

# A Fiesta of Delusion

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*By Okey Ndibe*

Fond of airy rhetoric, Nigerian politicians love to accumulate meaningless words and delusive jingles. The latest fashion is the stark lie called re-branding.

Nigeria's re-branding craze is actually an old, useless idea squeezed into new, expensive clothes.

Mention the name Chukwuemeka Chikelu today and I bet many - perhaps most - Nigerians won't remember him. Yet, he was the Information Minister in former President Olusegun Obasanjo's government who came up with the notion of re-branding Nigeria's image.

Chikelu's was a silly gambit with a high price tag. His idea consisted of packaging a few Nigerian achievers to the world in order to counter negative reports about Nigeria. As ideas went, this one was patently hollow in conception and fated for failure. Every single naira spent on that project was a naira misspent.

To begin with, the world didn't need to be reminded that there are extraordinary Nigerians in every field of endeavor. The world already knew, and knows, that Nigeria has produced some of the best writers, top-rank doctors, enterprising scientists and researchers, and excellent teachers. As if to advertise its ineptitude, the government's line-up of achievers included one or two questionable names, including an academic of minor stature

who had used the press to inflate himself as a candidate for the Nobel Prize.

A campaign based on reminding the world that Nigeria boasted men and women of high achievement was, then, bereft of purpose. At any rate, since most of the Nigerian "geniuses" on the government's propaganda list were based abroad, the world, if it paid attention at all, was apt to ask a few pointed questions. How come this country exports its best and brightest? With this cast of achievers, why is Nigeria in the calloused hands of rustics, "area boys" in agbada, clowns and mediocrities?

With its parade of prodigious men and women, why did Chikelu's Nigeria permit the likes of Lamidi Adedibu, Chris Uba, and Saminu Turaki to own the public space? Every citizen of a country deserves to be called a stakeholder. Yet, when Nigerian politicians speak about the country's stakeholders, they usually mean the elements who spend their waking hours stealing from the public, and plotting to embezzle ever more. They hardly ever include such admirable citizens as Gani Fawehinmi, Oyibo Odinamadu, Gamaliel Onosode, Balarabe Musa, Babs Fafunwa, Abubakar Umar, Eskor Toyo, and Bart Nnaji.

When Chinua Achebe dared to reject a tainted national "honor" offered by Obasanjo, