

Total transformers on trial

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By Okey Ndibe

A few days ago I spent a good deal of time discussing Nigeria with Niyi Osundare, a friend and inspirer whose poetry is as infused with social insight as his political commentary is sharp and intrepid. Our subject was—what else—Nigeria. Just returned from Nigeria, he had lots of stories to share, and insights about our shared nation's mixture of middling progress and deeply rooted malaise.

We agreed that progress, while still miniscule on most counts, was not to be discounted. One example of cheerful news was how the miasma of public outrage swept former Speaker Patricia Etteh from the seat she had (effortlessly) brought into ridicule. Left to the designs of the PDP hierarchy, including Ahmadu Ali, Etteh would have been decorated with heroic garlands—and sustained on her perch.

We celebrated the verdicts of some electoral tribunals who, with admirable courage, had invalidated some of the more egregious impositions from last year's record-breaking riggers' circus that passed for Maurice Iwu's elections. In particular, we recalled one of the high points in the Supreme Court's recent history: its widely applauded red card to Mr. Nnamdi Uba, the man who dreamed, and fantasizes still, of being Anambra governor.

Osundare and I even cast our minds farther back, to that buoyant moment when the Nigerian popular will asserted itself against the selfish and phony notion of third term. We recognized what a fine and spirit-boosting victory it was to rein in one man's illicit fantasy that would have rained down perdition and despair on Nigerians.

One measure of progress is the fact that Nigerians, from Abeokuta to Abuja, had commenced the necessary process of demystifying a fallen, unrobed emperor who daily witnesses the vitiation of his delusions of grandeur. Two years ago, Obasanjo instigated his PDP cronies to crown him father of modern Nigeria. Today, he is regaled with that supine title only in derision. Everywhere, the resounding refrain is: Probe him. And so universal is the call—with Obasanjo's own people leading the chorus—that the man is denied recourse to the handy shibboleth of ethnic persecution.

Umar Yar'Adua's spokesman has said that a probe of Obasanjo's eight-year ruination of the nation is out of the question. Some have given Yar'Adua grief on this account. But I say: Yar'Adua's posture is understandable. As the primary beneficiary of Obasanjo's ultimate act of political treachery, Yar'Adua lacks the moral funds to put his benefactor in the dock. The only way he can manage the feat is by first renouncing

his illegitimately acquired presidential bequest—and the man has shown no inclination, outside of judicial compulsion, to do so.

At any rate, Obasanjo's trial is proceeding rather well in the court of Nigerian public opinion. The unmasking of a hypocrite is in progress. How low have Obasanjo's political fortunes and moral credits sunk lately? So low that his oldest son, according to a report in last Sunday's edition of the Sun, has cited him as partly precipitating the bitter break-up of his marriage. Indeed, what the son accuses his father of doing is so scandalous and painful as to be unspeakable in polite circles. Few fathers, in ancient or modern times, have ever had so precipitous and hard a fall!

Which brings me to the subject of Nigeria's recent and extant political drama, one that would be so funny if it wasn't so sickening and tragic.

Three years ago, in the thick of the third term intrigue, I happened to be in Nigeria as the month of May drew to a close. Everywhere, there was the contrived euphoria associated with the anniversary of Nigeria's latest experiment with a deformed variant of democracy. An army of servile contractors and sundry job seekers were in a self-debasing, pathetic contest to out-do one another in gushing (obviously feigned) adulation for the then president as well as the supporting cast of thirty-six sitting governors.

It was a shameful and desperate exercise. The airwaves rang with commissioned, yet unmelodious, jingles that dredged up and extolled the virtues of any public office holder with a contract

or job to give. Newspapers and magazines were not left out in this frenzy of pretentious celebration. Each paper bulged with unctuous congratulatory messages addressed to Obasanjo or to some governor. Obasanjo was declared as God-sent, a man destined to take Nigeria to the promised land. As for the governors, they were regaled with such heady phrases you might have thought they were candidates for canonization.

They governors were too good to be addressed simply as Governor X or Governor Y. No, they were addressed as "executive governor," as if readers might otherwise mistake them for ceremonial fobs and well-dressed but powerless entities. Nor was the added freight of "executive" enough to flatter the occupants of Government Houses. Their seemingly fragile egos demanded that they be addressed in each paid advert as "His Excellency, the Executive Governor."

