

The Paid Distraction Named Ikenna Ellis-Ezenekwe

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By Okey Ndibe

As long as people disagree honestly with my views, my practice is not to make an undue fuss. Reasonable people may well see issues, even those that seem rather clear-cut, through different lens. However, when what passes for a response to me is an insidious and pernicious campaign to cast doubt on my integrity as a person and writer, I must exercise the discretion to reclaim myself. I have been called all manner of names lately, among them "poverty-pulverized," and I have had a cheerful laugh. But when Ikenna Ellis-Ezenekwe sets out to impugn my reputation, I believe it's time to break my silence.

In so doing, I know I disappoint so many friends and acquaintances who, in phone calls, e-mails and through third party contacts, had counseled me against dignifying a shameless smear campaign with a response. Their salient argument is that Ikenna's is part of a coordinated series of personal attacks designed to distract me and derail everybody's attention from the central questions one has raised with insistence—questions bearing on Andy Uba's fitness for exalted political office. Recognizing the untoward goal of my traducers, these friends implored that I not oblige them with a response.

Some of these friends have never met me, but they recognize that, for all my human

fallibility, I have sought to make my case with fervor and some measure of clarity. These people, thank God, recognize Ikenna's incoherent piece for what it is: a pathetic exercise in obfuscation and image falsification. Ikenna has put himself squarely in the service of a diversionary agenda. His goal, which is not so much his as his sponsor's, is to beguile the unsuspecting with titillating lies and innuendoes. To buy some respite, however momentary for Uba who must answer, sooner or later, to questions that have been raised again and again. Let nobody be deceived: Those questions, not I, are still the issues.

My reckoning is that most who read Ikenna were never in danger of being seduced by his sugared lies, but saw the glaring falsity of his claims even before I've uttered one word in repudiation. To these friends, known and unknown, I must express my deep gratitude. And I must ask forgiveness for not adhering to their advice to maintain a dignified silence.

I have decided that, in this event, the cost of silence would be to give comfort to a mischievous few desperate to call one's hard-earned probity and professional ethics to question. It would be a mistake to give such traders in specious rumors cause to become giddy.

Let's be clear from the outset. Unlike Andy Uba who's scared of declaring his assets, I can make it plain: I have never received a dime from any sponsor. I can state with pride: I have never been, and never will be, for sale to any bidders. Nobody but I dictates what I write, and nobody can. My friends and admirers know this, and my ostensible critics intuit it.

Let me tell a quick story that illustrates the clay out of which I was formed. At my father's funeral in 1995, a total stranger asked for leave to say a few words. He'd never met my father, he told the stunned audience, but he'd heard people at a market in a different town extolling my late father. He said he listened, enrapt, as people spoke about my father's devotion to God, his honesty, truthfulness, and his unstinting faithfulness to his wife and family. And this stranger said he then vowed to attend my father's funeral to bear witness.

I may not be materially rich, but in all I do in my waking hours I strive to remember this morally noble and graceful duo who not only gave birth to me but also shaped my worldview. I strive not to do anything that would reflect poorly on my upbringing. I'll never betray the moral training they bequeathed to us. That's been my message to the well-oiled Uba machine: There isn't enough money in the whole world to tempt me.

Now let's hasten to Ikenna's concatenation of lies.

I insist that the version of our conversation as I told it to Rudolf Okonkwo and reported by him in the villagesquare was accurate. A friend had called me in Tampa, Florida on Saturday morning (October 20) and urged that I look at that day's edition of Vanguard newspaper. This friend said a long piece signed by "ogenerereports" and titled "Andy Uba and Okey Ndibe's Activism," was posted under a report captioned "Anambra CLO backs Uba on review of S/Court verdict." That posting can be seen at:

www.vanguardngr.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=593&Itemid=45

On reading the report, I was amazed at the desperation of the Uba apologists. Why would they invoke my name in responding to an altogether innocuous news report that had nothing to do with me? On skimming through the posting, I immediately recognized Ikenna's hand as the author. On calling Ikenna in Miami, he immediately denied authoring the piece. A few days later, the same piece surfaced on the villagesquare, but now signed by Ikenna.

Ikenna knew he was telling a blatant lie when he claimed that I "confessed" to debriefing Rudolf Okonkwo to write the piece titled "Understanding the likes of Ikenna" and that I had directed him to "contact Omoyele Sowore immediately to

avert another publication that may falsely lump me with Andy Uba."

I had indeed reported my Miami conversation with Ikenna to Rudolf, but that had nothing to do with Rudolf's decision to publish the account. As a writer, I told Ikenna, I am more than capable of prosecuting my own fights, and won't ever outsource the job. And as one who respects other writers, I would not invite another writer to be my proxy in taking on an adversary. To suggest that Rudolf was my sponsored fighter is an insult both to Rudolf and me.

