

My poverty-pulverized self

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By Okey Ndibe

Also see: "Dr" "Andy" Uba's camp fight back [Responses to Okey Ndibe's "My vote for Andy Uba"]

Last week, following reports that Nnamdi Uba had exhumed his ambition to become governor of Anambra State, I asked two broad questions in my column. One was that Mr. Uba—who is best known as Andy—establish the veracity of his academic credentials. Uba's political website had listed him as possessing three earned degrees, including a Ph.D. But investigations by Sowore Omoyele of saharareporters.com, an assiduous, if unconventional, reporter, had cast serious doubt (some would argue definitive) on those claims.

Two, since any person who would be a governor is expected to have sound ethical acumen, I wondered aloud about the source of Uba's famed wealth. This was far from an idle question, for Uba, from all available information, was a man of modest means prior to his 1999 appointment as former President Olusegun Obasanjo's domestic aide.

How could one have conjectured that Uba was wealthy? We have Obasanjo's word for it. In 2004, Uba had ferried \$170,000 in cash on a presidential jet while traveling with Obasanjo to New York City. He failed to declare the cash to U.S. authorities, a breach of American law. Thanks to court documents that were first uncovered by saharareporters.com, we know that Uba

(who is married) handed the cash to one Loretta Mabinton, identified as his fiancée.

American authorities took an interest in this cash haul when Mabinton spent close to \$100,000 to buy a Mercedes Benz car for Uba. As U.S. officials snooped into Mabinton's finances, they discovered that she'd also used \$45,000 to purchase equipment for Obasanjo's Temperance Farm.

Many Nigerians raised questions, first about the source of Uba's undeclared cash and second about the propriety of the president receiving such an expensive gift from one of his aides. Mr. Obasanjo scoffed. Uba, he said, had made a fortune long before he came to Abuja to take up a middling political appointment.

Obasanjo's narrative had holes. If Uba was a millionaire in America, then why didn't he write a cheque from one of his U.S. accounts for the car and farm equipment instead of transporting cash from Nigeria? Or did he close all his accounts and transfer his assets to Nigeria? In which case, he'd have a record of such a transfer. At any rate, when American officials questioned him about the source of the \$170,000, why didn't he assert that it was part of the money he'd repatriated to Nigeria?

Part of my dream is to see Nigeria's public space rid of charlatans, usurpers, pretenders and fly-by-nights. In the particular case of Anambra, my home state, one has been consternated by its perennial impoverishment and betrayal. Enough's enough.

If a man with Uba's ethical baggage insists on "ruling" Anambra, then he should be prepared, at minimum, to declare his assets and liabilities. The people of Anambra deserve to know who he is. Where discrepancies exist between who he claims to be and the revealed record, it behooves him to reconcile the account. That's why I asked unsparing questions in last week's column entitled "My Vote for Andy Uba".

Uba's response came in the form of two diatribes, one titled "Okey Ndibe on Andy Uba" and written by one Jerome Azubuko, the other captioned "Apogee of Hate by Okey Ndibe," which was signed by Chuka Nwosu, former director of public affairs of the Andy Uba Campaign Organization. Taken together, both responses threw little light on the grave ethical questions several commentators and I had raised about Uba. Instead, they revealed the squalid moral state in which their principal, and they as his amanuenses, are trapped.

Neither Azubuko nor Nwosu would shame me and Uba's other critics by proving, one, that he holds the certificates he claims and, two, that he made his wealth in a licit, irreproachable manner. Instead, Azubuko called me a slew of names, among them: coward, dastard, daft, domestic failure, an exile, hoary headed, poverty-pulverized, economic refugee, mendicant, and sniper. He

accused me of peddling "illogicalities and incongruities." He questioned my sanity. He named me "a lily-livered armchair critic." And he wrote that I had importuned Uba for a pay-off in exchange for ceasing my criticism, but that Uba had rebuffed my "pecuniary demand"

Azubuko asked: "Can Ndibe deny dispatching perverse emissaries, while still writing his damnation, to Dr. Uba to settle him so that he could kill his column of calumny? Can Ndibe deny that he did not send to Dr. Uba his emissaries of graft and blackmail?"

He accused me of "crass and crushing ignorance." Of my column, he wrote that it was "satanic and destructive" and that I had "cheaped the back page of the DAILY SUN."

