

They're All Thieves

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By Okey Ndibe

As one who belongs to several Nigerian listserv groups, I can attest that one of the most e-mailed and discussed headlines came was from the March 4, 2009 edition of Next. The caption read: "We are all thieves in this Assembly".

On first reading the headline, I thought it was a news editor's ploy to put the most sensational spin on its subject's words. But the opening paragraph of this story, reported by Dimeji Adedeji-Kayode, quickly disabused me of this suspicion. The report stated that a "member of the Ogun State House of Assembly, Oluseyi Moses, on Tuesday, declared that all the 26 lawmakers in the state are fraudulent and should immediately be arrested by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)."

After reading through his unflinching confession, I can never again write the word "lawmaker" without retching.

It's still early in 2009, but I'm willing to bet that Mr. Moses' words will make the list of the most memorable words of the year. In fact, it's likely to be in the top league of quotable quotes.

It's not the sentiment itself that made the statement startling. Most Nigerians already know that most of their "leaders"

are certified thieves. The novelty lay in the open confession by one of the thieves.

According to the report, Mr. Moses "made the allegation on the floor of the House of Assembly, shortly after the suspension of two members of the assembly."irate, he called on the anti-graft agency to hasten and arrest the twenty-six members of the State Assembly. The "lawmakers," he stated, get paid much better than PhD holders. "Yet we still steal," he said. Then this invitation to the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission: "I am calling on EFCC to arrest all of us...I will cooperate with the organization in exposing our financial mess. We should all be arrested. We are all thieves in this assembly. We are only fighting because of our selfish interest and pockets."

What got into Mr. Moses, you ask? What manner of spirit moved this man to unmask himself and his fellow thieves? Perhaps the man is haunted by the collective anguish of the people of Ogun State, victims of misrule by a callous breed foisted in power by the Peoples Democratic Party and its do-or-die ideologues.

It's not everyday that one hears a Nigerian politician say that he and his

fellow assembly members “were all paupers before being elected to the House of Assembly.” Or admit that “their action so far was unfair to those who elected them and other citizens of the state.” Or pledge to “open up and confess to EFCC.” Or declare, “We should all be locked up.” Or reveal that “Virtually all of us have built mansions and have chains of cars on getting to office [sic], and where do we get the money?”

Far from admitting to his iniquities or conceding to exploitation of his constituents, the typical Nigerian politician is wont to declaim that he has “delivered the dividends of democracy.” He gives himself credit for “totally transforming the lives of the people.” He beats his chest and states that he has “totally redefined governance.” In an excess of vanity and pomposity, former President Olusegun Obasanjo even prevailed on his party to festoon him with the hollow title of “father of modern Nigeria.”

Ogun – incidentally Mr Obasanjo’s home state – is embroiled in the kind of political crisis patented by the visionless, inept fools who run Nigeria. From all accounts, there’s no salient principle involved in this broiling feud. The dispute has nothing to do with how best to address the ever-worsening economic climate. It’s not about differing strategies for transforming the state into a more livable space.

No, it’s – as Mr. Moses bluntly acknowledged – an exercise to determine which set of men and women are to preside over the uninterrupted

exploitation of the masses. It’s all about which group of so-called “stake holders” is to seize political leverage, and the exclusive use of that advantage to accumulate riches while sticking it to the so-called ordinary man.

The messy state of affairs in Ogun is a microcosm of the larger Nigerian tragedy. Nigeria is a space hijacked by the most unconscionable parasites, from the highest executive posts through the National Assembly to local government councils. Mr. Moses’ famous words were spoken about twenty-six members of the Ogun State Assembly. But – give or take a handful of exceptions – we could invoke his words to say to the collectivity of Nigerian politicians: You’re all thieves.

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
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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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