

Elechi Amadi And The Coming Hell

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By Okey Ndibe

Abductions for ransom have become another weird part of life in Nigeria. Two and a half weeks ago, this ugly fact hit home in a wrenching way. Like many, I was horrified to read about the abduction of Elechi Amadi from his country home in Rivers State. A soft-spoken man with a radiant smile, Amadi is one of Africa's finest writers, the author of such superb novels as *The Concubine*, *The Great Pond*, and *The Slave*.

My first reaction at the news was one of shock. It was a macabre beginning to the New Year. I had met Amadi as recently as last September in Port Harcourt, capital of Rivers State, where he and I participated in the inaugural edition of the Garden City Literary Festival.

True, I knew that the abduction of people as a tool for extortion has become another Nigerian disorder, especially in the oil-rich Niger Delta that seems richly cursed with its natural resource. Even so, I just could not fathom what strange motivation would lead abductors to this writer's door. Were they after tomes of manuscript? Did they begrudge the man his computer, or covet his typewriter?

Relief came – in the form of Amadi's release – the day after his abduction. His captors had not harmed him physically, thank God, but what mental anguish they must have inflicted on the man – to say nothing of his family's torment! Given Amadi's considerable stature and global

reputation, I suspect that many others, Nigerians and foreigners alike, were also deeply upset.

If Amadi was admired before his abduction, his response to that harrowing experience marked him out as a truly extraordinary man. In press interviews, he gave unvarnished accounts of his travails. He told about being blindfolded by his captors – a prudent move, it seemed. His young nemeses would not want a writer's knowing eyes prying into their souls' inmost – sordid – secrets. Amadi talked about the nightmare of sleeping on bare marshy ground. And then he offered snatches of the conversations that finally convinced his abductors that they had taken the wrong man.

Amadi's captors had demanded N300 million, but released him for “nothing”. They doubtless realized that their quarry had no way of garnering cash anywhere in the neighborhood of their demand. Freed about 6:30 p.m., the author walked some five miles in the bush before he emerged at a Shell location – and into the arms of a search party of friends.

Two things stood out for me in Amadi's recollections. One was the absence of rage or bitterness in his language. He was also clearly reluctant to dwell on his own suffering. Instead of calling down curses on his tormentors, or painting his woes

with indulgent glee, he chose to be a solicitor of sorts for his abductors.

The headline of *The Guardian* of January 8, 2009 captured this uncommon largeness of spirit. The caption read: "Free Elechi Amadi sings: Save my captors".

That Amadi recognized that his captors were not simply vermin or compulsive villains is a tribute to his capacity for fellow feeling. Armed with a poet's insight into the systematic pauperization and dehumanization of the Nigerian space, he perceived his young tormentors as also, even in a fundamental sense, victims.

His gift to them - which is to bring to us their story of desperate privation - is worth as much as N300 million. Or more, if his eloquent witness will persuade Nigeria's crass politicians to unclog their ears and hear his plaintive cry on behalf of youth forced into crime in order to eat. Amadi told the world that his young abductors "complained that they were unemployed and accused the government of not doing enough to ameliorate the plight of the jobless in the region." Is there anybody out there who would dispute the truth of this portrait of destitution?

Abductions, armed robbery and other crimes are on the rise in Nigeria because of rising unemployment and deepening poverty. And the rapacious greed of our political "elite," a class with no vision and little conscience, is a major reason the nation's resources are not bettering the lives of the populace. After years of walking the streets without finding meaningful jobs or opportunities to engage in licit private enterprise, many

graduates reluctantly take to armed robbery and 419 scams. I suspect that many armed robbers prowling at night would prefer to have day jobs that confer dignity and guarantee a livable wage. But when jobs are scarce, and the state rewards gubernatorial and ministerial thieves with national honors, many hapless citizens embrace crime as a strategy of survival.

That's why Elechi Amadi's empathy for his abductors struck me with its pertinence and power. His solicitude for those who gave him grief recalled the similarly admirable example of Nadine Gordimer, the South African-born 1991 Nobel laureate in literature. In October of 2006, four young men robbed the then 82-year-old writer in her home near Johannesburg. After stealing cash and jewelry, the robbers locked Gordimer - one of the most notable voices against apartheid - and a 66-year-old domestic servant in a storeroom. Then the robbers escaped.

Like Amadi, Gordimer refused to focus on her losses. A writer of penetrating insight into the vestiges of apartheid that continue to haunt her beloved nation, Gordimer realized that her attackers were, in a profound sense, victims as well. She regarded the robbery as an opportunity to highlight the plight of "young people in poverty without opportunities." Of her robbers, she waxed magnanimous: "What a waste of four young men. They should have jobs."

Amadi has essentially brought back the same message from his scary contact with the dispossessed of Nigeria. My fear is that those who run - make that, ruin - Nigeria are too deaf or morally comatose to hearken to Amadi's warning. In their

arrogance, they tell themselves that their victimized citizenry is too docile to stir in rebellion against the thieving class. Yet, sooner or later, the monster that corruption incubates will knock on the doors of the hope killers. Then, when it's too late, those whose gorging greed blinded them to Amadi's timely entreaties, may wake to realize that there's hell to pay. Unless these leeches and parasites learn to mend their ways, tuck in their bellies and rein in their greed, they may - will, actually - one day find implacable hell right at their doorstep.

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 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

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