

Nigeria's savaged children

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By Okey Ndibe

I had not planned to write today about Nigeria's savaged children. The subject thrust itself on me.

A lot of other topics and issues had jostled for my attention. I had wanted to devote today's column to a celebration of Adams Oshiomhole's legal triumph. After spending a year and a half in the courts to claim his governorship mandate from the usurper called Oserhiemen Osunbor, the former labor leader got his prize restored last week. The victory, which came after many shameful verdicts by the Court of Appeal, called for measured celebration. Even so, I was going to pause at some point to insert a note of disappointment about Mr. Oshiomhole's early and bizarre misstep - his hurried trip to Abuja to pledge loyalty to Mr. Umaru Yar'Adua. Surely, a man of Oshiomhole's mettle ought to know that the people of Edo State, not the occupant of Aso Rock, are his true employers. His loyalty is, or should be, to them.

I had thought to revisit Maurice Iwu, the embodiment of rigging, a man whose every speech appears calculated to traumatize Nigerians. Iwu has lately rigged a so-called "Man of the Year" award from a rogue faction of the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS).

I contemplated beaming a searchlight on Speaker Dimeji Bankole and his cast of gluttons pretending to be lawmakers. Mr.

Bankole's decision to sink N2.3 billion to buy more than three hundred Peugeot 407 cars for himself and many other members of the House of Representatives is another testimony to careless greed. This is a legislative body that stood unconcerned as Nigerian children lost five weeks of classes because their teachers went on strike to demand better pay. And what were the teachers asking for? A guaranteed minimum of N20,000 per month, the kind of sum these legislators spend on one meal in Abuja. By any measure - but especially considering the cost of living in many parts of Nigeria - N20,000 is a mere pittance. Yet, Bankole, who takes home millions of naira each month for little or no work done, gallivants around the globe at the Nigerian taxpayer's expense, and is spending N5.2 million to outfit himself with a new bullet-proof car,

did not appear to lose sleep over the teachers' strike much less their pupils' plight.

Another potential subject was the latest chilling act by some ratings of the Nigerian Navy. Last week, according to newspaper reports, they set upon a policeman in Abeokuta, Ogun State, and killed him. This tragic outing came less than two weeks after six ratings pummeled the daylight out of a young, wiry woman named Uzoma Okere. After reading accounts of the hapless police officer's gruesome death, I imagined Ms.

Okere in the quietude of her room thanking God that she made it out alive. Since it's been more than a week since several 'authorities,' including Yar'Adua "ordered" full investigations, I was going to ask if the investigators had flown to China, Dubai and London to hunt down the "facts of the matter."

There was the other subject, reported in the Punch, to the effect that Enugu State was spending N200 million to send its entire legislative team to a two-week jamboree in London to learn about parliamentary issues. Why doesn't the state send all its doctors to the U.S. to learn the latest surgical and therapeutic procedures; all its teachers to Japan, to master the secrets of turning students into math geniuses; all its journalists to Fleet Street, England; all its civil servants to Sweden; all its small-time thieves to Italy to learn how to become big-time mafia gangsters. Why not, since the state apparently has more money than its officials know what to do with?

In the midst of weighing all these subjects, I decided to take a peep at the popular website tagged Nigerian Village Square. It was there I saw a report titled "Horror in Akwa Ibom." Curious, I clicked on an accompanying video link. In a fraction of a second, I was transported to one of the most gruesome, barbaric and dehumanizing documentaries I've ever watched. The reel revealed a documentary run on Britain's Channel 4 TV channel and captioned "Saving Africa's Witch Children." In an instant, I was placed in front of a wrenching gallery of savagery, horror and cruelty perpetrated at children. Innocent, helpless children!

For some minutes, I gazed in absolute shock. I shook with shame, revulsion and rage at these graphic images of children killed, mutilated, burned, starved and abandoned, all on the grounds that they are "witches and wizards." A shirtless man in a village looks straight at the camera and states with deadpan ease, "I want to kill that small girl." Another woman, apparently a mother, pointed to two or three of her children and said they had confessed to killing their grandmother - with witchcraft! The camera pans to a young, big-eyed girl, her expression one of shy befuddlement. Then the narrator explains: "This is the story of Africa's child witches, like five-year old Mary denounced as Satan made flesh."

One girl tells how her "senior" brother poured boiling water on her, scalding her skin. Another girl's torso shows the hideous injury inflicted when her father made her sit on a fire. There's the story of a thirteen-year old girl, stooped on the ground, her skull still showing the scar of a nail driven into it!

Then there's a man named "Bishop" Sunday Ulup-Aya, a self-styled "poison destroyer," the poison he destroys being witchcraft, and the bearers of that poison being innocent children. Some of the accused witches and wizards are still toddlers. Before they have learned to walk, they have been diagnosed as blood-sucking witches or wizards by "Bishop" Mad and his fellow traders in superstition posing as followers of Christ.

White-gowned with a huge red ribbon around his waist, a red wool cap on his head, the "bishop" is a portrait of a madman as a healer. Watching the videotape of his rituals of deliverance, I

recognize him as a charlatan, fraud artist and salesman of deception who has started his own tragic cottage industry.

Channel 4's documentary estimates that as many as 15,000 children in Akwa Ibom have been branded as witches. They must have grossly underestimated. "Bishop," who charges as much as N400,000 naira to "destroy" each case of witchcraft, states that Akwa Ibom harbors 2.3 million witches and wizards. The man is shown in the report as he hands a dazed child "wizard" a potion to drink. The concoction, according to the report, contains "pure alcohol, a substance called African mercury, and the 'bishop's' own blood." The bishop, who speaks in halting, ungrammatical English, boasts: "I killed up to 110 people who was identified to be a winch."

To watch the documentary is to be confronted by fresh stark evidence of the broad devaluation of life in the space called Nigeria. What factors produced a depth of ignorance and superstition so powerful that parents would brutally maim their own children in the name of fighting witchcraft? Where were the police and other investigative apparatuses of state power as hundreds, perhaps thousands, of children were being tortured and killed, stigmatized as demonic forces? Why had the police not arrested "Bishop" Ulup-Aya, a confessed serial murderer who feeds hapless children his own blood to drink? Why did it take a lone, horrified Britisher to unearth this scandal, this twenty-first holocaust happening right in the glare of sunlight?

Nigeria has notoriety as a place where nobody is ever held responsible for anything. Yet, on this one, both the

commissioner of police as well as the state director of the State Security Services should explain why they didn't detect, or stop, this horror. They deserve to be fired for slumbering while bestial parents as well as madmen and women made innocent children to see hell.

This whole tragedy exposes the grave dangers of leaving unchecked the emergence of fraudsters who style themselves men or women of God. As Nigeria's misery index has risen, many citizens - unable to put food on the table, or to gain access to healthcare, or to generally live with the dignity of human beings - have taken to superstition, make-belief and magic. Instead of recognizing the objective factors and forces that devalue their lives, they accept some pastor or imam's lie that they are victims of "spiritual attack" by diabolical neighbors or even sinister relatives.

The horror of Akwa Ibom is a wake-up call. A society that would cast children in the role of these "spiritual" enemies and tormentors is an abomination.

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15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
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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*.

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