Each governor was credited with—and we quote—"the total transformation" of his state. Transformation wasn't considered to be impressive enough. Alone, "transformation" was deemed too pallid, effeminate, spineless and ordinary. So the contractors-turned-griots buffed up the word with "total." Again, if you hadn't visited the "totally transformed" states, you were likely to run away with the impression that the governors had re-made them into paragons of human habitation. You'd not expect to see rutted and gutted roads, school buildings with caved in roofs and waterless toilets, hospitals without syringes and bandages, or thousands of forlorn, unemployed university graduates.

Lucky Igbinedion was one of those governors who were advertised as performers of this Nigerian magic of “total transformation.” Today, Mr. Igbinedion is a totally wanted man, accused of totally stealing millions of dollars from the state treasury. I was in Benin City two years ago. That proud ancient city sure looked totally transformed to me. It wore the appearance of a city totally transformed by official neglect into a state of hideous blight and desolation.

As I write these words, nobody was sure about Mr. Igbinedion’s whereabouts, but many were certain he was in hiding. Many more doubted he was in a haste to confront the EFCC and reclaim his name in court. Some news reports said he was in Morocco. Others suggested he was in France. When was the last time a Moroccan or French ex-governor sought sanctuary in Benin City to evade prosecutors?

Yet, this ex-governor, who may have been totally transformed into a cowering fugitive, caused his lawyers to issue a statement declaring himself not to be on the run. The lawyers scolded the EFCC for “ruining the good name built over the years by [Igbinedion’s] family.”

Of course, the lawyers scrupulously avoided stating where he was, or when he planned to return to state he “totally transformed” over eight years.

Well, talk is cheap—even when it issues from the pen of well-paid lawyers. If Mr. Igbinedion had truly transformed his state and had kept his fingers out of the state treasury, he should be sprinting back to Nigeria—by air, land or sea—to rebuff the traducers of his legacy.

Embattled former Governor James Ibori was also one of the governors feted for totally transforming Delta State. My recent criticism of Ibori in my column of December 18, 2007, drew a fierce response by Dr. Godini G. Darah. Describing my purpose as “sinister and diabolical,” Darah concluded that my mind was “poisoned by pride and prejudice.”

Darah, a former colleague of mine at the Guardian before he went to serve Ibori as a senior aide, portrayed me as a crazed liar. Then, having reduced me to the size of a pupil in his class, he proceeded to educate me on the subject of Ibori’s monumental achievements—in other words, the ex-governor’s manner of “total transformation” of Delta State.

Asaba, wrote Darah, “was a sleepy, provincial town in 1991 when Delta was created. It had not changed much by 1999 when Ibori became governor. Thanks to his regime, the transformation of infrastructure and social life witnessed in Asaba in the Ibori years is unprecedented in the annals of other state capitals in Nigeria.” The good professor asserted that the “oil income that came to Delta during the Ibori years was judiciously and responsibly utilized.” Ibori “built the most gigantic bridges in Nigeria since the 1970s,” so impressive that Obasanjo (while commissioning them) “sang hymns of praise to Ibori.” The former governor, by Darah’s testimony, “set an African record for building 2,000 kilometers of new roads and highways in eight years.”

For me, the most enlightening feature of Darah’s retort was the news that, thanks to Ibori’s sagacity, “Twelve

hospitals were upgraded to W.H.O. standard." Darah painted a portrait of total transformation no reasonable man should make light of.

Unfortunately, I seem incapable of shaking off two nagging questions. One: With twelve WHO-standard hospitals under his belt, why didn't Ibori speak up when lawyers to Diepreye S.P. Alamieyeseigha, his friend and former governor of Bayelsa, pressed to have their client flown to Dubai for medical treatment? Imagine what political capital Ibori would have reaped by volunteering one of his WHO hospitals to the beleaguered D.S.P! (By the way, are we to assume that Ibori received his own medical attention from one of these twelve hospitals?)

Two: If Ibori had left such a transformed and beatific landscape, pray, how would Dr. Emmanuel Uduaghan, the current governor, justify spending millions of naira to send state legislators on a jamboree to South Africa, Britain and the U.S.? If one recalls correctly, Uduaghan's handlers had said the legislators deserved to rest after working hard for the first 100 days of the current tenure. Why wasn't Ibori's "totally transformed" state considered a conducive address for these lawmakers to rest their nerves?

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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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