

A soap opera and Nsukka's salute to Achebe

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By Okey Ndibe

Mr. Umar Yar'Adua, current resident of Aso Rock, was in Germany recuperating from an illness when I arrived in Nigeria. Despite his absence, his regime's soap opera continued its (tragic) run. In fact, as one exasperated friend, a political scientist, put it, the Yar'Adua show is not a soap opera at all but a tragedy.

One observation seemed self-evident. Even though Yar'Adua has occupied the nation's number one position for almost a year, he has yet to bring any salutary vision to bear on the nation's affairs. Despite the rising cost of crude oil, and the stupendous resources flowing into the nation's coffers, Yar'Adua is yet to articulate a plan to address Nigeria's myriad crises—a health care system so ghastly that Yar'Adua and other members of the class identified as “stake holders” must be flown abroad with each episode of illness; a road network that is a veritable museum of potholes and gullies; an energy situation that has been in dire shape for many years and worsening; and an educational sector that is in danger of miseducating or undereducating a whole generation of Nigerian youth.

In the face of these calamities, one got the impression that Yar'Adua is content simply to occupy the space of “president,” a bequest from former President Olusegun Obasanjo. If he knows a way out of the grave problems, or has given them thought at all, he has done an excellent job of hiding it. One

year in office and his biggest achievement is to treat Nigerians to the soap opera titled “Unmasking Obasanjo.”

Like all soap operas, Yar'Adua's lacks substance. It thrives, instead, on the titillation of Nigerians. Indifferent to the challenge of defining any character of governance, he has orchestrated the slow roasting of Obasanjo.

A man with Obasanjo's record of hypocrisy, greed and vindictiveness deserves the harshest comeuppance. The trouble with Yar'Adua's method of addressing the Obasanjo mess is that it is an evasion. Instead of setting up a proper mechanism for determining the nature, and extent, of Obasanjo's crimes, Yar'Adua has chosen to keep his reviled benefactor beyond the reach of the law, but as a convenient shooting target. Recognizing that Obasanjo is the nation's reigning villain-in-chief, Yar'Adua is making hay out of releasing carefully packaged revelations of the man's abuses.

The danger of this strategy became apparent in my conversations with many Nigerians. Many a friend told me “Yar'Adua is trying,” trying being a peculiarly Nigerian way of stating that somebody is doing well. Yet, when asked to enumerate the man's accomplishments, they lapsed into blather or incoherence. One lauded Yar'Adua for not using the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission to hound

his political foes. Another praised him for exposing the underbelly of Obasanjo's hypocrisy and graft. When I reminded him that Yar'Adua has resisted calls to launch a formal probe of the Obasanjo years, the man told me that the spree of vilification was punishment enough.

Here's the trick: Yar'Adua looks good only because the stench wafting from Obasanjo's moribund regime remains overpowering. Yar'Adua looks good by keeping the Obasanjo soap opera on the public entertainment frequency. It is a cynical strategy and bankrupt statecraft. You can castigate Obasanjo all you want, but unless you do a thorough inventory of his illicit haul and compel him and other looters to pay back, the soap opera is worthless fluff.

One of Obasanjo's gravest sins, in my view, is to squander eight years of the nation's precious time. It was eight years in which a visionary leader might have deployed the oil windfall to rebuild dilapidated roads and develop new ones; set up basic infrastructure, including dependable power and water supply; rehabilitated the health sector; revamped education; helped cities and other communities to establish waste management systems, and transformed Nigeria into a desirable space for its citizens and visitors alike. Obasanjo spent eight years ensuring that none of these promises was redeemed.

Yes, he wrote a jumbo cheque of \$18 billion to the Paris Club to settle Nigeria's external debt, but that's dubious achievement at best. For one, the legitimacy of the debts was in serious question. Besides, even if Nigeria had a moral and fiduciary obligation to pay, it is hardly an achievement that a president

who sat on unprecedented oil earnings wrote a cheque.

Yar'Adua has contracted the Obasanjo disease; he has spent a do-nothing year at Nigerians' expense. Leaders who know their left from their right can make a difference in one year. Yar'Adua can hardly take credit for "tarring" one mile of road, adding any wattage to the national grid, boosting the morale of the nation's underpaid academics, or revitalizing teaching and research in polytechnics and universities. You'd think that a man dogged by serious health problems would wish to improve the state of Nigerian hospitals. Not Yar'Adua, who appears oblivious to the shame of having to be flown to Germany each time he has a serious health risk.

My visit to Nsukka, venue of the ultimate in a series of events organized by the Association of Nigerian Authors to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Chinua Achebe's first and most popular novel, offered insights into the paradox of Nigeria. The University of Nigeria Nsukka –to use a favorite Nigerian phrase–was agog for Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The opening event took place in Alexandria Hall, and every seat in that capacious hall was taken. And the current of enthusiasm in that room was both palpable and powerful, the kind of vibrancy and energy that one encounters in the wrestling scenes on the pages of *Things Fall Apart*.

I was delighted to reacquaint with many longtime mentors, friends, or colleagues. They included Professors Emmanuel Obiechina, Ernest Emenyonu, Charles Nnolim and Ossie Enekwe. Then there was Odia Ofeimun, a poet whose everyday life can seem a mini-saga. He

had got to Nsukka after an improbable adventure that saw him board the “wrong” flight in Lagos that took him, not to Enugu, but to Maiduguri. Then there were Chuks Iloegbunam, who sat in for Governor Peter Obi of Anambra, and Wale Okediran, a medical doctor and former lawmaker whose enduring passion is writing.

The celebration had its surfeit of speeches from hosting university officials, but its air was elsewhere. It was in the music played by the university’s band. It was in Emenyonu’s eloquent keynote that laid out the importance of Achebe’s oeuvre, paying particular attention to the place of Things Fall Apart. It was in the sense of awe that swept through the hall when one of Achebe’s relatives, a professor at UNN, gave me a dog-eared copy of the novel’s first edition to show to the audience—side by side with Heinemann’s latest edition. It was in the body language of the audience, most of them students and some budding writers, who leaned forward in their seats as speaker after speaker pronounced on Achebe’s inimitable and enduring power as a novelist, moral conscience and public intellectual.

In a perfect world, the narrative would be exclusively one of cheer. But Nsukka is far from a perfect world. During lunch break, several students and lecturers sought me out. When I remarked on the university’s spruced-up appearance, one of the students pointedly told me not to be deceived. “Most of our toilets don’t have running water,” he said. Another complained that exams were around the corner, but the university was beset by severe power woes, with parts of the campus going without electric power for days at a time. One U.S.-educated lecturer

confessed that he was disturbed by “what this nation is doing to these young people.” He asked: “What kind of future will we have when our most precious resource—our students—have to study in semi-darkness, with candles and lamps, in rooms that are infested with mosquitoes?”

How much again did Obasanjo spend on his power projects?

An Akin Oshuntokun poser

The Guardian of April 23, 2008 named Mr. Akin Oshuntokun as one of the buyers of guesthouses formerly reserved for the use of Vice President Atiku Abubakar. Oshuntokun used to write a column before he morphed into a presidential adviser to former President Olusegun Obasanjo. As a columnist, he made it his business to pry into the affairs of public officials. Now it is time he made a public statement explaining how he got the guesthouse and how he was able to put together the money to buy it. That clarification would help dispel any speculation that those who champion transparency on the pages of newspapers are less than fastidious in its observance when they assume public office. Over to you, Mr. Oshuntokun.

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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