

Greed Dressed As Vision

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By Okey Ndibe

Nigerian politicians are experts in delusion and greed, but inept when it comes to action. The delusion of the moment is called Vision 2020-20. This seeming mumbo jumbo actually has a meaning, and it's this: that, by 2020, Nigeria would have become one of the world's twenty largest economies in the world. It's the kind of silly fantasy that grips Abuja.

Last October, I was asked to be part of a panel of Nigerians who discussed this latest vision fad. A reputable academic opened the discussion by suggesting that Nigeria has all it takes to "do it." By "it" he meant transporting ourselves into the company of the world's twenty robust economies.

I have nothing against fantasy, but I also like to invite those seized by heady illusions to awake to the real world.

I'm as impatient as any for Nigeria to rise to its promise. I'd like to see this prodigiously gifted adult-country abandon its adolescent ways. In fact, many of my waking moments are taken up with the hope that Nigeria should make it. But my version of "it" has nothing to do with the scam-in-progress misnamed Vision 2020-20. Greed has never lifted any nation to greatness.

Instead of setting its sights on farfetched, unattainable grandeur, Nigeria should adopt feasible, achievable goals. How

about striving to catch up to Ghana, Botswana, Uganda, Senegal - and, if we really have it in us to excel - South Africa? It's a scandal that the citizens of some of Nigeria's poorer neighbors enjoy much better standards of living than Nigerians. Ghana's strides in infrastructural development, modest as they seem to Ghanaians, are now the source of awe to Nigerians.

I have a friend who lives in Abuja but whose job often takes him to Ghana, Senegal and other West African stops. He recently told me that he spent two weeks in Dakar, Senegal. "Not for one moment did the electricity blink much less go out," he volunteered. And then he offered this other report: "Many Nigerians now fly to Accra on weekends just to relax."

I visited Ghana in 2002 and again in 2006, and could understand the import of my friend's observation. On my more recent trip to Ghana, I saw evidence of a country going in the right direction. The roads were better paved than they were in 2002; the streets cleaner; the electricity steadier. That's how all organisms, individuals as well nations, advance.

Six years ago, I spent a week in Uganda where I offered workshops to young writers. I arrived at night at Entebbe Airport, and was amazed during the forty-five minute commute to the Sheraton Hotel in Kampala that streets were lit as far as the eye could see. I

turned to my Ugandan driver and inquired about the reliability of electricity in the city. "It's bad," he said. "How often do you see power outages?" I asked. His answer: "Once or twice a week." "For how long at a time?" I probed. "Sometimes for one hour, sometimes two or three."

I could hardly mask my bewilderment and sense of humiliation! At any rate, I attended events in three hotels and went to three homes, but never once heard the rumble of a generator.

By contrast, the Nigerian narrative is one of racing gleefully backward. The odds are that many – perhaps most – Nigerian roads were in better shape six years ago than they are today. In the eight years that former President Olusegun Obasanjo occupied power, Nigerians witnessed a dramatic drop in power supply. And yet billions of dollars allegedly went into power plants and projects. Obasanjo's handpicked successor promised to declare a state of emergency to deal with the nation's power woes that have crippled many industries and diminished lives. Approaching the second anniversary of his controversial investiture, Yar'Adua has not found the steam or motivation to get cracking. He's ensconced in Aso Rock and enjoys round-the-clock power courtesy of mammoth generators. Who says there's an emergency?

Most Nigerian politicians are not only inept leaders, incapable of thinking beyond their belly; they are also colorless and unoriginal in their speech. They manage the miracle of using inane speech to "rouse" the citizenry to stupor. They hear a supine phrase like "move the nation forward" and they fasten to it as if

it was eloquence itself. They forget that a car in reverse gear won't move forward, period. Nigeria is in reverse gear.

Nigeria won't – can't – make it to the club of the world's elite economies. Let all the nation's pastors and imams shout at heaven until their voices grow hoarse, but the "it" of Vision 2020-20 won't happen. What Nigerians should do, and can if they put their minds to it, is resolve that their less endowed neighbors like Ghana and Senegal no longer out-perform them in vital indices of development.

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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