

# Adedibu, Abacha, and the Adisa syndrome

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*By Okey Ndibe*

Let me start by describing what I mean by the Adisa syndrome.

The syndrome is named for the late General Abdulkarim Adisa, a former military governor of Oyo, former Minister of Works and Housing, and former conspirator in a coup plot who died in a London hospital in February, 2005, six days after an accident in Nigeria. Adisa was, among other things, a colorful man, combining his rudimentary skill in the English language with a gift for illogic. He was given to pomposity, often describing himself and his ilk in superlatives.

Adisa was one of the dim “stars” of the Sani Abacha regime, a close confidante of the dark-goggled general who dreamed of ruling Nigeria maximally. But things began to fall apart when Adisa allowed himself to be roped into a plot to depose Abacha, his erstwhile benefactor.

One by one, Abacha—who apparently had a hand in designing the bizarre plot—summoned its ringleaders to personally confront them. Abacha arranged to videotape the sessions with his would-be traitors, especially his then second-in-command, Oladipo Diya, and Adisa.

Adisa’s “performance” could have won him five stars in any acting contest. He collapsed in tears, a portrait of self-debased penitence. He blamed the devil

for tempting him with illicit dreams. He wheedled and cajoled and implored Abacha’s forgiveness. He did not try to maintain a general’s poise or to project a sense of stoic dignity. A man previously known for loquaciousness and a hectoring manner, Adisa became, before our very eyes, an effeminate wimp.

Thanks to the hands of fate, Adisa survived the trap. His reputation was in tatters, but he outlived Abacha who died rather suddenly, and in a manner that accorded with his famed appetite for sex. Part of the Abacha legend is that he died in the company of three young women, one or two of them of Indian ancestry, and perhaps prostitutes.

Several years before his own death, Adisa gave an interview to a Nigerian weekly magazine. The question of his weeping before Abacha came up. Adisa said he had no apologies to offer; that he had thousands of his “people” who depended on him to feed them, and who would feed them if he weren’t around to do it. The interviewers then reminded him that his unmanly reaction had tarnished his image as a military officer. Again, Adisa was unrepentant.

Reaching for an intriguing metaphor, he told the interviewers that the white man who invented the pencil also invented the eraser. His point: that whatever was written about a person’s wretched

reputation could be amended—revised—in time.

Such quaint reasoning appears to shape the conduct of public officials in Nigeria. Many of them believe that, whatever their measure of reprehensible behavior, their wealth would always buy the erasure or “revision” of their perfidious actions.

To take Adisa’s example: as Minister of Works, he did little to rehabilitate roads in the country. He was content to amass great wealth at the expense of Nigerians who daily plied—and died on—the roads Adisa neglected. He felt it was enough to throw crumbs from his lavish table down to the emaciated hordes that daily thronged his gate, begging bowls in hand. He relished the idea of playing “big man,” a provider for the masses whose commonwealth he stole to begin with.

Adisa’s shortsightedness became his ultimate undoing. As if the roads he neglected as minister wished to make a macabre point, he was seriously injured in a road accident. Even though he was quickly flown to England for treatment—a trip paid for from public funds—he died several days later. Prior to his death, Adisa had crisscrossed Nigeria to forewarn us that he and other “prominent stakeholders” had decided to hand Nigeria to Ibrahim Babangida in 2007, and there was nothing we could do about it.

In the end, despite his haughtiness, Adisa could no more realize his Babangida project than he succeeded in his pet dream to rewrite—or erase—history. The verdict of history—that Adisa was a failed public figure, a net contributor to his nation’s misery index, a man short on

vision but long on greed and self-aggrandizement—remains entrenched.

At a time like this, Nigerians have a lot to learn from the false postulates of the Adisa syndrome. In the wake of the death of Mr. Lamidi Adedibu, the scourge of Oyo, and the tenth anniversary of Sani Abacha’s passing, a lot of “powerful” people seem desperate to use their erasers to wipe clean our memories. With as much insistence and resolve, “ordinary” Nigerians are resisting the effort to falsify well-known data in order to burnish the image of men who were knaves or worse.

