

# A president's parting blues

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*By Okey Ndibe*



Give it to expired President Olusegun Obasanjo: the man has a promising career as a dramatist. He spent most of the last week of his tenure weeping and yapping, two attributes of a man of theatre.

At a ceremony to bequeath the chapel at Aso Rock to Jonathan Goodluck, the president, according to media accounts, broke down and wept for a good twenty minutes. His audience must have looked on, in amazement and embarrassment, at the rare display of presidential sorrowfulness. They must have wondered what kind of pain plagued the president's soul. Mr. Obasanjo did not keep them guessing. After collecting himself, he confessed that his paroxysm owed to the absence of his late dear wife, Stella, to help him pack up and move his stuff from the nation's number one address.

It's a good thing that Mr. Obasanjo cleared that up. Had he failed to do so, busybodies like me would have had a field day. We would have ascribed his tearfulness to presidential blues, specifically to a condition called acute withdrawal syndrome (aws). We would even have speculated that the president dreaded the prospect of returning to a mortal mode. After eight years of living as a godhead perched atop Mount Aso, life among mere humans must seem bleak and insufferable.

Coming on the heels of his extraordinary lachrymal drama, the president began to make sordid valedictory revelations to the Nigerian people. Appearing on a special edition of his occasional live television interviews, Obasanjo turned in a prize-winning performance. He declared that, contrary to the perception that he engineered the failed bid to alter the constitution to enable him to run for a third term, he was not interested in perpetuation. Had he wanted to stay on,

he boasted, he would have easily had his way. How? Oh, he would simply have appealed to God. And, for the information of his listeners, he disclosed that God had never once denied him anything he coveted.

And it wasn't the most astounding utterance from the president. Ever the diarrhetic speaker, he said new clues had enabled the police to zero in on the mastermind of former Attorney General

Bola Ige's assassination had been unmasked. The police were pursuing the lead that an incarcerated drug baron had ordered Ige's gruesome murder.

Obasanjo also inveighed against Vice President Atiku Abubakar, his favorite foe and scourge. Atiku, claimed the president, had once colluded with Ghali Na'Abba, erstwhile Speaker of the House of Representatives, to effect the president's impeachment. Atiku allegedly handed the speaker a wand of cash to be distributed at the rate of \$5,000 to each willing legislator. As if that alleged act was not perfidious enough, Atiku, according to Obasanjo, also enlisted the offices of sorcerers to arrange the president's death. Why would Atiku do that? To enable the vice president to capture the presidency, stupid!

A day after making the stunning claims, the president received a torrent of darts and barbs. First, Mrs. Funsho Adegbola, the late Bola Ige's oldest daughter, and Professor Wole Soyinka, one of the man's closest friends, tore the president's new theory to shreds. Both daughter and friend scolded the president, accusing him of mischief and malice. Standing up for the slain lawyer, Adegbola and Soyinka berated the president for his veiled imputation of incompetence to the ex-minister. The president's uncharitable comments dishonored the memory of a man whose profile of public service was exemplary. In a cutting retort, Adegbola said her late father's ghost was haunting the president's conscience.

Atiku was just as direct and unsparing. Questioning the president's profession of Christianity, Atiku suggested that Obasanjo was obsessed with sorcery and diabolism. Part of his rebuttal read: "The

President has exposed his own mindset as one that is covered by the cobwebs of juju or occultism." He continued: "It is on record that the President had never in the past denied his association with deadly secret societies." Atiku advised the next occupant of Aso Rock to spiritually cleanse the abode to make it habitable.

Atiku also accused Obasanjo of hypocrisy on the issue of bribery. He insisted that the president was the practiced hand at doling out generous sums to induce legislators to do his illicit bidding. He alleged that the president had periodically bribed legislators to remove their officers who resisted presidential meddlesomeness. He specifically charged Obasanjo with paying 50 million naira each to lawmakers willing to endorse the unpopular third term bid.

The fierce raillery against Obasanjo served as a foretaste of the president's life effective tomorrow. For almost eight years, he had owned the public forum. His every fancy and utterance, however silly or inane, was guaranteed indulgence. Even when he spoke hypocritically, or acted in a manner unbecoming of an occupant of such exalted office, there was a retinue of fawning sycophants to shield him from the truth. The days of flattery are over.

Obasanjo had better brace himself, for the ride is bound to be bumpier from now on. All the unanswered, or incompletely addressed, questions of his presidency are likely to be posed again. A man who brought a controversial stamp on the nation's public realm cannot expect to slide into an easy retirement.

Beginning tomorrow, Nigerians will begin to ask hard questions of this

president, and to ask them with a relentlessness and directness to which Obasanjo has never been accustomed. There will be questions about some of his choices and policies as president. How did he shepherd the oil sector? What did he know about, and what role play, in the orgy of destruction unleashed on Anambra by Chris Uba and Oyo by Lamidi Adedibu? How clean were his hands as he managed the windfall from the spike in oil prices?

He can expect new questions, and insinuations, about the unsolved high profile murders that took place at his watch. Yes, the ghosts of Bola Ige, A.K. Dikibo and Harry Marshall, among others, will stalk his step.

Is he going to hibernate, or would he dare travel freely? He can expect to get a true measure of what Nigerians think about him and his presidency. For eight years, his handlers had drummed messianic plaudits into his ears. They told him that Nigeria's fortunes were tied to him, indeed that he and his nation were interchangeable. Now stripped of the accouterments of office, Obasanjo will get an incontestable reckoning. If Nigerians hold him as a hero, they will cheer him at every public appearance. But if they see him as a poseur who deepened their malaise, then trust them to boo and jeer.

I wonder if the president's tears of last week were triggered, in part at least, by presentiments of a doleful experience out in the cold. I wonder.

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13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
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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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