

Looking beyond Etteh

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By Okey Ndibe

No Nigerian newspaper that I read last week failed to grasp the import of the David Idoko report on the N628 million renovation scandal starring Speaker Patricia Etteh. Each newspaper's headline correctly noted that Etteh was "indicted."

The nine-member panel returned a devastating verdict. Fundamentally, it established that the obscene renovation contract did not follow due process. Etteh, contrary to the impression she wished to leave, was deeply involved in generating quotations for the contracts. Indeed, the memoranda for the award of contracts were raised before some of the job quotations were processed. Idoko also revealed that, contrary to the embattled speaker's protestations, the bulk of the contract sum—N238 million—was to be spent on the main house, not on its "cluster of structures."

Despite this plain and unambiguous indictment, Etteh has asked those calling for her resignation to perish the thought. She persists in proclaiming herself innocent. Curiously, as soon as Idoko presented his report, the house tainted by sleaze proceeded on a two-week recess. Etteh's sponsors and rescue team, including Olusegun Obasanjo and Emmanuel Nnamdi Uba, the ex-president's factotum, were in New York at an event where some of Nigeria's ugly faces "met the world."

The two-week recess would buy time. Time to permit Etteh to press the weird case of her innocence. Time to enable her godfathers to mobilize in her defence. Time to embolden her ruling party, the party that Obasanjo re-engineered, to tell the rest of us to back off because "this whole renovation thing is now a family affair." Time to shop for morally blind members of the devalued house who would not only shamelessly declaim the speaker's innocence but also declare her deserving of elevation to sainthood. Time for Etteh's camp to fine tune the message that she is more sinned against than sinning, that she is a victim of persecution by disgruntled elements seized by a sense of entitlement to plum committee assignments. The real villains, we would be told, are these sulking representatives determined to use blackmail and cheap tricks to undo what the god of Ota had wrought. In two weeks, Etteh and co would unfurl its new banners: "Etteh the ethereal speaker!" "Etteh, outstanding as a hair dresser; a genius of a speaker." "Etteh, the woman who saved Nigeria billions of naira by choosing not to stay in a five-star hotel." "Etteh, innocence personified!"

To which the nation should respond: If Etteh is innocent, if she is a prudent manager of money rather than a mindless guzzler of public funds, then Nigeria is not Nigeria but Singapore! For me, if Etteh is blameless, then I hereby invite all

and sundry to my coronation next week as the last King of Scotland!

That Etteh just doesn't get speaks volumes about her wretched ethical funds. It is also a commentary on her warped understanding of the state of Nigeria. For me, the Idoko panel was not actually necessary. Even if the renovation contract had met every criterion of due process, the speaker would still be guilty. Her sin lay in approving the expenditure of more than six million dollars in the renovation of two official residences—and to spoil her deputy and herself with a few cars. Even in the richest countries in the world, that kind of prodigality would have shocked and awed the citizenry.

What was Etteh thinking? Did she think she was speaker in Dubai? Did she forget that she holds the fourth most exalted political office in a country where the minimum monthly wage is about N10,000? Did she not know that, driving five or so miles in any direction from her palatial official abode, she would run into shanty slums bereft of habitable conditions, where hope runs as thin as food? Did it escape her that she is speaker in a country where millions of university graduates go years without jobs; where crushing poverty inflicts all manner of indignities on hardworking citizens; where a growing number scavenge refuse dumps for their meals; where, as the oft-quoted (and therefore numbing) factoid goes, more than 70 percent of the citizens exist on roughly a dollar per day? Did Etteh not remember that millions of Nigerians are compelled by dire circumstances to feast on rats and other unappetizing fare?

Should Etteh elect not to resign, or her sponsors choose to shield her from a

richly deserved fall from grace, then Nigerians ought to be just as determined to let her—and her champions—hear about it. An Obasanjo who punished Nigerians with frequent fuel price increases should be chased off the square if he, or his agents, ever attempt to justify Etteh's profligacy. Labor leaders ought to serve notice of their willingness to call a general strike to protest this impunity. University and polytechnic students, condemned to living in slummy shacks, ought to stand up to resist Etteh's egregious assault on reason.

As the nation braces for the next sordid chapter in Etteh's renovation scandal, it is pertinent to admit that Etteh is far from a unique case. Properly understood, the scandal is symptomatic of a larger malaise. Etteh is a synecdoche for what Frantz Fanon aptly identified as a contemptible elite, a class fixated on privilege and alienated by its parasitism and lack of vision from the lives of the vast majority of Nigerians.

As the first woman in Nigeria's history to occupy the seat of speaker, Etteh must be seen, also, in the context of an excellent principle misapplied. In a lot of ways, Nigerian women are the heroes of the nation's drama. Disproportionately burdened by atrocious public policies, it often falls to them to devise ingenious ways of fending for children and husbanding their families' disappearing resources. No just Nigerian man would suggest that the womenfolk are anywhere near responsible for the nation's myriad woes as the men. If the last eight years are anything to judge by, then it could be argued that the female members of Obasanjo's cabinet—among them Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and Oby Ezekwesili—acquitted themselves most creditably.

It was a sound goal to recruit a woman as a speaker. If you ask me, the political parties should have prospected in the pool of women for presidential candidates. A female speaker is a good thing; Etteh as that speaker was at once a cynical and tragic choice. And that poor choice was made, one suspects, with Obasanjoian spite (and perhaps a little mischief). Given an opportunity to empower women and showcase female talent, Obasanjo and the PDP opted for a choice that disesteemed women and gave misogynists fodder for lacerating comedic sallies.

As the nation insists on Etteh's disgraceful vacation (her defiance has earned her this disgrace), we must insist that another woman—a more enlightened, morally astute candidate—ascend to her seat. In fairness to Etteh, she is far from the only public official infected by the virus of self-aggrandizement, greed, ineptitude and visionlessness. Many men—make that most men—who occupy exalted positions are just as morally confused and inept. Nigeria's aspiration to greatness is bound to remain a hollow dream as long as such tragic characters with extra-large egos are permitted to run its affairs. Nigeria has enough talent in every field not to have to settle for mediocrities and also-rans. Let us root out the Ettehs in our public lives, whether they be male or female.

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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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*.

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