

One vast toilet and other Nigerian impressions

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By Okey Ndibe

Self-styled Nigerian leaders like to speak in grand tones. It is a scandal, but true, that Nigeria now lags behind most African countries – including several that were recently beleaguered by war – in development indices. Placed side by side with Ghana, for example, the state of Nigeria’s infrastructure is ghastly by most measures. Yet, instead of articulating a plan to make their country at par with Ghana or, say, Senegal, Nigerian leaders boast of their determination to transform Nigeria into one of the world’s top twenty economic powers by the year 2020. Hence the joke that goes by the name of Vision 2020.

Don’t get me wrong: there’s nothing wrong with big ambition. In fact, a country like Nigeria, with many wasted years, would benefit from a dispensation of bold thinkers and doers. Note that I didn’t say bold talkers, for Nigeria certainly teems with big talkers who, alas, fall terribly short in the departments of thinking and action. We have a surfeit of men and women who perversely mistake the size of their loot for the grandeur of their stature in public life. Hence the tragedy of Nigeria: a country conceived in hope but nurtured into hopelessness.

To be sure, there seems an odd correspondence between the grandiloquence of Nigerian leaders and their country’s deepening malaise. I have

never heard a Nigerian governor speak merely of transforming his state. No; they speak, instead, of “totally transforming” their states. But look closely and you see that the only total transformation is in their personal fortunes. In just six months in office, many a Nigerian governor contrives to pocket billions of naira of public funds. The more they steal, the more fevered and inflated their rhetoric. Each stealing governor likes to invent a fiction of himself as a faithful deliverer of “the dividends of democracy.” Sheer bunkum!

And yet there are examples from all over the world that a leader who wishes to make a positive impact, even a dramatic one, can do so by applying a mixture of old-fashioned vision and hard work.

Take Dubai, the spectacular city in the United Arab Emirates that Nigerian politicians revel in visiting. In just one decade, Dubai has become a showcase for what is possible when vision is married to energetic action. Yet, the Nigerian politicians who make frequent jaunts to this architectural marvel created out of a desert appear not to recognize that Dubai didn’t just happen through fervent prayers and fasting. Dubai is a product of human imagination activated and empowered.

I recently re-watched a report on Dubai produced by "60 Minutes," America's most popular newsmagazine program. When Steve Kroft, a "60 Minutes" reporter, asked Dubai's ruler, Sheik Mohammad, what he vision was, the ruler had a cryptic response: "I want Dubai to be number one, not in the region, but in the world."

The sheik's answer was even more telling when Kroft wondered why he was in such a haste to develop his country when he could have stretched out his master plan. Sheik Mohammad said: "I want my people to live better lives now, to go to the highest school now, to get good healthcare now, not after twenty years."

Kroft described the sheik as a "workaholic," a man who is "always in motion" and who relishes being "on his feet." He drives himself and moves about the city of Dubai freely, making unannounced stops at offices as well as construction sites. When Kroft wondered about his security, the sheik responded matter-of-factly: "I don't have any."

In his stubborn drive to immediately give the best of everything to his people, Sheik Mohammad has been called "a madman," but mostly by admirers in awe of his derring-do. As "60 Minutes" reported, he seeks out and puts the most qualified people in charge of critical areas of his city's development. And he makes it clear that he demands from each a can-do spirit, not expertise in making excuses failure to deliver.

In introducing its segment on Dubai, "60 Minutes" described the city as "a tiny sheikdom with big dreams. Thanks to a combination of extraordinary wealth and vision, it has transformed itself from

desert sand into an international business center and tourist destination. The man behind Dubai's rise is its leader, Sheik Mohammad bin Rashid Al Maktoum." The citizens of Dubai enjoy free health care, free education, and pay no taxes.

I invite you, dear reader, to imagine and write down what a similar report on Nigeria might say. Here's my sample: "Nigeria is a massive country with puny dreams and misbegotten leaders who are given to hollow, pompous boasting. Thanks to a combination of great oil resources and extraordinary greed and lack of vision, Nigeria has become one vast toilet. Yet, many major international corporations frequent it; they disregard its feculent air, attracted by the promise of huge, exploitative profits that serve as generous trade-offs for the sheer chaos and disorder of the place. The men and women behind the country's disaster are its so-called leaders, past military dictators as well as the current crop of politicians whose corruption makes their uniformed predecessors gawk in envy."

I read an account of Dubai's dramatic transformation, this time in Gulfnews.com. The report, which echoed the sentiments in the "60 Minutes" report, is by Manal Alafrangi. It began with the following words: "Many people say His Highness Shaikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai, inherited his father Shaikh Rashid Bin Saeed Al Maktoum's vision of dreaming large and achieving big."

Dubai's sheik rhetorically asked CBS's Steve Kroft why Dubai should not aspire to have the best things in the world if European countries could have such dreams. It would not occur to so-called Nigerian leaders to think along such

lines, much less pose such a question. Nigeria's big men and women are unabashed in announcing that they fly off to Europe, North America or Asia for their medical check-ups as well as treatments. Yet, they never pause to realize that their country's lack of basic health care services is a direct product of their catastrophic policies.

Instead of providing facilities that would make Nigeria a fit address for human habitation, Nigerian leaders revel in escaping to countries whose saner leaders have developed and made habitable. That explains why former Vice President Atiku Abubakar now basks in his Dubai home, but failed in near to eight years of collaborating with former President Olusegun Obasanjo to persuade the latter to make Nigeria a little like Dubai. Nigerian leaders delight in claiming to be agents of transformation in their country. Yet, not one of them is content to "rest" or spend a vacation in the space they allegedly transform everyday. Instead, they leave in droves to Dubai, Hong Kong, Beijing, London, Paris, or the numerous cities of North America.

Make no mistake: Dubai is no spotless paradise. Its marvelous economic strides are tainted by the exploitation of migrant workers who arrive daily from Asia, the Arab world, and even parts of Europe. These workers are paid abominably low wages and often stay in squalid quarters. A city with the wealth of Dubai is blemished by such atrocious abuse of those whose physical labors are responsible for the transformation of its landscape.

Even so, Nigeria has a lot to learn from Dubai about what it takes to humanize the social space in which its citizens move

and have their being. During my recent visit to Nigeria, I saw evidence that the country has become a vast toilet. Men and women, adults and children, were liable to squat and excrete in any space, at any time, with no shame. In every Nigerian city I visited, I saw mounds of rubbish piled high next to residences and offices. The Nigerian mode trash disposal is to set fire to the messy, stinky bunch, polluting the air that millions inhale.

Instead of persisting in the self-deceit that they are moving Nigeria forward into the first twenty economies, it would help if those who run Nigeria scaled back their ambitions to feasible levels. First, let them build roads that can compete with those in Ghana, Uganda and Botswana; let them provide sanitary facilities and trash disposal systems; and let them ensure that Nigerians enjoy potable water, regular power supply, and good health care. Let them save Nigerians from the humiliation of regarding every inch of space as a potential site for unleashing their bodily wastes. Let's take baby steps, but important ones, instead of voicing grandiose dreams that are simply unrealistic.

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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