

# Chronicles of a starving cleaner

Monday, 18 August 2008

*By Okey Ndibe*

A nation's international airport is a symbol and metaphor of its national character and narrative. A dirty, disheveled airport bespeaks a people whose ways are squalid.

On June 30, I arrived at the international wing of the Nnamdi Azikiwe Airport, Abuja, to begin a six-week visit to Nigeria, part research and part leisure. One purpose of my trip was to gather information for a memoir on the Biafran War. But even before I was done with immigration formalities, I encountered in human form the evidence of a war raging in today's Nigeria. Let me re-phrase that, for a war presupposes at least two combatants going at it. What's happening in Nigeria is best described as an unprovoked, unconscionable assault on the country's poor. I crossed paths with one of the victims on arrival at the airport.

Whilst waiting in line to clear immigration, I needed to make a quick toilet run. A wire-thin man stood outside the toilet, his expression so forlorn that I couldn't resist an urge to engage him. "How you dey?" I asked jovially. In a voice that seemed emptied of spirit, he said, "We're praying God. Life hard."

At first, I conjectured that the man was referring to the challenge of eking out a living on a cleaner's meager salary. But the man soon disabused me. "For ten months now, no pay," he volunteered.

"Which kin' work be dis? Na only God we dey look."

"Are you saying you've not been paid for ten months?" I asked in a voice that must have betrayed my disbelief.

The man's voice choked as he confirmed that he'd gone without pay for ten months.

"Why don't you then leave the job? Why not search for another job?" I suggested.

"Another job?" he queried, spreading his arms in a frustrated gesture. A tinge of melancholy had crept into his voice. "Where?" He gazed at me as if daring me to give him some clues. When I offered none, he then explained: "I don dey look for long, but 'e hard to find job for Nigeria."

The man then told me the rest of his sad, saddening story. In many other countries, the gist of the man's miserable story would sound incredible. However, the story he vended is an all-too familiar reality in Nigeria. According to the cleaner, the contractor who hired him—and other cleaners at the airport—had not come forth with their salaries for some ten months. The contractor's excuse, he said, was that the Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria (FAAN) had not paid him for months as well.

When I suggested that the contractor could be lying to them, the cleaner said no. He described his employer as a good man who had at some point borrowed money in order to pay his workers. But with the FAAN balking at paying the contractor, the man explained to his cleaners that he could not afford to keep borrowing at high interest rates in order to meet payroll.

My hunch was that the contractor was indeed exploiting his employees. But the cleaner was adamant in defending the man who sends him and others out day after day to keep the airport clean without meeting his obligation to pay them. The cleaner swore to me that the current FAAN leadership owed several other contractors for months. He then complained that it's small people like him who bear the brunt in unpaid wages.

I was curious to know what the cleaner earned per month (a paltry N18,000) and whether he had a family (yes, a wife and two small children). I then asked how he and his family coped, how they managed to pay their rent, buy food, and afford clothing. He said they borrow "from all corners." He confided that, in the last few months, he had borrowed various sums from his relatives, his wife's relatives, and friends. Then he added that "We pray and God helps. Sometimes passengers [at the airport] can give something."

My suspicion was piqued the moment he mentioned monetary gifts from passengers. Perhaps the man had made up a woeful narrative in order to move me into giving him some money. Despite this sneaking suspicion, something about the man's mien suggested truthfulness. I knew how easy it could be for any man who puts his mind to it to feign sorrowful

circumstances. Even so, there was a suggestion of pained candor in the man's manner. He answered my questions in a fluid manner that invited me to trust him.

He told me that he was born in Delta State and came to Abuja three years ago. The fifth in a polygamous household of more than twenty siblings, the cleaner said he relocated from his village to Abuja to look for the means to help raise his younger brothers and sisters. Instead of realizing his dreams, he's been stuck in the mirthless, impoverished margins of a federal capital awash with evidence of wealth concentrated in a few hands.

The cleaner's face lit up with expectancy when I told him I was a writer, and that I planned to tell his grim story. Even so, he requested that I not use his name. He feared that the contractor who hired him might be pressured by irate FAAN officials to fire him.

The encounter with this cleaner stayed with me throughout my visit in Nigeria. Two days after my arrival in Abuja, I told the hapless cleaner's story to a friend as we ate dinner at a restaurant. He told me that the man's monthly salary of N18,000 was the equivalent of what two or three friends could blow on dinner in one of Abuja's upscale restaurants. When I stated my suspicion that the cleaner's employer was taking him to the cleaners, my friend disclosed that he had a friend who works at FAAN. He promised to contact his friend and find out if it was true that the agency owed contractors for several months.

The next day, my friend rang me up. His friend at FAAN had confirmed that the agency's current management is notorious for owing contractors. He told

me that his friend also disclosed that several of the agency's top shots "are fond of living it up. They fly around the world and lodge in expensive hotels abroad all in the name of capacity building. Meanwhile, they sit on bills submitted by contractors for services already provided."

If the appearance of an airport gives away something of the character of a nation, the way a nation treats its lowliest citizens is a mirror into its soul. In Nigeria's case, the fact that artisans, cleaners, messengers, drivers, nannies and cooks are paid abominably low wages suggests a corroded soul. When agencies of the government like FAAN make it impossible for low-paid workers to receive even the pittance that is due them, then nothing less than evil is at play. A man who works for little pay may be the victim of social injustice. A man who is reduced to begging because even his tiny salary is not forthcoming has been reduced to a serf's subhuman status. By that measure, Nigeria teems with degraded humans who are no better than slaves. It's a scandal and a moral affront.

A National Assembly alert to its oversight task should summon the irresponsible FAAN officials to show up and answer tough questions. In addition, Nigeria ought to have a stringent law that makes it a crime to deny a worker his due pay. As I found out during my six-week visit, unpaid wages is a widespread scourge in Nigeria.

Officials of government agencies who cause hard working Nigerians to take up begging bowls ought to be indicted in court, and sentenced to the same kind of harsh existence they inflict on others. Culpable FAAN officials must be

compelled to explain why contractors who maintain the nation's airports are not paid for months at a time. Where are such contractors expected to find the money to keep their staff working?

If a particular contractor is deemed incompetent, then the agency ought to initiate the process to formally abrogate his or her contract. But it's nothing short of criminal not to pay a contractor who has rendered services. It's even less forgivable when smaller men like the cleaner at Abuja's Nnamdi Azikiwe Airport are sentenced to hell-on-earth because of the arrogance, possible corruption and misplaced priorities of a few high-flying FAAN officials.

## 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?

Read or download more titles at

<http://www.okeyndibe.com>

### 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

To discuss a speaking engagement, please contact Okey Ndibe by e-mail ([okey@okeyndibe.com](mailto:okey@okeyndibe.com)) or by phone (860.306.7843).

---

PDF conversions done with Adobe Acrobat Professional 6.0 (US & International Patents) under license to All Hands Business Solutions, Inc.