

What I saw (or didn't) in Port Harcourt

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By Okey Ndibe

Once famed for its tree-lined boulevards and pristine streets, Port Harcourt has lately become notorious as Nigeria's abduction capital. The city's once vibrant nightlife has all but become a dim memory. There are some stubborn habitués who still stay out late at night – among them, a friend of mine named Eric who received his first degree at the University of Port Harcourt, got an MBA from Italy, and returned to the city to set up a business after a stint with a bank in Lagos. He jocularly explained that he could blend in well with the “militants” and convince them that he is no enemy.

Others lack his confidence or fearlessness. One friend – a certified night crawler in our secondary school days – explained that he never ventures out after 8 p.m. He spoke in a rueful tone, recalling the days when the city could be navigated easily at night. “Port Harcourt is no longer the PH I used to know,” he said.

I very much wanted to take a measure of the city for myself. I wanted to wander off and talk to the residents about their everyday experiences. However, the organizers made it clear that such quixotic adventurism was not to be permitted. With Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka as well as the Ghanaian poet and novelist Kofi Awoonor in town for the festival, Governor Chibuike Amaechi had instructed that nothing less than the most fastidious security steps be taken.

The gubernatorial instructions meant that tight reins were put on our movements. The first day of the festival, Awoonor asked me to stroll with him from the hotel to the streets to buy a wristwatch to replace one that stopped ticking. Once we exited the doors of Le Meriden Hotel, we were accosted by three police officers. When we explained our mission, they gently but firmly told us we were not to go unescorted. They then called a security vehicle to take us to the streets where Awoonor purchased a wristwatch that lasted a few hours before its hands froze.

Each morning, a convoy of security vehicles, sirens blaring, conveyed us to the university where the events took place. Moving at great speed, one saw a distorted – or at least dizzying – view of Port Harcourt. The city seemed alive, a mill of people going about their business. It was hard to imagine the prowling presence of “militants,” the elements who have struck fear deep in the heart of many city residents.

Port Harcourt was the second time in my life that I rode in a “sired” convoy. The first was more than twenty years ago, in Calabar. That first time, I came away with a pet theory: that the magic of zipping through crowded streets at manic speed was a major reason many African politicians are addicted to power.

This time around, in Port Harcourt, I again cringed in embarrassment. I quietly

hailed when drivers ignored our convoy, or used all deliberate slowness to veer off the streets at our approach. Such resistance seemed to me apposite responses to the provocations of Nigeria's misgoverning class. It'd be a wonderful if Nigerian road users one day resolved to adamantly refuse to yield to the harangues of official sirens.

There's palpable injustice in the way the ruling elite, who shirk the responsibility to maintain old roads and build new ones, harass innocent road users to clear out of the way. An elite that won't honor its duties in the area of road development deserves to be stuck in traffic along with hapless Nigerians.

My dour impressions notwithstanding, the festival itself was hugely successful. I'm accustomed to conventional literary conferences, with their dreary air, jargon-bemused papers, and (often) stiff academics trudging from one panel presentation to another. The Port Harcourt festival was different. The brainchild of Mrs. Koko Kalango, a bibliophile, bookstore owner, and promoter of reading, the Garden City Festival was a welcome departure.

It was a festival in the best sense of that word. I had never been at a more fervently advertised literary event. The organizers bought spots on network television to promote the gathering. They also bought newspaper space. They got the event onto the arts pages of several national dailies. A week before I arrived in Nigeria, a friend resident in Port Harcourt had e-mailed to tell me he had seen a headshot of me on billboards in different parts of Port Harcourt adorned with photographs of Wole Soyinka, Elechi Amadi, Kofi Awoonor, Kaine

Agary, and other participants. "Your grey hair now competes with Soyinka's," he joked.

Soyinka's presence on the program guaranteed a massive turnout. He stayed for three out of the four days of the festival. Drove of students, most of them from the University of Port Harcourt, thronged the various venues to see and hear the literary sage. Most of them were seeing him for the first time in flesh and blood, and their adulation and general enthusiasm lent a carnival atmosphere to the festival.

Each day, we arrived at the university to an energetic welcome by a crush of students. The opening day, televised live nationally, was simply spectacular. The crowd must have topped - by my rough guess - a thousand people. Governor Amaechi, an English graduate from the University of Port Harcourt, spoke of his excitement at meeting some of the writers whose works he read and wrote on as a student. Later, Soyinka commented on the salutary change of encountering a Nigerian politician who expresses pride in being literate. Too many politicians wear their illiteracy as a badge of honor, he noted.

The trio of Soyinka, Amadi and Awoonor meant that three of the giants of African literature were part of the festival. Particularly popular were the interactive sessions in which these three writers took questions from the audience. Soyinka's interactive session took place on the second day of the festival, in a cavernous hall (named for Goodluck Jonathan) that must have held several hundred people, most of them students. The third day, Amadi and Awoonor shared a forum at the university's library complex where

aspirant writers asked questions, among other issues, about the two writers' craft, inspiration, and politics.

Mrs. Kalango had arranged for Soyinka, Awoonor and Amadi to offer writing workshops to young or aspirant writers. It turned out to be a brilliant program. Nigerian literature is on the cusp of a renaissance, a resurgence of extraordinary creativity after a prolonged period of intermittent output. Nigeria's younger writers are eager to rise to the challenge of telling their nation's - and their - stories. They would benefit from the experience of the best that Africa has produced.

When will Nigerian governments as well as companies and wealthy individuals wake up to the need to establish fellowships and grants to bring the country's best writers - and other intellectuals - back to Nigerian universities to nurture and shape the creative future? My guess is that the students who were lucky to be in the workshops taught by Soyinka, Awoonor, Amadi and others will never be the same.

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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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

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