

# Good tings dey happen

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*By Okey Ndibe*



**Announcement:** As of the time of this writing, the Culture Project and NVS was (and maybe, is still) offering 2 Free tickets to every performance of Tings Dey Happen. (Go to <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/board/nvs-matters/42196-free-tickets-see-tings-dey-happen.html>)

Yes, good things are happening in Nigeria. True, both the momentum and quantum of change are hardly where most Nigerians would want them to be. Given the nation's decades of disappointment and waste, Nigerians understandably desire—and deserve—dramatic leaps, not jaunts. But it's time to take an inventory of national gains. And while we must work to sustain as well as extend the gains, it makes sense to thank God for small mercies.

Reflecting on recent positive events, my mind returned again and again to a play by a young American playwright and thespian. Dan Hoyle, who spent an enlightening year in the Niger Delta as a Fulbright scholar, has written a captivating play titled *tings dey happen*. The one-man play, a brilliant *mélange* of voices and perspectives that captures both the resilience and distress of the Niger Delta, has been a hit since its debut. It is currently enjoying a terrific off-Broadway production.

Like Karl Maier's *This House has Fallen*, a compendious and insightful book on contemporary Nigerian politics, Hoyle's play is infused with the energy, sheer drama and undying spirit that are Nigerian hallmarks. It is at once a portrait of a nation's desultory journey and a testament to hope and tenacity.

For Hoyle, the Nigerian landscape is without any dull moments. In the midst of all the chaos and upheavals, Nigerians find a way to survive, a way to extend their lease on hope even when life seems unremittingly bleak. For Nigerians, *tings*

dey always happen. Bad things mostly, but also the occasional morale boosting, spirit-lifting good thing.

Nigerians have been strafed and buffeted by too many disasters. Often by man-made disasters called leaders. They've been stomped, deceived and sold out by knaves posing as men and women of integrity. They have suffered through many seasons of disillusionment, many locust years. Through it all, they struggled sometimes quietly, sometimes mightily, but they always clung to hope. Their investment is bearing (some) fruit.

After weeks of defying the nation, Speaker Patricia Etteh was last week forced to surrender. It should not have come this far. To begin with, any Nigerian entrusted with the office of speaker ought to have recognized it was obscene to devote more than six hundred million naira to spruce up two residences and buy cars. Considering the depth of social misery in Nigeria, Etteh ought to have recoiled in horror the moment she peeked at the renovation's price tag. She should not have squandered such an Olympian amount on her comfort. Not in a country that is, for most practical purposes, roadless, hospitalless, waterless, electricityless.

Etteh has blamed journalists for her fall. It's a familiar cop-out. Did journalists push her to expend a vulgar sum on self-aggrandizing luxuries in a country whose citizenry is trapped in squalor? Did some reporter advise her to ignore proper procedure for the award of contracts?

Etteh erred gravely. Then she compounded the error of financial recklessness with political arrogance. She disdained widespread calls to step down.

Emboldened by her sponsors, she fastened on tedious and unconvincing semantic hair-splitting. She insisted that the panel that probed the renovation contract had not conflated her name and the word "indicted" in its report. Her obstinacy grounded the business of the house, and on two occasions triggered free-for-all fisticuffs that might have served as excellent advertisement for the World Wrestling Entertainment. Not even after one of her stoutest cheerleaders slumped and died was she moved to reconsider her untenable position.

In the end, it took the real threat of impeachment to bring her back down to earth. And to a resignation that should have happened several weeks ago.

Etteh's intransigence, while ill advised, has produced a collateral dividend. When the members sat down to the business of electing Etteh's successor, they resoundingly rejected the candidate who bore the ruling party's imprimatur. Instead, they settled for Oladimeji Bankole, a highly educated member, the kind of man in whose company Etteh's chief sponsor, former President Olusegun Obasanjo, takes little delight. In demurring from the party line, the members served notice, one hopes, of a house awakening to a new sense of its independence. Good things dey happen.

Speaker Bankole would do well to avoid the pitfalls that an insouciant Etteh fell into. Nigerians deserve a speaker who owes his elevation not to chumminess to Obasanjo but to the possession of sound legislative acumen. They deserve a speaker who is seized by a vision of how to deploy law-making to solve real problems. Though presiding over an undistinguished chamber, most of whose

members have questionable mandate, Mr. Bankole must set clear legislative agenda.

If the new speaker must approve any contracts, he had better ensure that the letter and spirit of due process are met. In fact, the speaker ought to champion the full establishment and empowerment of the Bureau for Public Procurement. This bureau, when fully functional, should assume the role of overseeing all aspects of government contracts. Acting as a clearing house, the bureau would ensure that all public sector contracts are properly advertised, that the bidding process is transparent, that contracts are not unduly inflated but stay within justifiable limits, and that bids are evaluated with professionally sound criteria.

In a sense, the absence of such an effective oversight bureau made it possible for Etteh to bungle her way into a scandalous contract. The fiasco of her renovation contract was far from an isolated case. A study commissioned by Obasanjo in 2001 concluded that Nigeria has lost several hundred billions of naira owing to lax or non-existent public procurement practices. It is time to stop the bleeding of scarce resources, and adopt adept contractual monitoring. By making this one of his legislative priorities, Mr. Bankole would spare himself the kind of embarrassment that swept Etteh from her perch. And he would help Nigeria to save a ton of money. And the nation needs every naira it can save.

In terms of positive developments in the country, there is no question that the judiciary deserves special commendation. It is hard to explain the resurgence of judicial courage, but more and more

Nigerians are now reposing faith in judges to right wrongs and set a redemptive tone to the nation's business. Led by the superb example of the justices of the Supreme Court, a growing number of Nigerian judges seem to have risen to the challenge of checking egregious illegalities in the body politic. In the run-up to April's marred elections, the courts stepped in on occasion after occasion to rein in Obasanjo's bid to frustrate rival candidates he wished to exclude.

Going by judicial reversals of some of the more bizarre outcomes of the April polls, some members of the judiciary remain alert to their duty. In ruling on electoral challenges with relative dispatch, and also in torpedoing some controversial verdicts, the judiciary has given Nigerians cause to hope. It is true that many judges continue to deliver baffling judgments, and that some still seem wedded to timidity, inspiring suspicion of their susceptibility to bribes. Even so, Nigerians daily encounter judgments that make them proud in the caliber of the men and women on the bench. The streak of electoral reversals is a departure from the trend that followed the 2003 elections. Then, the judges seemed united in a frenzy to validate a mindlessly rigged election.

Thanks to the fierce courage of many judges, Nigerians can now dare to hope that many usurper governors, senators, representatives and state assembly members are going to be sent parking. It is to the credit of the judiciary that some Nigerians even contemplate the prospect of a verdict invalidating the presidential election.

Good things dey happen. When Nigerians stood up as one and fought to

about Obasanjo's illegitimate third term dreams, it was a beautiful moment. When then Senate President Ken Nnamani rejected the former president's orders to sack T.V. cameras from the chambers of the upper house, the better to facilitate surreptitious approval of tenure elongation, Nigerians enjoyed a buoyant moment. When former immunity-fortified public officials who stole the public trust blind are compelled to face prosecution, to live as execrated exiles, or to walk about in anxiety and have sleepless nights, then it's a good dawn in Nigeria. Tings dey happen for Nigeria. And we can add: a few good things dey happen.

## 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](mailto:okey@okeyndibe.com)) or by phone (860.306.7843).

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