

Nigeria's Real Witches And Wizards

Monday, 01 December 2008

By Okey Ndibe

Most Nigerian politicians deserve the tag of vicious "witches" and "wizards." Their specialty, these politicians, is to fatten themselves by creating collective misery for other Nigerians. Obsessed with cornering more and more of the nation's resources for themselves, they hardly have time to raise their heads from the trough long enough to notice the millions of fellow citizens who have become hideously emaciated as a result of prolonged hunger.

Truth be told, most Nigerian politicians are unconscionable sadists who gleefully live off the blood of dispossessed citizens, the men and women who at night drop to their mats in air-filled stomachs and awake dizzy from famishment. Yet these pauperized hordes must drag themselves out of the shacks and hovels that serve as their homes and report to work as drivers, bus conductors, cleaners, civil servants, teachers, even doctors and lawyers.

As I write, Jos, the once cheery capital of Plateau State, is embroiled in an orgy of violence. At least one newspaper reported that as many as 500 lives had been lost and countless cars, businesses and homes razed. All this in the name of democracy, Nigerian-style! The immediate provocation for the violence that quickly festered arose from local government elections in the state. The ruling party was on the way to awarding itself all the seats in contention, but some

of the opposition parties and their supporters unleashed mayhem as a way of saying no.

In the midst of this macabre "dividend of democracy," both Mr. Umaru Yar'Adua and Governor Jonah Jang of Plateau issued separate statements in which they claimed that the government "was on top of the situation." Jang even asked residents of the beleaguered city to "go about their normal business." Gabriel Zi, chairman of the Plateau electoral commission, announced that the governor's party won all seven local government seats. And then this: he described the elections as "free, fair, credible and peaceful." If the scale of death and destruction were not so morbid, these official reactions would be hilarious!

Yar'Adua and Jang are two faces of a political disorder that has entrenched rigging. They are, along with many other politicians, wizards at electoral manipulation. It's all so tragic that elections always come to this. Thousands of Nigerians perished in the struggle to shove the country's military misrulers back to the barracks, and to institute democratic rule. Instead of honoring the memory of the martyrs of democracy by observing basic tenets of electoral contests, Nigerian politicians took to the arena in a manner that suggests that no lessons were learned. Driven by equal measures of callousness, greed and

arrogance, a majority of our politicians have operated as if they were hired to prove that civilians could be worse at governance than the worst military regimes! During my most recent visit to Nigeria, I had to take on a group of people at a restaurant who openly advocated the return of the military. In the end, my argument was that we

needed to give time to our democratic culture to take root and grow.

When one sees hell let loose in Jos one wonders if this bloodletting was what the nation's pro-democracy heroes bargained for. For how long is this frayed nation really going to afford this anomaly we have misnamed democracy? Do we seriously wish this culture of impunity and nastiness that styles itself "nascent democracy" to take roots? Do the witches and wizards who ruin the nation have the moral capacity or mental talent to check themselves before the nation is swept by a huger version of the Jos conflagration?

Nigeria's peril is to be run by men and women who can't find their way to the word "leader" in a dictionary, and won't understand its meaning even if you showed them. Contemptible fools that they are - to use Frantz Fanon's apt phrase - their every waking moment is preoccupied with thoughts of amassing more wealth. They delight in making junkets to Dubai, South Africa, Britain, Switzerland, the United States, even Ghana, but conveniently forget that the comforts they seek in these places are the product of other people's vision, energy and purpose.

Thanks to the witches and wizards that are perched in Abuja and thirty state capitals, Nigeria has become a disaster-in-

progress. The carnage in Jos is a microcosm of what's altogether and easily possible in any corner of Nigeria. Such is the tragedy of a nation conceived in hope but nurtured into hopelessness.

Plateau - like Nigeria - is saddled with politicians who go into elections with the vocabulary of war. They relish speaking about the "conquests" of their opponents. They go into elections determined to win at all costs. They speak about elections as "do-or-die" affairs, a phrase that enjoys the imprimatur of a certified wizard like former President Olusegun Obasanjo. And like Obasanjo, they make sure that their actions match their bloody language. Obasanjo, whose legacy includes the imposition of an unprepared, feeble Umaru Yar'Adua on a Nigeria that desperately needs an alert, vibrant and visionary leader, is now treading the forests of the Democratic Republic of Congo trying to put out the kind of fires he helped set in many parts of Nigeria, including the Niger Delta.

When these witches and wizards steal elections they roundly lost, how do they explain away their bizarre "victory"? Simple, they state with a straight face that somebody greater than voters - God - handed them the mandate! In the event that you contend that God could not possibly align with fraud, these mandate-snatchers always have a ready retinue of servile "pastors" or "imams" willing to step forward, quote some isolated passage from their holy script, and proclaim that all power comes from God. And in case you didn't suspect it already, that this divinity's ways are not man's ways!

The day Jamaica's Usain Bolt broke the world record at the Beijing Olympics on

his way to claiming the title of the world's fastest human, I joked to a friend of mine that any pot-bellied Nigerian politician could have easily beaten Bolt if the conditions were right. "What conditions?" he asked. First, if the Chinese would agree to borrow Maurice Iwu, the gold standard of umpires, as the judge. Even if the race had been telecast, and even if our politician had broken the record for the slowest time ever recorded, he stood a chance of persuading the umpire to announce him as the winner. After pulling off the feat, he'd tell a stunned world press conference that God gave him the gold - and to God be all the glory. If a reporter informed him that Usain Bolt was shouting about being robbed, our politician would calmly retort: "Somebody should warn that young boy not to overheat the Chinese polity! Is it because he is tall? How old is he? And is

he not a Christian? Why can't he accept the will of God and wait for his own turn to be blessed? If he insists that he won, let him hire his lawyers and meet me at Justice James Ogebe's court!"

Plateau is in the grips of a ruling party that regards anything less than 100 percent control of all contested seats as an abject defeat. For the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), elections are an unnecessary evil and distraction. The party prefers to win all elections by consensus - the consensus of a few godfathers who would be termed criminals in other countries, but who are elevated to the rank of "critical stakeholders" in the PDP and Nigeria.

That's how Yar'Adua found himself as Nigeria's "president." Running on the ticket of a widely despised party, and as

the anointed stooge of a hugely unpopular president, Yar'Adua would have been trounced in any credible election. But here he is before the Supreme Court pleading that he be validated as the legitimate winner of last year's elections. That's witchcraft!

The court has a clear duty, and that is to hand back to Nigerians their just right to decide who may govern them. The witches and wizards at the nation's electoral commission mindlessly violated that right during last year's elections. In the end, the justices have an opportunity to dictate what kind of Nigeria they wish to live in. Do they crave a Nigeria in which usurpers of office continue to hold sway, debase democracy and devalue lives? Or do they want a nation in which elected officials are truly elected, are accountable, and work for all?

For me, the question now is whether the seven members of the Supreme Court panel have the judicial and moral spine to do the right thing. If out of cowardice or, worse, some kind of inducement, they rubberstamp an electoral scandal, they would have done grave disservice to the cause of democracy and diminished the reputation of the judiciary. An apex court that rewards stealers of office is sending a message that rigging is right. Oh, the Jos-grade carnage that such a message would trigger all over the nation during the next round of elections. The justices can't afford to make themselves candidates for inclusion in Nigeria's gallery of sinister witches and wizards.

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) 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.