

What's Next For Africa?

Thursday, 08 January 2009

By Okey Ndibe

Almost thirty years ago, the Indo-Trinidadian writer and caustic wit, V.S. Naipaul, told the American writer, Elizabeth Hardwick, "Africa has no future."

It's a harsh dismissal, but one could at least take solace in the fact that it came from the lips of a notorious curmudgeon and sourpuss. In his long career, Naipaul has mocked everything and everybody, from his country of birth, the India of his ancestral descent, his late English wife, Pat, who slaved as a teacher to pay his bills in the years that he struggled to earn a living as a writer, to Islam and fellow writers everywhere, African, European and American.

Lester Thurow, a former Dean of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management, does not have Naipaul's talent for instant disparagement. Yet, he wrote a bestselling book, *Creating Wealth: The New Rules for Individuals, Companies and Countries in a Knowledge-based Economy*, in which Africa is termed "an economic desert." As metaphor, a desert implies aridity, lifelessness, the absence of hope.

Long before Naipaul and Thurow, a slew of British and European writers had produced dire prognoses about Africa. In 1831, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel concluded that Africa was too "enveloped in the dark

mantle of the night" to be reckoned a "historical part of the world". The English writer, Joyce Cary, who doubled as a colonial officer, wrote that, in Africa, basic obsessions are seen "in bold and dramatic action." Then John Buchan, in his novel *Prester John*, has one of his characters proclaim that, as long as whites continue to exhibit "the gift of responsibility," they "will rule not in Africa alone but wherever there are dark men who live only for their bellies."

The sum of it is that, as far as many European writers and their Naipaul clones are concerned, Africa's economic doldrums and political instability arise from racial taint. Africa's woes are deemed to be a product of our primal instincts, our self-destructive habits, our inability to think beyond the immediate desire.

Let's be clear: Europe's portrait of Africa is gravely distorted. The violence of European's meddling in Africa set the tone for many of the continent's crises. When western journalists write with voyeuristic glee about famine, wars and a litany of other maladies in Africa, they obscure the historical role played by Europe in carving up Africa into artificial, incoherent nation-states. They also ignore the complicity of global corporations in exploiting Africa's resources, whether it's crude oil, gold, uranium or diamond. Even today, these corporate predators are deeply invested in Africa's political

chaos. Their obscene profits often depend on Africa's continuing instability.

Yet, it's time Africans confronted the question of their continent's economic and political perils. What explains the paradox that Africa has produced some of the world's best writers, but the continent's reading base remains as small as its publishing industry is marginal? Many Africans often show up in the lists of top physicians in North America, Europe and Asia, yet most African countries cannot boast the most rudimentary health care for their citizens. Africa has prodigious endowments of some of the most prized natural resources, including oil, diamond, and uranium, yet the continent's leaders haunt conclaves of so-called donor-nation, begging bowls in hand.

In truth, Africa has produced too many depraved figures who lived through their bellies. Think of Mobutu Sese Seko, Sani Abacha, Ibrahim Babangida, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, Gnassingbe Eyadema, and Olusegun Obasanjo.

It seems to me that there are two Africas, and they are at war. There is, on the one hand, the Africa of enlightened, morally astute and professionally trained men and women who can hold their own anywhere in the world. On the other hand, there is the Africa of lechers, of morally inept men and women whose trade is power and whose religion is conspicuous consumption - especially of other peoples' products.

I admit, of course, to oversimplifying a complex equation. There are many Africans who, while poorly educated, display great moral insight. And there are many highly trained Africans who

collude with rustic elements to steal whatever is in sight - and much that isn't.

A salutary turn in Africa's fortunes depends on the ascendancy of its more enlightened citizenry. Is Africa hopeless? Hell no! Yet, it's finally up to Africans to summon their intelligence and vision to the task of self-redemption. We cannot afford to leave the question of what's next for Africa in the hands of those whose minds cannot soar beyond the distance of their protuberant bellies.

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 Nigerian novelist, poet, and political commentator. He is the author of the critically praised novel, *Arrows of Rain*. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988 to be the founding editor of the *African Commentary*, an award-winning and widely acclaimed magazine published by the novelist Chinua Achebe. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. He is finishing work on a 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.