Adedibu represented the worst in Nigerian politics. He exemplified the politics of thuggery, extortion and blackmail. Adedibu’s notion of “moving a state forward” was to have the state government wire hundreds of millions of public funds into his private pocket. With that illicit haul, he then set himself up, Adisa-style, as a grand patrician whose office it was to give paltry handouts to the wretched of the earth who haunted his Molete residence. Never mind that the pittance he doled out merely degraded the beneficiaries. It never occurred to him—for he was a rustic of the worst order—that the largesse belonged, in the first place, to the same people he presumed to be helping.

In a decent society, Mr. Adedibu would long have languished in jail. Instead, he was enthroned as the “strongman” of Ibadan, his Olympian fantasies fed by the mischievous indulgence of people like Ahmadu Ali who approvingly tagged him “garrison commander,” and former President Olusegun Obasanjo who proclaimed a thug “a leader.” Yet, when news spread that Adedibu had died, the

verdict of history appeared in the streets of Ibadan (and elsewhere in Oyo) in the form of spontaneous jubilation. It must be the worst possible damnation when a man's death elicits a paroxysm of celebration.

In that regard, Adedibu joined a company of two; in my recollection, only Abacha's death provoked a superior outbreak of jollification. At his death, Abacha was on the cusp of emasculating the will of the Nigerian people. His vile goal of transforming from a military dictator into an indispensable "democratic" leader was on auto-cruise.

He was a ruler straight out of hell. His volcanic ire consumed Ken Saro-Wiwa, Kudirat Abiola, and Pa Alfred Rewane, and also sent Wole Soyinka and many pro-democracy activists into exile. He and his small circle of minions plundered the nation's treasury, including direct raids on the Central Bank where caches of cash were lifted. He commissioned a grand document styled Vision 2010, a purported blueprint for the nation's development, but his body language and action oozed visionlessness. As the journalist Karl Maier has stated, in his excellent book, *This House Has Fallen*, Nigerians regarded his death as "a coup from heaven." As news of his death filtered to the streets, there was at first a momentary air of disbelief, soon followed by a spontaneous fiesta of dancing and beer-guzzling merrymaking. Whatever Abacha and his small band of flatterers thought, the implacable judgment of history was writ large on the streets.

Ten years later, Abacha's widow, and the trio of Babangida, Muhammadu Buhari and Abdulsalami Abubakar, all former military dictators, have set up a choir

whose sole purpose is to sing the rest of us to amnesia. Mariam Abacha, affecting a "generosity" that her late husband never showed to his foes, said she had forgiven Obasanjo and other traducers of Sani Abacha.

Perhaps Obasanjo needs her forgiveness, since he proceeded to behave in office with a greed, hypocrisy and craving for self-perpetuation that might have been adapted from Abacha's manual of style. But Obasanjo's tragic statecraft did not mitigate Abacha's rapaciousness and treachery.

The revisionist agenda continued with the bizarre claims by Babangida, Abubakar and Buhari that Abacha was no thief. Buhari said: "All the allegations leveled against the personality of the late Gen. Sani Abacha will remain allegations. It is 10 years now, things should be over by now." From Babangida: "It is not true that he looted public treasury, I knew who Abacha was because I was close to him." And this entry from Abubakar: "It is quite unfortunate and unfair to accuse the family of the late Sani Abacha of looting public funds."

As Americans would say, go tell that to the marines! It is a matter of public record, attested to by the Swiss government, the Nigerian government, the World Bank, and the American government that the Abacha family returned close to one billion dollars of stolen funds to the Nigerian coffers. Why then would any sane person deny that Abacha stole?

Perhaps the answer is that, like Mobutu Sese Seko, Nigerian rulers believe themselves entitled to take freely from the public treasury. After all, Babangida

and Abubakar—as well as Obasanjo and former governors—are reputed to be stupendously wealthy beyond their legitimate means of income. The three musketeers of Babangida, Abubakar and Buhari must have judged Abacha by their own standards and found him scrupulous. The Adisa syndrome is at play. But thank God, history is not easily deceived.

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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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