhuman scale and not take it personally?

The New Yorker magazine of November 13, 2006 carried a feature titled "The Megacity: Decoding the Chaos of Lagos". Written by George Packer, the piece was a portrait of a metropolis straight from hell. Lagos, it noted, is "a city where only 0.4 percent of the inhabitants have a toilet connected to a sewer system." Why would one not feel personally outraged?

At the height of last year's rainy season, the Sagamu-Benin expressway was in such terrible shape that commuters were frequently stuck in its stretches for two days. How did President Olusegun Obasanjo respond to this blight and anomaly? With imperturbable indifference, thank you. It is well known that Obasanjo is possessed of an Olympian ego. In fact, one of his chief fantasies is that the whole world should hail him "founder of modern Nigeria." Yet, he lost not one second of sleep over his fellow citizens' harrowing experience. In his conception of governance, all a president need do about roads is to read budgets that allocate several hundred billion naira ostensibly for road construction and repair. But, as many Nigerians suspect, such monies are often ploughed into private pockets. As one who has lost several friends and relations to accidents on Nigeria's ghastly roads, why should one not be angry?

Thanks to official neglect and inadequate funding, Nigeria's once robust teaching hospitals have been reduced to shells of their former selves. A friend recently described Nigerian hospitals as the last bus stop on the way to the mortuary.

Nigerian public officials know this, and they know their culpability in creating the tragedy. You would think, then, that they would lend themselves to correcting the situation. Hell, no! Rather than do so, they (and their family members) are content to jet off to some European, Asian or North American hospital for routine medical check-ups. How can one assiduously practice "objectivity" in the face of such provocation?

Nigeria makes the top of the list of every international index of misery and social underdevelopment. Even so, the Nigerian president makes a fetish of splurging in style and revels in buying state-of-the-art jets and helicopters. He sends off planes on his presidential fleet on irresponsible runs, to pick up one "Chief This" Or "Chief That" or to fetch Ibrahim Babangida's letter of formal retreat from the presidential race. He conveniently forgets that he's presiding over a nation that's economically hamstrung, and that the British and Singaporean leaders don't own a single official jet. He permits his aides to transport large sums of cash on presidential jets during foreign tours. His farm accepts tens of thousands of dollars in gifts from the haul. Why would anybody see this and not take it personally?

Nigeria is a nation of two sets of rules. On one side: the rest of the nation. On the other, the Lamidi Adedibus, the Uba triumvirate and people like them. Their sole rule is that they need not obey any rules. Do they feel like abducting a governor? They have the president's leave to choose this manner of settling a quarrel "in the family." How about razing a whole state? No problem, according to the emperor's decree. To facilitate their design, a contingent of

armed police officers is put at their service. The officers' charge is to ensure that the arsonists encounter no hitches or resistance. Do they feel like impeaching a governor intent on gorging alone on the security vote? No hassles, the president respects their claim to being "political factors" and would ask the Inspector-General of Police to oblige with firepower.

Registration machines belonging to the electoral commission are found in a private residence where they don't belong. Two months later, the only move the police have made in the matter is to berate those calling for the arrest of the stalwart in whose abode the machines were found. I can't seem to learn the trick of maintaining tact when such evil is rubbed on my nose.

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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