

What Ibori Means

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By Okey Ndibe

It is hard, extremely hard, not to exult at James Onanefe Ibori's travails. Even if the former governor of Delta State eventually beats the extensive rap sheet—not impossible given the size of his bank accounts and the unpredictable strictures of Nigeria's judiciary—it felt good to witness the caging of this man.

One who in many ways elevated unprincipled politics to an art form, Ibori is one of those figures who suggest, if not embody, an amoral, reprehensible ethos in the nation's public affairs.

To borrow a favorite phraseology, my attention was drawn to Ibori in 2004. Abandoning his gubernatorial post in Asaba, he'd joined several governors on a frivolous junket to London. Ibori and his brother governors went to revel in an obscene fortieth birthday bash thrown by a shadowy Nigerian "moneymen" by the name of Terry Waya. So offensive was the frolic, in expenditure, scale and aggrandizement, that then President Olusegun Obasanjo (no great loather of parties by any means) chastised Ibori and his fellow guests as "owambe governors."

Miffed by Obasanjo's pedantic tone, Ibori adopted an unapologetic stance. He chided Obasanjo for essaying to spoil the afterglow of his London revelry. He then let it be known, in the event that Obasanjo had forgotten, that he could govern his state from whatever location

suited him. Even when he was in a toilet, he said, he still governed his state.

Ibori's retort was telling. Nobody can seriously contest a governor's powers to run his state from his toilet. Even so, the scatological context of Ibori's response was far from edifying. In an opinion piece titled "Ibori's Toilet Ethics," I castigated the governor for the whimsical quality of his statement. Ibori's reference to the toilet suggested a man whose metaphor of governance was odoriferous and fecal. The people of Delta State had no right to insist that their governor desist from making toilet runs when nature called; even so, it was within their rights to insist that the governor did not drag them, and their affairs, to his toilet. In carousing in London with a money-miss-road Terry Waya, Ibori was, in symbolic terms, casting the concerns of his constituency into the toilet.

As if his owambe outing was meant to serve as unambiguous notice, Ibori proceeded to run his state as if the office of governor was an invitation to a four-year-long party. During his eight-year reign—and reign it was—billions of naira poured in every month into the coffers of the state. Delta received a relatively tremendous inflow of revenues, thanks in large part to the derivation principle that rewards oil-producing states. But no visitor to the state would suspect that so much money came in every month. In

several visits to Asaba, the capital, one never saw evidence that Ibori knew his left from his right when it came to the uplift of his people. A governor who apparently treasured governing from the toilet—or from heady parties in some foreign capital—was busy in all the wrong ways. Delta was being turned into a vast toilet. His public policies ensured that Asaba would never come close, in appearance or quality of life, to London or Miami or any of the other foreign cities where Ibori owns swanky real estate, Rolls Royces and other spectacular assets.

If Ibori weren't a real person, he would make an endearing and captivating character right out of fiction. The trouble is his all-too realness, his undeniable flesh-and-blood identity. A man whose public provenance is somewhat shrouded, Ibori has made himself, almost effortlessly, into a character of legend.

A few years ago, his political opponents went to court to prove Ibori's unfitness for office. They proved that a man named James Onanefe Ibori was once convicted by a magistrate's court for stealing. Ibori's defence was that it wasn't him. He never produced an iota of proof that a different James Onanefe Ibori exists. Yet he managed to persuade learned judges all the way to the Supreme Court to find that he was not the convict.

Ibori ranks among the most curious of the strange players to emerge on Nigeria's political turf over the past decade or so. If Ibori is held in dreadful awe in some quarters, it is because he was born, politically speaking, during the horrendously dark dictatorship of Sani Abacha. He apparently came into wealth during that repressive dispensation, but the question of how remains a mystery.

His trial, if it proceeds, should help dispel some of that mystery. Like many a Nigerian political actor, Ibori has been both in the public eye and yet inscrutable. Only last week, for example, it came to light that a man bearing his name had been convicted twice in London in the early 1990s on counts of stealing and the use of a stolen credit card. Was he the convict? Or is he a hapless victim of identity theft, a man whose name is borrowed by all manner of felons?

