

What I saw in Nigeria

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By Okey Ndibe

I arrived in Nigeria on April 20, my first trip there in a little more than a year. It turned out to be an enlightening visit in several ways. My trip was at the instance of the Association of Nigerian Authors, whose esteemed chairman, Wale Okediran, had asked me to preside as master of ceremony at the inaugural of a conference at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

The trip had its dose of positive surprises—but there were certainly moments that confirmed Nigeria's reputation as an address where right is wrong, wrong right. One of such unsavory moments happened right at Murtala Muhammed International Airport as we queued up for immigration formalities. In a voice audible enough to be overheard by many, one female passenger said to another one, "This is Nigeria, let's go to the front." As we watched in amazement the two women strode all the way to the front of the line, and squeezed in.

A few people hissed in disgust. Some mumbled their protests. Several exchanged chagrined looks. I wasn't going to take it. For me, the women had committed not one but three offences. The first was to boldly proclaim the Nigerian space as a lawless and indecorous one where anything goes. The second was to act on that proclamation.

The third was to assume that, this being a Nigerian queue, nobody dared stop them.

Their attitude was a microcosm of the larger social malaria that troubles Nigeria. It is a condition that emboldens public officials to steal public funds, and pronounce themselves honest. It enables candidates to rig elections in the most blatant manner, expect to get away with it, and declare that their ill-gotten power is a divine bequest. It fuels the perverse pride some Nigerians take in the promotion of anti-social behavior, including the award of chieftaincy titles and even national honors to known rogues and notorious scam artists.

It seemed to me inexcusable to permit the women to get away with their assault on etiquette. I walked up to them and ordered that they return to the back of the queue. Their first reaction was to ignore me. But I was not about to yield either. Once they saw my preparedness to raise hell—and with several passengers lending their angry voices—the women took to pleading. One of them, traveling with a child, asked that they be forgiven on account of the little one. I let them know that reasonable people would be happy to make allowances for a passenger with a child, but a passenger who regards Nigeria as a space where queue-jumping thrives deserves stern correction.

This airport confrontation seemed an apt introduction into Nigeria. A day after my arrival, I rang up a longtime friend who lives in Abuja and works for an international agency. He told me he'd just returned that afternoon from a two-week working trip to Senegal. In those two weeks, the power didn't blink for a second, he said. He bemoaned the frustrating fact that many Nigerians regard their country's power woes as part of the normal process of development. "It's my painful duty—as somebody who travels extensively to other African nations—to tell them that our epileptic power supply is actually a sign of our utter mal-development," he said.

I rang up another friend, an entrepreneur who seven years ago left a well-remunerated corporate job in America to return to Nigeria and set up a thriving business. He answered the phone from Ghana. "My brother," he said, "I now operate from Accra. It's a relief to live among civilized people."

But Nigeria was by no means an exclusively sorrowful narrative, thank God. Throughout the four days I spent in Lagos, I had a heady time catching up with friends and relatives. I was impressed by the ambitious road projects going on in different parts of the Lagos metropolis. One could hardly recognize the Ozumba Mbadiwe Street in Victoria Island, a perennially gutted stretch which has been transformed into one of the best roads I have seen anywhere in Nigeria. Governor Tunde Fashola's commitment to rehabilitate the city's roads showcased what can happen when a politician is armed with purpose.

For long, Lagos has served as a metaphor for blight. Mr. Fashola has a long way to

go in order to reverse that reputation. A friend who knows him assured me that Fashola privately states that his vision is to make Lagos as attractive as Singapore. If that's true, then the governor's dream ought to be commended. Too many Nigerian "leaders" seek to buy mansions in foreign countries built up and made habitable by their leaders and people. It's about time a Nigerian public official thought seriously about turning his state into a desirable address.

