

The fire next time

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By Okey Ndibe

I've related this anecdote before, but it is so pertinent to the malaise bedeviling Nigeria today that it bears repeating. This sad, saddening encounter took place in 2002 at the University of Lagos where I taught as a Fulbright lecturer. While discussing the theme of post-independence disillusionment in African fiction, I drew my students' attention to the pervasive corruption in what was then fashionably dubbed Nigeria's "nascent democracy." I then shared my view that electoral hanky panky represented the worst species of corruption, and that it often spawned other brands of unethical conduct.

Seeing a raised hand, I invited the student to speak. "Sir," he began, "is it not wrong to criticize people in power? As I believe, I know that God puts every leader there. He chooses the people he wants to use and installs them. Only God gives power."

My initial reaction was that this was a galling attempt at a joke. This was, after all, a class of third year students, not a gathering of unlettered peasants. Yet, I had the sneaking suspicion that the student's intervention issued from conviction rather than fancy—indeed, that he spoke in deadly earnest instead of whimsy. My intuition was soon bolstered by the observed response of many in class. They nodded in seeming

approbation of their colleague's contention.

"How many of you believe what this guy just said?" I asked the class, curious. By my rough estimation, more than two-thirds of the hands in class went up. Stunned by the amazing count, my mind quickly weighed different options for repudiating this baffling creed. Should I ask the students to reflect, for a moment, on the caliber of public officials who had run, and ruined, their nation? Perhaps, I meditated, I might shock them out of their complacent credulity by asking a pointed question: "What sin have we all committed that God should inflict on Nigerians a relay of mediocrities, nonentities and fakeries?"

I thought about all the atheists and even rabid anti-theists who have held political power or wielded enormous economic or cultural influence. I recalled the old Soviet Union as well as the communist regimes in China whose apparatchiks not only denied the existence of God but also went to every length to repress, and reform, those within their polities who expressed any form of religious faith. Did the God these students invoked engage in the suicidal act of handing power to men who would brutalize his devotees? If God were in the business of dispensing power, would He not seek out candidates of exemplary piety and impeccable devoutness?

At last, I settled on a question whose simplicity, I hoped, would suffice to open the students' mind to the folly of their position. "I'm going to ask you to consider a simple scenario," I told the class. "Imagine there was an election in which two candidates ran. Let's say that Candidate A received by far the majority of the votes cast, but that Candidate B bribed the electoral officers who then declared him the winner. In that event, would you still insist that God gave power to Candidate B?"

I had hardly finished framing the question before a multitude of hands volunteered to offer an answer. I called on a female student this time. "Yes," she said, with dogmatic certitude, "God must have given power to Candidate B. If God didn't want him to get power, God could have easily killed him." This response invited approving hoots, murmurs, and fervent nods.

I was shocked. The retort struck me as appalling, and yet powerful in an oddly peculiar fashion. Part of what it said was that, by avowing warped values and living them, the society had made its youth—the nation's best and brightest—susceptible to crazed notions and toxic ideas. When university students are wedded to the idea that power is given by God, then how might they catalyze change or reshape society?

If such a patently wacky idea could take root among university students, then what sector of the populace would be immune to its contagious power? If supposedly enlightened citizens succumb to the lure of such inane thought, then where was the hope for Nigeria's future? Where was the social stratum to stand as

a bulwark against the advance of such pernicious faith?

I came away that day with a sense of the depths, not necessarily of ignorance, but of a fundamentalist faith willing to fasten upon divine determinism, however moronic. There once was a time when only a tiny portion of the society (and usually among the unlettered) subscribed to the idea that every facet of individual and social life conformed to God's will. Today, unfortunately, that misshapen idea has become rampant and deeply triumphant, permeating every level of society.

It's provided one of the most oft-deployed cantos of the current post-election season. The spree to festoon winners of ghost mandates with shameless congratulations has begun in earnest. There's a carnival buzz around Umar Yar'Adua, the PDP's presidential candidate and, by a large margin, the biggest beneficiary of INEC's vote allocation. There are smaller carnivals around the persons of the various governors-selects. The horde of political pilgrims are determined to "show face" to the "winners." This rash of self-interested felicitations proceeds even as most Nigerians are still in a dazed state, reeling still from the "shock and awe" confection that passed for elections. We're talking about a tragedy in which several hundred citizens lost their lives, and President Olusegun "I-dey-kampe" Obasanjo dishonors their memory by describing the electoral travesty as a uniquely Nigerian way of holding polls.

Nigerians live in a time when, to invoke William Butler Yeats, the vile are full of passionate intensity. Coming off an election that's destined to enter the record

books as the canonical case of how not to conduct an election, a steady stream of “prominent” Nigerians have inaugurated a self-debasing bazaar of bestowing congratulations on farcical victors. Some of these contortionists justify their treachery by appealing to the demands of pragmatism. Others seek to burnish their expedient choice by reifying the imperative of “moving the nation (or state) forward.” Of course, none of the croakers of this mantra would be honest enough to admit the near-impossibility of moving a polity forward on a foundation of injustice and treason. Nor are they capable of recognizing that a collectivity animated by disgraceful values can only be moved forward towards the precipice—indeed, in the direction of disaster.

The ultimate prize for infamy belongs, I suggest, to those who routinely ascribe their unconscionable deeds to God. It has become the trademark of a broad class of Nigerian politicians, men and women whose conduct is observably ungodly but who feign piety. They revel in exploiting the ignorance and superstition of a growing number of citizens who buy their facile rhetoric. President Olusegun Obasanjo is a practiced master of this art, and a notorious invoker of God to cover awful actions. In the wake of the recent electoral charade, many a priest, pastor, imam and “royal father” has seen fit to dust up the God ruse.

Those who engage in this deceit, and those who know better but are too craven to vigorously repudiate this illicit doctrine, are sowing seeds whose germination is bound to engender widespread skepticism about democracy and its electoral rituals. Every few years, millions of Nigerians stand in the sun or

rain to exercise the civic function of choosing those they wish to run their affairs. At each turn, a cabal that claims to be clued in on divine decisions works to thwart voters’ desires and dreams. If God decides who wins and who loses an election, then why were Nigerians put to the trouble of going to vote at all? Why did the electoral commission spend billions of naira on a needless prank? Why did hundreds of Nigerians have to lose their lives, and hundreds more their limbs? All the electoral officials needed do was invite reporters to a press conference where they would have heard God reading out the names of the anointed candidates as well as their margins of victory.

Instead, we’re left with the paradox of “landslide” mandates that have produced, not communal elation, but a palpable sense of bereavement and catatonic rage. How many more times can a people stand to be so cruelly raped by a few claiming divine connection before they awaken and proclaim: “Enough! Destroy this bloody temple!”

The majority of Nigerians are visibly in an ashen mood. They are aghast. Questions quiver on their lips. Will this impunity be let stand? How do we confront, and combat, the small band of leeches determined to suck and suck until the nation slumps, comatose? The carnival is on, but the dispossessed seethe in a thundering, gathering rage. When they rise, their oppressors stand to reap hell. As James Baldwin would say: It’s the fire next time!

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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