

Nigeria's football as metaphor of promise

By Okey Ndibe

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No, Nigeria's football team did not win the gold at the just-concluded Beijing Olympic Games, but they gave an undeniably golden account of themselves. At the end of their riveting decisive match with repeating champions Argentina, the Nigerians could lay a claim only to the silver, but they certainly acquitted themselves as champions. Only one goal was scored in this titanic encounter, and it wasn't against the Argentine team, but it's almost a misnomer to state that Nigeria was defeated.

To a man, the members of Nigeria's football squad played proudly and inspired pride in the hearts of their countrymen and women.

I haven't met or heard from one Nigerian who was less than impressed by the team's performance in the final match of a tournament that had the world captivated. Talk about being on the world's football stage, and this was it. Talk about a game that came with monstrous pressure, and this was it. Yet, at the end of ninety minutes—plus a few minutes of injury time—the Nigerian

team could walk with their heads held high.

Facing an Argentine team that has Lionel Messi, the nimble-footed young man who is arguably the best player today, the Nigerians played an exhilarating game. Three words came to mind as I savored the artistry of the Nigerian team: cohesion, poise and discipline.

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Take cohesion. Our team played exquisite team football. The team represented a harmonious sum of their individual parts. There was an absence of selfishness in their play. There was not one player out to pursue individual aggrandizement at the expense of the team's goal. None tried to dazzle the spectators with his spectacular skills to the detriment of the team.

Carrying the banner of Africa into the final, the Nigerians elevated their game. In an era when some ascribe wizardry only to foreign coaches, Samson Siasia gave a creditable account of himself. This homegrown coach proved that, with the right encouragement and tools, indigenous talent could compete with the best in the world.

Under Siasia's direction, the Nigerian team played purposive football. Both teams thrilled the 90,000 odd spectators in the stadium and the hundreds of millions more who watched on television with displays of quintessential football. The game was marked by fluidity of movement, amazing symmetry, and adroit use of space.

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Take poise. The Nigerian team's passes were crisp. Their defense, for the most part, was impregnable. They used football guile and wile to open up spaces and to penetrate their opponent's equally formidable defense. When the Argentine team mounted attacks, the Nigerian side employed intelligent defensive strategies to thwart them. When Angel Di Maria scored the lone goal, it was evident that it came from a rare defensive lapse.

Take discipline. Our players played at a tempo and in a style that minimized their mistakes. It was clear that they came with

a well-choreographed game plan; they applied themselves with assiduity to ensure that their play accorded with the plan.

Even though the team came short, their terrific run offers several lessons about the way towards Nigeria's socio-economic progress. For one, our football team proved the wisdom of entrusting national tasks to the most capable hands. As Chinua Achebe pithily contends in his polemical book, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, part of our country's tragedy is that mediocrities are too often put in the most critical sectors. A cursory look at Nigeria's public affairs reveals the preponderance of the least intellectually and ethically equipped. The public sphere teems with rustics, clowns and nonentities who are perversely venerated. Inflated as stakeholders, godfathers, they pollute the public space and drag the country to their gutter level.

It hardly requires a soothsayer to discover that a country that promotes half-baked talent over its best and brightest is preparing for failure. Hence, as Achebe has also pointed out, Nigeria often achieves the feat of snatching defeat from the joys of victory.

The grave fault is when one deliberately strives to sabotage one's goal

Another lesson from the Nigerian team's superb showing in China is this: Nigerians will accept a disappointing

outcome once they are convinced that their representatives worked hard and prepared themselves to succeed. The truth is that, even with the most astute preparation, success is never guaranteed. But it's equally true that an ill-prepared team is bound to crash, sooner rather than later.

If Nigerians are exasperated with their leaders, it is not because the public officials fail per se. A more fundamental reason is that these officials, who are paid extravagantly to begin with, hardly apply themselves to the solution of the country's myriad and intractable problems. As I have said elsewhere, the inability to achieve one's goal is not a contemptible flaw. The grave fault is when one deliberately strives to sabotage one's goal. It's akin to conspiring in order to fail.

To give an example: former President Olusegun Obasanjo and his ministers of power would have earned some praise if they had made demonstrable efforts to address the nation's power crisis. In that event, Nigeria would have witnessed some improvement in electric power supply. Instead, the former president and his coterie set out, it now seems clear, to defraud the nation of billions of dollars. And they bequeathed worsening power supply woes to the nation. That is unforgivable.

Nigerians owe a great debt to the young men who carried their nation's football dream to Beijing, and husbanded that dream all the way to the final game. Those players gave us a mirror image of what's possible for the country once we batten down, set high expectations, and

adopt the work ethic to enable us to realize our goals.

The Southeast and the Siemens Deal

Two things stood out as I read last week's announcement that Nigeria was entering into a fresh power deal with German firms, including Siemens. The more obvious one is that Umaru Yar'Adua, current occupant of Aso Rock, continues to betray the hollowness of his acclaimed revulsion to corruption. That his regime would fall into bed with a company like Siemens, accused of offering bribes of \$14 million to Nigerian officials, speaks volumes about Mr. Yar'Adua's inability even to put up a convincing show of pretence. There's no other way to put it: Mr. Yar'Adua, like the man who entrenched him, is embedded with corruption.

The other point has to do with the conspicuous exclusion of the southeastern states from the list of states that would benefit from the envisaged power projects. It's a bizarre development, almost calculated to demonstrate a willful marginalization of the Igbo-speaking part of the country.

This inexplicable imbalance clearly raises the question of justice and equity with regard to the distribution of the nation's resources

This exclusion makes even less sense coming shortly after Governor Peter Obi of Anambra led other south-east governors to visit Yar'Adua and protest the alarming state of federal projects in their states. Not only are federal government roads in the southeast in scandalous shape, the federal government has let its industrial projects in the concerned states to become moribund. Governor Obi's delegation also pressed the case, unassailable in my view, to create a sixth state out of their area.

Let's return to the new power projects, meant to inject 6,500 megawatts into the national grid by 2020. Even though the planned power stations will include coal-powered plants as well as hydro plants, thermal plants, solar thermal plants, solar photovoltaic panels, wind power plants, waste-to-energy plants and light crude plants, the federal government made the bizarre decision to exclude Enugu, the hub of Nigeria's coal exploration.

Newspaper reports indicated that the projects are to be sited in Ikot Abasi (Akwa Ibom), Kainji (Niger), Kaduna, Obudu (Cross River), Kano, Maiduguri, Egbin (Lagos), Sapele (Delta), Afam (Rivers), Sokoto, Katsina and Gombe. Not a single southeastern state!

This inexplicable imbalance clearly raises the question of justice and equity with regard to the distribution of the nation's resources. It fuels the speculation that a deliberate policy exists to frustrate the economic aspirations of the Igbo. A policy that marginalizes any sector of Nigeria is disastrous, and bound to boomerang.

Nigeria is a fragile proposition to begin with; it cannot afford to pursue a policy that disenchants or spites the Igbo or any other group. Whilst signing the new power deal, Mr. Yar'Adua said it "signals our unwavering commitment to evolving those requisite deliberate, structured policy choices that will enable us to rapidly rebuild, upgrade, and expand our critical infrastructure." If he wants those words to be taken seriously, then he better head back to the drawing board to ensure that the southeast is represented.

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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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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