

# Nigeria's Romance With Farce

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*By Okey Ndibe*

Brace yourself for this: Last week, the Kwara State Police Command detained a goat it accused of attempting to steal a car!

A joke, you think? Well, the joke's on you. The police were in deadly earnest. The Nigerian Vanguard of Friday, January 23 reported the bizarre news. The report was then circulated globally by the online service of the British Broadcasting Corporation as well as other online and print media.

There's no question that Nigeria continues to blaze the trail in the absurd and farcical. A friend of mine, a Nigerian attorney who practices in Washington, DC, once told me that Nigeria is a space where absurdity makes sense!

When you think it could never get more bizarre, the Nigerian state deploys its genius to invent new depths of weirdness.

For my money, I hazard that Nigeria must be the first and only country in the world where a goat was arrested - and paraded to the press - as a theft suspect! This goat was not charged with nibbling lettuce from somebody's garden - no! It was not detained because it had upturned a street trader's ware. No, we have it on the authority of Tunde Mohammed, public relations officer of Kwara police, that this goat was caught while attempting to steal a Mazda car!

The Vanguard's headline told the story: "Police parade goat as robbery suspect: For attempting to 'steal' a Mazda car".

You don't believe it? Believe it! If you missed the Vanguard report, here are its opening lines: "It was a shocking sight yesterday as men of the Kwara State Police Command paraded a goat as an armed robbery suspect...The goat 'suspect' is being detained over an alleged attempt to snatch a Mazda car. The mysterious goat, according to the Police Public Relations Officer, Mr. Tunde Mohammed, while briefing bewildered journalists at the Force headquarters, is an armed robber who attempted to snatch the said car, Wednesday night, and later transformed into the goat in a bid to escape arrest."

A colleague of my wife's forwarded the report to her, seeking her comment. But how, really, does one respond as a Nigerian to this shocking joke that is, after all, not a joke? Unable to think up a response that made sense, my wife simply wrote back: "Wonders shall never cease."

Much of the rest of the world has moved into the 21st century, but what time is it in Nigeria? Going by what many Nigerians, including so-called "educated" ones, believe, we may well be in the 15th century. A few years ago, at an international conference in Cape Coast,

Ghana, a born-again professor at one of Nigeria's first-generation universities stunned us at lunch by declaring that many of his students were witches and wizards! Two American academics, sharing the lunch table with two Ghanaians and two other Nigerians, roared in laughter; they conjectured that the man was cracking a joke. How quickly they were disabused! The storyteller told us that, usually after fasting and praying for forty days, he was able to see a gathering of these witches and wizards in his classroom. "They use four different creatures," he announced. "Some of them carry scorpions on their shoulders. Some have monkeys perched on their heads. Some have snakes curled

round their necks, and others are half-human and half-fish."

"Amazing!" exclaimed one of the Americans, clearly amazed. The Nigerian academic misread the response as credulity. He then related how he once saw a vision of some of his witchcraft-practicing students congregating at midnight under a banana tree. The next day, he confronted one of the members. "What were you doing at midnight under a banana tree?" he asked her. He reported, "She ran away!"

Only recently, Britain's Channel 4 TV aired a shocking documentary on so-called child witches and wizards in Akwa Ibom. It's estimated that more than 15,000 children in that state have been dubbed witches or wizards. Once the stigma of witchcraft is affixed on a child, he or she is immediately ostracized. Some of the children are tortured to confess to responsibility for sickness, deaths and other calamities in the community. Many

are starved, abandoned in the forest, or even killed.

As the documentary showed, deranged pastors who arrogate to themselves the pompous title of "man or woman of God," diagnose children as witches and wizards. One of these crazed pastors, who goes by the name "Bishop" Sunday Ulup-Aya, is a self-styled "poison destroyer." He administers a potion to rid children of "witchcraft". According to the documentary, the darkish liquid contains strong alcohol, a substance called "African mercury," and the "bishop's" own blood! On tape, an apparently inebriated Ulup-Aya boasts that he had eliminated 110 witches and wizards.

After watching the disgusting documentary on youtube.com, I wondered why the Nigerian police had not all along rounded up the criminals who hurt innocent children by passing themselves off as pastors. Now we know part of the answer. As far as the Nigerian police are concerned, the real culprits are goats!

## 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
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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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