

Lying in God's name

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By Okey Ndibe

Those who wangled Umaru Musa Yar'Adua into office through the backdoor constructed an elaborate myth about the man's honesty. Mr. Yar'Adua has, it seems, undertaken to demystify himself. Since assuming office through questionable means, he has gone about the task of unmasking himself. Perhaps he is doing so in a perverse spirit of honesty.

In the early days of his "presidency," Yar'Adua impressed some people by acknowledging that his (s)election was marred by irregularities. Some people mistook this confession as evidence of candor and honesty on his part. For some of us, it was actually a mark of an unattractive quality. Forgive me for asking, but when was the definition of honesty expanded in the dictionary or ethics to include a man who keeps stolen goods?

Besides, Mr. Yar'Adua's ostensibly honest admission was modified by a patently false claim, namely, that he would still have emerged winner of the presidential polls with or without rigging. This was an absurd claim, for electoral observers even concluded that Yar'Adua's handlers had to resort to hanky panky to be competitive in his home state of Katsina - where he just finished two terms as governor!

The day he was sworn in, Yar'Adua read a speech in which he committed himself

to electoral reforms, promised to pursue a seven-point agenda, and pledged to be a servant-leader. Within twenty-four hours, the man had blissfully forgotten what it would take to institute real electoral reforms. He'd erased the seven-point agenda from his memory, and if servant-leader means anything concrete to him, he has yet to let Nigerians know.

Yar'Adua quickly morphed into a master-ruler. A servant-leader doesn't leave his duty post without telling his employers or fellows where he is headed, or what he is up to. A servant-leader does not set out to deceive or mislead his people. Yet, Yar'Adua left the shores of Nigeria for more than two weeks to attend to his deteriorating health in Saudi Arabia. Instead of looking Nigerians in the face and telling them the truth, he permitted his office to issue a statement that he was off to make religious observances.

There's no way to mitigate what transpired: Yar'Adua's handlers lied in God's name. And one must assume that the lie was told at his behest, or, at minimum, with his permission. Of course, his office could claim that the statement that he was gone on a minor pilgrimage is technically "true." Perhaps he did tread on one or another of Islam's holy sites while in Saudi Arabia. But here's one claim the man and his image launderers can't truthfully make: that the primary purpose of his trip was to observe the lesser hajj.

It's bad enough to bracket God into one's lies. It's worse to cling desperately to such a lie long after anybody with half a brain can see through the falsity of it. And yet, Yar'Adua's ministers and party henchmen continued to engage in a marathon of lies and deceptive gymnastics. Even after Yar'Adua's sickness necessitated the cancellation of a state visit to Brazil, his Abuja relay team of liars maintained the fiction that he had simply extended his religious visit to Jeddah. When he missed several speculated deadlines for his return, and his fibbing team grudgingly admitted that he was receiving treatment, the lie was nevertheless allowed to stand in the way of the truth. The narrative was only slightly modulated to leave the impression that, while engaged in matters of religious solemnity, Yar'Adua had a health hiccup and was quickly seen by Saudi doctors.

Mr. Vincent Ogbulafor, the chairman who has served notice that the ruling party intends to stand astride the Nigerian carcass and gorge on its entrails for at least sixty years, delivered one of the facile lines in this sordid game of invoking God's name in a lie. Two weeks plus into Yar'Adua's absence from Abuja, Ogbulafor joined a small group of party chieftains who traveled to Saudi Arabia to appraise the condition of a man they alleged to be "hale and hearty." Apparently, the visitors found new ways to renew the lease on the original deception. According to Thisday of last Saturday, September 6, Ogbulafor told the paper: "We had breakfast with the President this morning. He's responding positively to treatment. Don't forget he's also a human being."

It's interesting that the PDP chairman would adopt such a pedantic tone. One didn't know that some Nigerians had fallen into the error of viewing Yar'Adua as a god. But thank goodness that there's an Ogbulafor to exercise his intellectual wizardry to guide the erring, who had carried Yar'Adua off to the Olympian height of the gods.

On a serious note, though, it's the likes of Ogbulafor, John Odey, Ojo Maduekwe and other handlers who behaved as if Yar'Adua were of divine stature. Those of us who believed from the first day that Yar'Adua was an ailing man know that he is, like the rest of us, all too human. When we questioned the official narrative that he was deepening his faith in Saudi Arabia, instead of reviving his body, we implied that there should be no shame in admitting the obvious fact of the man's sickness.

Perhaps, then, Yar'Adua and his cronies nursed a secret design to sell him as some divine creature. Perhaps that's why they went to absurd lengths to sustain a manifestly false and implausible script. In recognition of his own mortal character, Yar'Adua should have instructed his publicity people to tell Nigerians the simple truth: that he was sick and was going to Saudi Arabia to seek medical treatment. To mask his medical trip as an occasion of religious pilgrimage is to pretend to be beyond sickness. If he had to lie to anybody about the reason for his Saudi trip, it should never be Nigerians. What's the sense in lying to Nigerians who foot the bill each time he flies out for treatment?

Last Saturday Mr. Yar'Adua finally returned to Nigeria. The manner of his arrival spoke volumes about his instincts

and, indeed, character. He sneaked into Abuja at 3 a.m., under the cover of darkness. After all the tension and sense of drama that built up around his absence, his reentry into the Nigerian space was anti-climactic. As I write, I don't believe he's made any public appearances.

Secrecy and a retreat to the shadows have become the hallmarks of the Yar'Adua style. A servant-leader would seek to relate with his people as openly as possible; Yar'Adua is a master at concealment, not communication. His mode of operation bespeaks a man who lacks the courage of his convictions. Barring a medical miracle during the trip to Saudi Arabia, one suspects that Yar'Adua is going to become even more of recluse, a man too enervated by illness and political illegitimacy to offer Nigerians the clarity of vision and vibrancy of strength they have never been fortunate to find in a leader, but desperately need.

Yar'Adua health crisis has served to deepen Nigeria's political cum economic malaise. Nigeria can't afford for this physically beleaguered man to remain in an ill-acquired office. Those who hold him most dear ought to sit him down and persuade him to unbind himself, and Nigeria, from this disaster-in-progress. If this would be an incentive, the National Assembly could enact a bill guaranteeing that his medical bills will continue to be picked up by Nigerians. In the event that he is not sold on this idea, one hopes that the justices of the Supreme Court would have the spine to invalidate the electoral charade that hoisted Yar'Adua on Nigerians.

The old argument that Nigeria would come to a halt if Yar'Adua weren't there has expired. If there was a positive fall-out from Yar'Adua's prolonged sojourn in Jeddah, it is this: that Nigeria will continue to function, and fare no worse, without Yar'Adua. I'd even suggest: fare much better!

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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*.

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