

A female speaker's manly vices

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By Okey Ndibe

It is time to banish Patricia Etteh, Speaker of the House of Representatives, from her perch. She has displayed a quality of arrogance and insensitivity to the national mood that is difficult to stomach from an occupant of her exalted position. In a season of national misery and disquiet, she has proved herself an insouciant fan of revelry, self-aggrandizement and squandermania.

Etteh, to hear her adulators say it, was supposed to be different. When she was chosen to steer the House of Representatives—and to be three heartbeats away from assuming the presidency—she was projected as a dark horse capable of meeting—even surpassing—national expectations. Some of us had serious misgivings about her qualifications, but we opted to give her the benefit of the doubt. Part of the trouble lay—to state it euphemistically—in her humble education and in her antecedents as a hairdresser. With careful grooming, guidance and astute effort, anybody could rise to the challenges of lawmaking. But to jump from hairdresser to speaker? That seemed a stretch. She may have been at the top of the hairdressing game, but did she have what it took to pilot the country's legislative business?

Those who celebrated her ascendancy choose symbolism and tokenism over substance. She was the first woman in

Nigeria's history ever to be chosen as speaker, and that fact was the sum of it. Former President Olusegun Obasanjo had, for reasons only he can reveal, anointed her. Those who championed her improbable enthronement as leader of the nation's most representative body made a lot of hay out of her gender. She was sold as a worthy representative of Nigerian womenfolk, an embodiment of the capacity of women to alter the toxic tone of politics set by men. An implicit expectation was raised, that Etteh would bring feminine finesse and nobility to the affairs of the legislative chamber.

Perhaps those who marketed Mrs. Etteh did not really know her, or perhaps she has, chameleon-like, changed overnight. Whatever may be the case, this much is clear: Nigeria's first Madam Speaker is exhibiting every (male) vice in town. Her record so far has been undistinguished and uninspiring.

Far from being a great advertisement for women, Etteh, judging by recent revelations of her bizarre choices, has cast herself in poor light. She is as thin in legislative credentials as she is big in crassness.

Etteh's leadership of the lower chamber has been inept. She has gone out of her way on several occasions to stave off legitimate attempts to probe how her mentor, Obasanjo, disposed of certain

national assets in the dying hours of his administration. She has otherwise not chalked up any impressive legislative agenda. If she has a menu of bills targeted at addressing the nation's myriad crises, she has done an excellent job of keeping it a secret. Her inability to push any legislative initiative with the potential of bettering the lot of Nigerians cannot possibly make her an icon of Nigerian women.

But if legislative ineptitude were Etteh's only deficit, it might be readily forgiven her. But ineptitude compounded with greed is a lethal combo in any public official, man or woman.

Two weeks ago, Etteh flew out to the U.S. with a complement of personal staff and numerous fellow legislators in tow. Part of her plan—and her entourage's—was to bask in a birthday bash to mark the speaker's 54th anniversary. The location of the party was swanky Bowie in the state of Maryland, right next to Washington, DC, the seat of U.S. power. Had the event taken place on the scale of its original conception, it would have made a huge splash and left many American observers with stories to tell for years. In fact, it would have registered 9.7 on the Ovation scale.

Sadly for the speaker, a nosy reporter blew the cover on the party. Following the embarrassing press, the speaker's office went into spin mode. Mrs. Ette, her office said, was in the States for medical check-up, not for the business of dancing the night away. Even so, a party did hold, albeit scaled back. Most of the junketing legislators who had come into town for the occasion were too timid to show up at the venue. Ensnared in their hotel rooms, they and the speaker must have

rued the media's newfound role as killjoys.

Etteh's American party exposed the speaker as one in kind with many Nigerian politicians. These politicians receive their paychecks and lucre from Nigeria, but their minds and souls are in North America, Britain, Europe or Dubai. They fleece Nigeria and feather their personal nests abroad. Neither Etteh nor her battery of aides could figure out that it stunk for the speaker to celebrate her birthday—the first, too, since her elevation—in America. What kind of laws or legislative leadership can be expected from a speaker with such errant moral compass and terrible political instincts?

