

Achebe's Apt Censure

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By Okey Ndibe



Three years ago, Chinua Achebe made the day of millions of Nigerians when he publicly rejected the offer of a so-called "national honor" from President Olusegun Obasanjo. In repudiating the award, Achebe underscored the fact that an honor is often as good as the man who bestows it. Given his dismal track record in governance, Mr. Obasanjo is in no position to confer any worthy honor. Achebe's novels are read all over the world. The man is

highly esteemed in Nigeria, Africa and globally. Obasanjo's decoration would have added nothing to the novelist. Instead, the novelist's assets as a clear-minded intellectual with an ethical outlook would have been depreciated had he consented to the president's offer.

Achebe has had his share of battles with Nigeria's nay Africa's cast of dictators. In essays as well as in his fiction, he has written penetratingly about those who perpetrate political corruption. Therefore, the timing of Obasanjo's bait could not have been lost on the writer. It was shortly after hoodlums had combed Achebe's home state of Anambra for three days making a bonfire of public property. That shocking act, for which not a single person has ever been prosecuted, was designed and executed with the complicity of a president who wanted some grounds to justify the declaration of a state of emergency in Anambra.

A few elements embedded with the president had failed to persuade then Governor Chris Ngige, a man they had rigged into office, to turn over the keys to the public treasury. A plan was hatched to create mayhem in the state in order to

enable the president to declare that law and order had irretrievably broken down. The uncooperative governor was then to be hounded out and a servile administrator appointed whose charge would be, above all, to permit free access to state resources to the cabal that was beloved of the president.

In the wake of this perfidy, Obasanjo's decision to invest Achebe with a national honor struck me as driven by cynicism. At play was a presidential attempt to deflect deserved criticism for the acts of lawlessness in Anambra. If Achebe had presented himself for investiture, his presence would have amounted to a public relations coup for the president. The president's dim reputation would have burnished by the implicit suggestion that Achebe approved of his policies and leadership.

Realizing what was at stake, Achebe seized the opportunity to telegraph a resounding rebuke to Obasanjo. The pointed censure was heard around the world, but especially in Nigeria. Many Nigerians who had long pined for such acts of moral courage felt inspired by Achebe's gesture. The man whose novels have limned our lives had given a voice to millions of Nigerians baffled by the president's ruinous conduct. Buoyed by Achebe's example, I saluted him in an opinion piece titled "Achebe's Repudiation of Horror."

If Obasanjo has learned any salutary lessons in the three years since Achebe spurned his tainted honor, it is not reflected in his utterances or conduct. His demeanor has been marked by a larger dose of hypocrisy and cynicism. He has waxed with an inflated sense of his place in the nation's history, ascribing to himself the office of founder of "modern Nigeria." He has committed the ultimate sin of hubris, equating his narrow desires with the nation's interests. For much of the last two years, he squandered the nation's resources and energy in pursuit of a calamitous dream: self-perpetuation in office. As far as the man is concerned, he is coterminous with Nigeria. For him, Nigeria is Obasanjo and Obasanjo is Nigeria. Nobody should be surprised if, as his last act in office, he decreed that Nigerian history must hereafter be discussed under two rubrics: Before Obasanjo (BO) and After Obasanjo (AO).

Nigerians are on the cusp of what should be a historic election, but the president has ensured that it will be a moment of historic anxiety, historic unease and historic disappointment. He has declared the election a do-or-die affair. And as far as he's concerned, it's meant to be "do"

for Obasanjo, "die" for the rest of the nation. As in 2003, when he and his party engineered a shameless heist of votes, he is again carrying out an open manipulation of the electoral commission as well as law enforcement agencies.

Maurice Iwu, who heads the electoral commission, has displayed a readiness to oblige the president and his party. The commission has sought to disqualify any candidate deemed a serious threat to Obasanjo's list of anointed candidates. It has constituted itself into a superior court, cavalierly deciding which court judgments to obey and which to ignore. In Anambra and elsewhere, the commission has programmed the election to produce bogus outcomes.

Under Sunday Ehindero, the police are already behaving as if their salaries were paid from the ruling party's coffers. When armed thugs from the ruling party spar with armed bandits from rival parties, guess who gets blamed? The police make a point of arresting only those from the opposition. In Obasanjo's do-or-die ethic, PDP thugs maim and kill in furtherance of the ideal of "modern Nigeria." They are an army of "democratic reform." The real troublemakers are thugs from other parties who maim and kill in the name of that "pre-modern, ancient Nigeria" created by the sum of Nigerian rulers who preceded Obasanjo. The Obasanjo government has served a terse notice to Nigerians of the shape of things to come: the Nigeria police recently spent some billions on guns and other killing toys. It is common knowledge, from Harare to Abuja, that the police never turn their guns on pro-government elements; all firepower is targeted at the reprehensible

men and women who stand in opposition.

Given our state of anomie, I was not surprised that Achebe has once again seen fit to make a public intervention. In a short but salient statement issued on March 31, the novelist captured the mood of the nation. He accused Obasanjo of taking Nigeria "as low as she has ever gone." Achebe weighed in on the well-advertised fiction that Obasanjo is a crusader against corruption. Only Nigeria's foreign "friends," intent on willful amnesia, still embrace that myth. Achebe lambasted Obasanjo for derailing the war against graft into a campaign to "go after people who disagree with the president, especially on his desire to extend his tenure." Zeroing in on the anti-democratic drama being played out in Anambra, the writer deplored Iwu's plan to ensure that "only one candidate will be allowed to run in the state."

A president capable of sober reflection would have been chastened by Achebe's well-aimed rebuke. Not Obasanjo. A man who has come to believe in his own myth of infallibility, Obasanjo brooks no criticism, however legitimate and founded. Last year, his erstwhile chief attack dog decreed that Nigerians should no longer pay heed to any statement by Wole Soyinka, the man who, along with Achebe and John Pepper Clark, represent the nation's most prized intellectual and moral figures. Declared an atheist (which, in the creed of Aso Rock, means anybody who doubts Obasanjo's divinity), Soyinka was "stripped" of his right to contribute to the national discourse.

Predictably, Achebe has earned a variant of the same treatment. Following the novelist's well-publicized statement,

Akin Osuntokun, a political adviser to Obasanjo, told the press that Achebe was "disconnected from reality and unhelpful at this point in the history of Nigeria." The Tribune reported Osuntokun as contending that "the novelist lived abroad and hence relied on secondary sources for his information on Nigeria," hence "his judgment on events could not but be impaired and negatively affected."

If there is anything sadder than the fact that a nation of Nigeria's promise and potential is saddled with a leader like Obasanjo, it is that the Osuntokuns of the world lend themselves to the defence of a tragic administration. To argue that Achebe's residency outside Nigeria has impoverished his apprehension of the nation's affairs is to play mischief. Outside of the camp of paid handlers like Osuntokun, where are those Nigerians at home who are celebrating the great achievements of the Obasanjo presidency? Achebe will be treated as a hero anywhere he steps in Nigeria. How about Obasanjo? After he leaves office and is shorn of the trappings of power, I'd like to see him step into any part of Anambra state without armed escort. Or, for that matter, in any state, be it Oyo, Ogun, Plateau or Ekiti.

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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