

Lest we forget

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By Okey Ndibe

Mass amnesia—collective forgetting—is an ally of anybody, or group, whose agenda is to violate the public interest. I suspect that Nigerian leaders—or, at any rate, those who wreck Nigeria while posing as leaders—encourage docility, passivity and forgetfulness on the part of the citizens. If Nigerians discover the secret to keeping a comprehensive ledger of official misdeeds, then the days of many of their so-called leaders would be numbered.

Sadly, memorylessness remains a bane. It does profound harm to the citizenry, but is deeply prized by Nigeria's band of false messiahs, snatchers of dreams and stealers of hope who are versed in the hollow rhetoric of "moving the nation forward." Since their main job is to fatten themselves at the expense of the rest of us, these villains go out of their way to keep the rest of us in a state of blindness.

Blindness—an apt figurative description for a state bereft of memory—gives public officials the license to act with impunity. At the end of his quietly powerful novel, *A Man of the People*, Chinua Achebe offers us a moving metaphor of the kind of monstrosity borne of an atmosphere of moral complacency. Achebe writes about "a regime in which you saw a fellow cursed in the morning for stealing a blind man's stick and later in the evening saw him again mounting the altar of the new shrine in the presence of all the people to

whisper into the ear of the chief celebrant..."

Achebe's thief—despised one moment and the next moment seen treading the sacred ground to commune with the priest—can thrive only by securing communal indifference or nonchalance. In like manner, Nigeria's agbada-sporting knaves who fleece the commonwealth prize memorylessness. Day and night, as they plot, and act, to siphon the nation's resources into private pockets, these men and women seek to deflect our attention. They succeed only when the rest of us forget.

That's why it behooves enlightened citizens to keep themselves informed, to retain a healthy skeptical stance in relation to officialdom's narcotizing nostrums, and to ensure that the mechanism of social remembrance is in a permanent state of activation.

In the spirit of keeping memory alive and vital, an antidote to the spew of falsehoods supported by official imprimatur, one has decided to exhume a few recent issues and controversies—lest we forget.

Lest we forget, the Olusegun Obasanjo regime "revealed" to the world in April that security operatives had apprehended a truck loaded with explosives. The truck's immediate mission, the government alleged, was to bring down

the offices of the Independent National Electoral Commission. Nigerians were even shown pictures of a handcuffed man, the alleged suicide bomber who drove the bomb-laden truck. Government spokesmen spoke volubly about those behind this Iraq-style terror plot aimed at thwarting INEC's conduct of the elections. The unnamed sponsors, we learned, were desperate politicians who'd divined their poor electoral prospects.

Government officials gloated. Their frustration of the horrific plot, they said, testified to the preparedness of the nation's law enforcement apparatus to deal with mischief-makers. Sunday Ehindero, then Inspector-General of Police, weighed in. He promised to prosecute the plot's faceless masterminds. Were the story true, it would have represented a dark and disturbing new chapter in Nigeria's experience.

Some Nigerians—perhaps many—fell for the poppycock. A credulous friend called me, his voice quaking with awe and dread. "Okey," he said, "Nigeria is finished o. We're now getting suicide bombers too." He was scandalized when I told him I didn't believe a lick of it. "Do you think the government—any government—would make up a story like this?" His innocence was touching. "Governments regularly make up this kind of story," I retorted.

Three months later, there is nothing but conspicuous silence about this suicide bomber jiggery pokery. For all his huffing, Ehindero made an ignoble exit from his perch at police headquarters without muttering another word on the issue. Ehindero's successor, Mike Okiro, has (wisely) being mum on the matter. Not even Obasanjo, author of the do-or-

die strategy that must have spawned the "terror attack" script, or any of his battery of apologists, has shown any inclination to revisit the drama.

But if those who manufactured this elaborate hoax have opted to abandon it, Nigerians cannot afford to forget. It was calculated to scare the hell out of Nigerians, and to portray the country to foreigners as a terrain in which the bloody modus operandi of the suicide bomber was going to come into play. Show me who came up with this stunt and I will show you the most unpatriotic Nigerian alive.

Lest we forget, Obasanjo—in the dying days of his misrule—used the occasion of his last media chat to make a sensational claim. He told the nation that the police had discovered the identity of the man who ordered the assassination of former Attorney General Bola Ige. According to Obasanjo, the culprit was a drug baron. Many found the timing of this presidential revelation suspect. Funsho Adegbola, Bola Ige's oldest daughter, rose to a quick dismissal of this bit of presidential fiction. Mrs. Adegbola said—in language whose highly revealing import was not lost on Nigerians—that the new fangled speculation meant that the ghost of her late father haunted Obasanjo.

At first, Ehindero seemed incapable of mustering the gumption to legitimize the president's weird theory. He spoke to reporters in an accent that suggested that he was demurring. But a malleable man with no spine soon falls for any bait. "Properly briefed," Ehindero came out the next day to parrot the president's line along with a pledge to parade the drug baron in question. But the farcical drama

of exposure, poorly rehearsed, collapsed at Ehindero's hands. The alleged mastermind openly scoffed at Ehindero's puppet show, complete with a masked witness. Seized by uncontrollable guffaws, the alleged sponsors of the assassins told a discombobulated Ehindero: "This is like going to a theatre." He might have added, "Puerile theatre." To his credit, Okiro has kept his distance from the Obasanjo-Ehindero script. Nigerians must demand: If the former president's fantasy about Ige's killer is going nowhere, then who, really, killed the former attorney general?

Lest we forget, armed thugs swept through Anambra in November of 2004 and, in burning every major public facility, left us a frightening portrait of man-made disaster. The arsonists swarmed the state in a convoy of numerous trucks and they operated for three days. Contrary to what might be expected of hoodlums engaged in the most reckless of crimes, these ones wore no masks. They were without a tinge of fear. Understandably, for the state police command was apparently under strict orders not to hinder the arsonists in any fashion—but, in fact, to facilitate their dastardly work. The police did an impeccable job of it, hailing the slash and burning horde from the sidelines—all of this captured on television.

So outrageous was the wholesale assault, and so open the complicity of the police, that Audu Ogbe, then chairman of the ruling party, was compelled to scold Obasanjo in a public letter. In a hectoring response, Obasanjo claimed that the police had arrested some of the arsonists, and would soon bring them to justice. Three years later, if anybody has been charged to court on account of that

affront then it is a secret known only to Obasanjo. But Nigerians must ask: Who paid those thugs to burn and destroy public property? Who instructed the police to give the relay of arsonists unhindered roaming rights?

There are many more events that we must continually seek to bear in mind—lest we forget. There is the genocide of Zaki Biam and Odi. The lending of the police to political great grand godfather Lamidi Adedibu in his drive to sack Rasheed Ladoja from the governor's office in Ibadan. There is the smuggling out of \$170,000 on a presidential jet bound for New York City. There is the scandal involving Chioma Anasoh, a woman linked to former Aviation Minister Femi Fani Kayode. On June 27, she was caught on her way to London—allegedly with more than a couple hundred thousand dollars she had failed to declare. There is the scandal of Obasanjo's presidential library and the billions of naira funneled into it by businessmen and governors alike.

Those who reap from such violations of our patrimony would want us to forget, for that's how they win. We, whose aspirations and dreams they abort, must insist on remembering—and on seeking restitution. That is the recipe for salvaging our collective promise.

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

To discuss a speaking engagement, please contact Okey Ndibe by e-mail (okey@okeyndibe.com) or by phone (860.306.7843).

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