As it happened, partying in America was far from the speaker's greater flaws. According to her critics—members of the house, no less—Etteh spent more than 600 million naira to renovate her official residence as well as that of her deputy, and to buy plush cars for her own use. And this in a country where 70 percent of the citizens exist in abject conditions, where hordes of youngsters scavenge refuse dumps and live off of fetid pickings, where millions of graduates go jobless for years, where the Sagamu-Ore-Benin expressway is impassable, where many residents of Rivers State are caught in a dire choice between dying from "militant" or military gunfire. Given these harsh circumstances, Madam Etteh's profligacy is worse than obscene. It is also depraved.

But wait, it gets more interesting. Under relentless barrage for her thoughtless wastage of public funds, Etteh found fit not to budge from her stolid silence. A protégée of Obasanjo, she seemed to have mastered the art of nonchalance in the

face of public outrage at her impunity. Inoculated—like Obasanjo—to public rage, Etteh (as at the time of this writing) has not personally spoken on the renovation scandal. No contrition. No denial. Nada! Perhaps, like her mentor—Nigeria’s reigning mischief-maker-in-chief—she doesn’t bother to read local newspapers.

But her apologists have been speaking, and what they have to say is simply moronic. Eziuche Ubani, chairman of the committee on media and publicity, told the press a few days ago that the award for the renovation was far less than the N628 million touted by Etteh’s critics. The correct figure, he asserted, was only N238 million. To hear Ubani make the case, it’s as if N238 million—roughly two million dollars—is peanuts!

Why should the renovation of any Nigerian public official’s residence gulp two million dollars? Ubani posed the question, and gave a telling answer: “Now, questions have been asked about why that money should be spent on the house. The last time such major work was done in the complex was in 2003. This time, the job was extended to include rebuilding of the perimeter fence, outside works, and furnishing of the four houses in the complex.”

Ubani’s reasoning, in all charity, is unreasonable. Is he unaware that N200 million naira can build many comfortable homes for Nigerians? If it costs this much to renovate two residences, then what did it cost to build them? Why was it necessary to refurbish houses that must have had furniture? If the previous speaker and his deputy had illegally carted away furniture, should Etteh not have asked the police to go after them?

Why must Nigerian officials—whose greed and treachery pauperize the populace—wallow in opulent and gaudy abodes even as a growing number of the nation’s urban dwellers are homeless, or squat in shacks?

Did Ubani expect to be taken seriously in pointing out that the speaker’s official quarters had not been renovated since 2003? Who did he think he was kidding? How many Nigerians, including the wealthy, renovate their homes every four years? And of those who do, how many would throw two hundred million naira into the job? Even if the speaker were a billionaire, would she have invested the royal sum of two hundred million naira to refurbish her private home?

Ubani’s effete attempt at justification merely exposed elitist callousness. One of the speaker’s defenders even reminded Nigerians that Senate President David Mark had poured in more than N400 million into the renovation of his own residence. Mark’s financial recklessness does not make the speaker’s excesses right. It makes both Mark and Etteh wrong.

If it’s true that Mark is spending such a shocking amount on renovation, then he too deserves rustication. No Nigerian public official should be allowed to get away with prodigality on this unconscionable scale. Nigerian roads are a mess. Nigerian healthcare is scary. University and polytechnic students live in squalid, subhuman dormitories. Armed robbers are the lords of Nigerian streets both in daylight and at night. As misery worsens in Nigeria, why is it that already over-pampered officials can think only of gorging ever more on the trough?

Nigerians ought to demand a breakdown of all the so-called renovation work on the official quarters, along with accompanying cost estimates. Afterwards, this misfit of a speaker should be asked to step down. Or, better still, sacked.

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