One of the most frightening parts of Ikenna's inept attempt at fiction is to suggest that I participated in the active investigatory work that led to the expose on Uba that Sowore and Ikenna co-authored. Nope, I never made a single phone call to anybody to dig up information on Uba.

Ikenna's brand of contortion, his act of self-debasement in the name of tainting Okey Ndibe and Sowore, must appear transparent even to the blindest among us. The hazard of living a lie is that the liar runs the risk of maneuvering himself into a corner. And then his lies begin to testify against him. Until I read Ikenna's bold-faced fib about me phoning Dr. Ngige's sister on a daily basis, I didn't even know that Ngige had a sister. His brother I knew about, and only because I'd read newspaper accounts about his legal work. How could I have called a woman I don't know—and still don't know even as I write?

I have met Ngige a total of four times in my life: once in 2001 when I was a Fulbright scholar at UNILAG, once at a press conference he gave in Lagos after his abduction, once in Washington, DC, and last weekend in Miami at the ASA-USA conference. In all that time, the man and I have spoken on the phone at most a dozen times—and I'm being on the generous side. On no occasion has Ngige remotely suggested that I be his hireling. Not once has he suggested that I write on any topic, or adopt any particular stance on an issue. Not once.

Another fact is that, while I admire Sowore's investigative tenacity, incorrigibility and patriotic mettle, I have offered very limited help on his reports. I'm too busy. But it was only Sowore's trust in my judgment that led him to agree to collaborate with Ikenna on reports. Little did I know that the man I was introducing was morally puny, a man looking out for lucre.

In one week, Ikenna has told me three different yarns about ogenreports. In Miami, he claimed he had nothing to do with the site beyond designing it. Two days ago, he told me it was his after all, and that he'd set it up after some virus had incapacitated ukpakareports. Then yesterday, he claimed again that it was not his but his cousin's.

Ikenna gave the impression that he, Sowore and I worked consistently in tandem and as a team, and that we were frequently on the phone chatting.

Nothing's further from the truth. Between the date of his cousin's wedding and his controversial relocation to Nigeria—a period of more than eight months—Ikenna and I did not hold more than six telephone conversations. And I've seen him only that once—on August 11, 2006.

Here's the most hilarious part of Ikenna's latest gruel: "It is important a point be made of the growing penchant to blackmail innocent people for reasons that are either dubious or for reasons that are best known only to Okey Ndibe and Omoyele Sowore." Sowore and I blackmail Ikenna? How the man flatters himself! How his conscience flogs him right in front of bewildered witnesses.

Behold, the real blackmailer par excellence. For the only blackmailer here—the blackmailer-in-chief—is this man behind the mask, this showman of shifting narratives. For example, in my recent conversations with Ikenna he kept harping on Sowore being a Yoruba man out to damage Uba, an Igbo man. I found it ignoble, indeed shocking, that he would resort to such patently false non sequitur! As if blinded by his sponsor's gruel, Ikenna made the hollow argument that Sowore was having an ethnic laugh at the expense of the Igbo. So what kind of ethnic laugh did Uba's master enjoy when Anambra was turned into an inferno by hired thugs protected by police? Or when an Igbo businessman like Ibeto was cast into financial ruin so that Uba's Kano-born friend might enjoy a monopoly in the cement business?

How unscrupulous is Ikenna? Let me tell those of you who haven't figured it out yet. Yesterday, in an e-mail, Ikenna made the astonishing claim that Sowore and I were being financed by Atiku, Ngige and Orji Kalu! Atiku—a man I've never met in my life—as my financier? Ikenna claims I've never commented on Atiku's wealth? What planet has this unreformed liar been living in? Ikenna obviously never reckoned that those he defamed would ever get to read this meretricious confection.

After reading it, I placed a call yesterday to Ikenna. Ikenna boldly told me that he'd never peddled any such falsehood, and that somebody must be trying to pin it on him. And yet, his words were there to indict him, to expose his baseness and shamelessness! Who knows how many people he'd covertly sent that diseased lie, all in a depraved effort to besmirch my name.

I'd wish that this young man in danger of morally bankrupting himself pause for a second and take stock. I'd like him to be more jealous of his reputation, that he take pity on himself, and begin the arduous process of self-redemption. He should engage in honest self-analysis. Ask yourself, Ikenna, how you managed to bring yourself to this unenviable pass. What illicit and inordinate hungers have driven you on this ruinous course? Do you have it within you to halt, turn around and retreat before you condemn yourself to total moral denudation?

I take no delight in unmasking Ikenna. It's painful to see a young man become so morally squalid so quickly. It's sad to see a man's moral resource squandered in so abject and tragic a manner. It's hard to look at a young man who has stripped himself of ethical insight.

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

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