One hopes that Fashola recognizes that the odds are forbidding. For one, the city's population is bursting at the seams. With unemployment at dire levels, the rate of violent crime is, anecdotally at least, on the rise. In recent months, armed robbers have staged daredevil attacks on a few swanky restaurants at peak lunch or dinner hours. They carted off cash, phone sets and jewelry from patrons and cashiers alike. Residents of the supposedly secure redoubts of Lekki and VGC, two of the city's upscale redoubts bordered by water, have been receiving unwelcome raids by robbers who arrive—you guessed right—by boat and make their getaway through the same means.

Lagos—like every other Nigerian city and town—is also strewn with small plastic sachets, containers of "pure water." The plastic cast-off has become an environmental plague, a sickening part of the Lagos (and larger Nigerian) landscape. Fashola has to contend as well with illegal structures built all over the sprawling city. Besides, I visited a friend who lives in Ikeja and spoke on the phone with another who resides in Olodi-Apapa. Their prayer: that Fashola's road revolution should not bypass their precincts.

I had considered traveling by road from Lagos to Anambra on my way to Nsukka. I had wanted to have a first-hand experience of the state of the Sagamu-Ore-Benin Expressway. Several friends and relatives talked me out of the "adventure." Instead I flew to Enugu. From the airport, I drove to the New Haven home of Ikemba Odumegwu-Ojukwu. As a young journalist in the 1980s, I made frequent visits to his Queens Drive abode where I sounded him out on political and social issues.

On finding out that I was in town, and flying into Enugu, Ojukwu's wife, Bianca, insisted that I stop over to see the former Biafran leader and his family. I hadn't seen the man since 2001 when, headed for Nigeria to teach for a year as a Fulbright scholar, I ran into Ojukwu, his wife and children, in Amsterdam.

My visit was short, but powerfully moving. Bianca Ojukwu was ever the flawless hostess. She offered wine and called their four beautiful children, two of them twins, to greet me. She told me that she read several of my columns to her husband. Ojukwu's loss of eyesight has far from dimmed his powerful, charismatic presence. He held court in his small reception room set off from a capacious living room. For all his reputation as a man of fiery temperament, it is his inimitable sense of humor that I most remember. And it was on display during my brief visit.

I spent three memorable days in Anambra. It was a blessing to spend time with my mother who spoiled me with all my favorite cuisines. Her failing sight notwithstanding, she was a portrait of maternal care. She did what she does

best, directing me to visit widows, widowers, the bereaved, the ailing and the poor of my hometown. And she reminded me again and again to observe the one lesson that she and my late father had never tired to impart to us, their children: "Speak the truth, son, because the truth is life."

Wherever I went in Anambra, once people recognized me, they spoke to me about their sense of relief that Anambra, finally, was on its way to being rescued from the long reign of mindless parasites whose business is to inflict suffering on others and to profit from the misery of others. They expressed their admiration for Governor Peter Obi's tenacity in pursuing, and reclaiming, his mandate. For all his shortcomings, Obi has inspired a palpable sense of optimism in the state. He has injected a much-needed moral tonic into the state's, and indeed Nigerian, politics.

Like his predecessor, Chris Ngige, Obi is making impressive strides in road construction and structural development in the state. Even so, expectations remain high about a lot more that needs to be done. Onitsha represents the most dramatic theatre of Obi's developmental efforts. Many of the commercial town's streets have been nicely resurfaced, making it once more pleasant to drive in Onitsha. Even so, the town still faces a trash crisis that deserves an enduring solution. I happened to drive through the well-paved streets shortly after a torrential rainfall. The rain had swept all manner of refuse abandoned on streets, including the plastic containers of "pure water," into open gutters. The clogged gutters in turn spewed the trash all over the streets.

In Anambra one encountered a predicament of a different sort—the prospects and risks of entrusting important projects to local contractors. While lauding Governor Obi’s efforts in road construction, many people told me that the local contractor handling many of the projects often did sub-par work. The wisdom of supporting local businesses should not overshadow the imperative of ensuring that there is value for every naira of public funds spent and that contracts meet the highest standards of execution. Obi must, then, take seriously the challenge of closely monitoring compliance with contractual specifications.

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
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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*.

Speaking Engagements

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