Ibori's billing is as a larger-than-life character. His arrest and trial has been attended, so far, by great theatre and controversy. Take the simple question of the facts of his arrest. There is nothing simple about that question. Instead, a riveted nation has been fed three accounts of Ibori's capture. The EFCC issued a relatively terse statement, but tinged with thinly disguised gloating. A spokesman for the Kwara State government distributed a press release that acknowledged that Ibori was picked up within the premises of the state government's lodge in Abuja—and in Governor Bukola Saraki's presence. Saraki is not only Ibori's friend; he also shares the embattled governor's passion for expensive real estate in England and elsewhere. Kwara was in a hurry to deny accounts that Governor Saraki had granted Ibori sanctuary in the lodge.

Then, from left field, came a statement by Tony Eluemunor, Ibori's mouthpiece. In an Orwellian attempt at revisionism, he said that Ibori was not arrested at all but had gone of his own accord to respond to the EFCC's phone-delivered invitation.

Eluemunor's version of events was a signal—if one was needed—that Ibori's

trial has high odds of being mired in controversy and drama. On December 13, a day after the former governor's was picked up, Punch reported that several groups, including the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), had criticized his arrest. Playing the ethnic card, one critic said that Ibori's arrest and trial was an attempt to disesteem the Urhobo people. In a mark of the debasement of student unionism, the student group called for Ibori's immediate and unconditional release. Apparently the new breed of student leaders have never met a rich accused thief they didn't like.

Thank goodness that Ibori himself is singing a different tune. The Thisday edition of Sunday, December 16 reported that the accused relishes his opportunity to "cleanse his name in the court of law." Exuding supreme confidence in the presence of "numerous highly placed citizens, including Senators and House of Representatives members," Ibori reportedly portrayed himself as the much maligned victim of "faceless organizations and persons" who have smeared him with "innuendoes, outright lies, and even forgeries." With the high spiritedness of a man certain of vanquishing his foes, he reportedly boasted that his traducers had inadvertently offered him an opportunity at vindication.

Is Ibori's upbeat mood some affected hubris, a besieged man's effort to put a gloss on his bleak fate? Or does he have a trump card that his accusers are not aware of? It remains to be seen.

To be sure, there won't be a shortage of surprises, legal and political drama, as well as astounding revelations at his trial.

The EFCC has slammed Ibori with a menu of indictments containing 103 allegations. In sum, the agency accuses the ex-governor of pilfering more than N9 billion from his state to feed his greed. In an enthralling subplot, they also allege that Ibori produced \$15 million in cash to persuade the EFCC to let him walk. That allegation alone, if proved, is enough to deal a knockout punch.

Nine billion naira is no peanut change by any stretch. In a country with washed up roads, drugless hospitals, bookless libraries, ill-equipped schools and scandalous rates of poverty and unemployment, any public official who steals so unconscionably is sick and sickening. Such an official deserves worse than incarceration.

But Ibori's major nemeses, a coalition of the state's "elders" who have long called for his trial, insist that the EFCC has painted a mere fraction of the portrait of looting. The former governor, they say, has to account for something in the range of N159 billion.

For several months, while officials of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, fantasized about netting him, he gallivanted about Nigeria and flew freely to African as well as European and North American cities. He cut the picture of unflappability, a man confident in his invincibility. He carried on with Icarian pride, hardly concealing his Olympian disdain for the EFCC and (especially) its helmsman, Nuhu Ribadu.

Ibori's hauteur owed, many conjectured, to the fact that he funneled billions of naira into Umar Yar'adua's "election." While Ribadu rattled his saber, Ibori

visited Yar'adua at Aso Rock. Last September, Ibori got himself listed as a member of the Nigerian delegation to the United Nations during the General Assembly sessions. He left the impression of a man aware that, on the question of his indictment, Yar'adua was in a terrible moral, legal and political bind. Now that Ibori is in the dock, Nigerians have a rare opportunity to glimpse how their patrimony is ravaged. And to witness the unmasking of an arrangement founded on corruption, gluttony and lies.

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