Here's another example of Azubuko's championship-grade exhortation: "Okey Ndibe, from his photograph on the back page of the DAILY SUN, looks to me like one of those famous, famously poor 'veteran journalists' whose permanent abode is the balcony or receptions of NUJ Press Centres, forever to be found, nearly drowning in bottles of beer paid for by others and who ceaselessly harass the successful for chicken change which they promptly waste on alcohol like Unoka, the father of Okonkwo in Achebe's THINGS FALL APART."

What powerful stuff! And he even threw in free advice on the formula for success. "Grey hair notwithstanding," he wrote, "[Ndibe] can 'succeed' if only he would rejoice with those who are successful and are rejoicing instead of trying to pull them down and dig their graves. He should change or die a pauper, a hand

outstretched for a kind kobo from Governor Andy Uba of Anambra State.”

Nwosu’s retort vended more of the same. For him, my column exposed “a hate-infested thought-process possessed by a man at the apogee of his hatred” for Uba. He unmasked me as “a self-acclaimed ‘intellectual’, who lives in a condominium (high-rise flat) in America with his family.” Charging me with “empty arrogance, jealous disposition, warts and all,” he challenged me to “run and win even a councillorship election in his village ward.” He figured me out as a “lying geezer [who] is nobody in his home town Amawbia, Anambra State, and Nigeria.” Then he contended that “the highest courts in Nigeria” had settled the question of Uba’s educational qualifications

The evasive response did not surprise me in the least. Uba’s hired hands had to work with what was available to them: cheap propaganda, sophomoric lies, and a dime-a-dozen insults. If Uba can’t produce the certificates that would forever put me and other critics to shame, then why won’t his paid hands dust up a dictionary and desperately fish for aspersions? If Uba can’t give a straightforward explanation for the source of his wealth, then why not call Okey Ndibe a pauper, a pitiable teacher, a nonentity in his hometown? Why not remind this irritating columnist that his hair is graying, that he is “poverty-pulverized” (like most Nigerians for whom the Ubas have Olympian disgust), that he is an exile and economic refugee? Why not taunt this uppity columnist with the fact that he doesn’t live in a mansion, that he has no oil blocs, that he is no chieftain of the greatest political party in Africa? Why not, indeed?

Uba’s response was in character. It revealed that this would-be governor and his crowd of griots have nothing but contempt for anybody who works for a living. The harder you work for a living, the more contemptible you seem to them. By their reckoning, even the Supreme Court justices who work hard at their judicial tasks (and who therefore don’t have Uba’s stupendous riches) must seem pathetic. By contrast, anybody who acquires wealth through shady means, or who is a wizard in the art of stealing and lying, is to be celebrated as heroic, virtuous, and worthy of praise. Behold, the mind of the man who is haranguing the Supreme Court to re-install him in illegitimate power!

In my column of March 27 titled “Andy Uba Goes to War,” I had detailed how several of Uba’s agents had rang me and offered stupendous sums in order to buy my silence. One simply asked me to name my price. To each agent I gave the same message: Some people are not for sale. I’ll never covet Uba’s or anybody’s filthy cash; all I ask for is the space and freedom to tell the truth.

Here’s something Uba may not know: God flattered me with extraordinary parents who equipped me, and my siblings, with sound moral instincts. My opinions will never be for sale to any bidders, no matter their wealth. And unlike the Uba crowd, I reserve my highest respect only for those who are morally wealthy. I respect those who work hard for their living, even if they live in shacks. For those who flaunt ill-gotten wealth, I have absolute disdain.

As the parlance goes, Uba is loaded. But his unexplained wealth may well prove

his undoing. For there are many things that money simply can't buy. It doesn't buy true respect, wisdom or honor. If Uba's handlers truly care for him, they should talk to him about the capital sin of hubris, that malady of puny men seized by an inflated sense of importance.

If Uba and his hired hands imagine that shameless lies and gratuitous insults (about, of all things, that part of my hair that is beautifully gray!) are going to rattle me, then they know nothing about me. My challenge stands: Let Andy Uba tell the world where he went to school, and how he made his money. If he wants the nation to take his Supreme Court appeal seriously, he must first come clean about these matters. Period!

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2. The war we ordered is here
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4. Murder Incorporated
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8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
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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
16. Why I Take It Personally
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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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