

# Yar'Adua and a sick nation

Monday, 01 September 2008

*By Okey Ndibe*

One fact should by now be clear to most Nigerians: Umaru Musa Yar'Adua should not have run for the office of president. Despite the best efforts of his handlers to put a mask over the truth, Yar'Adua's poor (and apparently deteriorating) health has become the central story of his desultory regime.

Let's be clear: Yar'Adua is only half to blame for the unmitigated disaster of his impostor presidency. A great deal of the blame belongs to former President Olusegun Obasanjo, the principal recruiter of Yar'Adua, and the man who, in the end, smuggled his ward into office. Obasanjo had alleged that Yar'Adua was a tested performer. That's now a self-evident lie. Many residents of Katsina, where for eight years Yar'Adua held gubernatorial sway, remember him as a mediocre governor.

From the outset, it was an open secret that Yar'Adua has been battling serious health problems. Obasanjo, a trader in superstition, told Nigerians that Yar'Adua had been healed. Another lie. Since his imposition on Nigerians, Yar'Adua has been flown to Germany for treatment. His feeble health has also meant that he often can't keep scheduled appointments. When I visited Abuja in July, a journalist with sources inside Aso Rock told me that the man retires to bed before 8 p.m.

Obasanjo lied on at least two fronts when he said that Yar'Adua had the vision to continue the pursuit of political, social and economic reforms. First, after more than one year in office, few Nigerians would be in a hurry to put Yar'Adua and vision in the same sentence. Sometimes the kindest thing to be said about the man is that he occupies (presidential) space. The second is the fiction that Obasanjo had reforms worthy of perpetuation. In a lot of ways, Obasanjo saddled Nigerians with a legacy of deforms, not reforms.

A man with Yar'Adua's health woes should have made the prudent choice of retiring from public life to devote full attention to himself. It's a pity that the man didn't have the strength of character to rebuff the flattery of those who wanted to install him in Aso Rock as an enfeebled stooge. Of course, it is not uncommon for a person, even one in weak physical shape, to decide to make self-disregarding sacrifice in order to advance the public good. But nobody who has watched Yar'Adua in office would testify that he evinces passion about bettering Nigeria. He is, at best, a confounded figure who is dozing while Nigeria sinks into depths of despair.

During my recent six-week travel in Nigeria, I encountered many people from different stations of life who bemoaned a country cast adrift. A constant refrain from different quarters, whether it was in

Abuja, Yola, Lagos, Awka, or Asaba, was that Yar'Adua's inability to govern had put Nigeria at the mercy of some despicable forces. Some even stated that a coalition of former and serving governors, with James Ibori and Bukola Saraki as co-captains, had hijacked the country.

Yar'Adua's self-effacement and weakness derive from two sources at once. One is that the man is too beset by sickness to be an effective manager of a complex, challenging country like Nigeria. The second factor is the fact that, the ruling of the presidential electoral tribunal notwithstanding, Yar'Adua and his sponsors know that his mandate is—stolen. When all is said and done, Yar'Adua is a usurper, and one who came to office without the benefit of any blueprint. Given the two strikes against him, it is no surprise that he has resorted to making wooly promises about transforming Nigeria into heaven on earth come 2020!

Many Nigerians who, for one reason or another, chose to accept the imposition of Yar'Adua as “president” are, it is clear, now gnashing their teeth. More than a year after his illegitimate inauguration, Yar'Adua has proved, above all, the danger of putting the affairs of a nation in the hands of a man too beleaguered by sickness to be attentive to statecraft. Nigeria is a sick country that requires the astute attention of an alert, visionary leader. Unfortunately, Yar'Adua's sickness has left Nigeria sicker than it ever was.

Yet, the beneficiaries from the Nigerian malaise persist in playing ostrich. Last week, Ojo Maduekwe and John Odey combined their ministerial voices to retail

a white lie to Nigerians. Emerging from a federal executive council meeting, the two men tried to debunk an online publication's report that Yar'Adua was being treated in a Saudi Arabian hospital. They told reporters that Yar'Adua was quite hale and fit, and that he was occupied with matters of religious piety in Saudi Arabia, the headquarters of Islam.

What a pathetic picture the ministers cut in their effort to mislead the world. Asked to explain why Yar'Adua's scheduled state visit to Brazil was hastily cancelled, Maduekwe thought he was scoring a point by lecturing reporters that the trip was only “readjusted.” Nobody was fooled. Not Nigerians, who are more knowledgeable than they get credit for, nor Brazilians and other members of the diplomatic corps in Abuja. To me, the shamelessness of the ministers' canard was matched by the media's pitiable collaboration in spreading falsehood.

Maduekwe and Odey are products of a political culture that thrives in the dissemination of misinformation. One often wonders whether the Maduekwes and Odeys of our world truly believe that Nigerians are so gullible, or whether they are just caught up in a system whose currency is to rearrange the truth?

Sadly, much of the Nigerian press lends a hand, I suspect wittingly, to this process of deception. First, I don't recall any newspaper, major or minor, that published the report that Yar'Adua's trip to Saudi Arabia was for medical treatment. That story was told exclusively by saharareporters.com, a website that has become a must-go destination for Nigerians anxious to find out, in words

and pictures, how their country is misgoverned.

The website's accuracy in reportage is nothing short of stunning. In fact, the reliability of its exposes is posing a challenge to some Nigerian newspapers and weekly magazines that now specialize in recycling official fabrications. A few weeks ago, having a drink with two academics at the staff club of the University of Lagos, I overheard a lecturer speak glowingly of saharareporters.com. Since discovering saharareporters.com, the man said, he hardly bothered to read Nigerian newspapers. "Saharareporters tells me what's going to happen in Nigeria sometimes two weeks before it happens," he said.

The website had reported, before Yar'Adua's departure to Saudi Arabia, that he was headed for medical treatment. It even reported that Yar'Adua's handlers had refined an official narrative to the effect that he was off to observe the lesser hajj. I don't recall that any major Nigerian newspaper published this report, even as speculation. Through their silence, the press allowed Yar'Adua and his handlers to get away with deceiving Nigerians. Yet, the newspapers gave prominent coverage to the government's denial of a story the press never had the courage to carry.

Yet, a day after the government's absurd denial, several newspapers suddenly woke up to their reportorial responsibility. They reported that Yar'Adua had undergone surgery in Saudi Arabia. What manner of "president" would sneak out of the

country and mislead his country about the personal nature of his mission?

Yar'Adua's friends and family ought to tell him that, much as Nigerians would sympathize with any ailing person, they deserve an energetic, intellectually vibrant, and visionary leader to run their affairs. Even more, they deserve a man they choose in a credible election, not one whose mandate is beclouded by electoral fraud. Yar'Adua has sound health reasons to immediately announce his resignation from an ill-gotten office. But if he won't do it for the sake of his health, he must do it to spare Nigeria its continued descent into the abyss.

## 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.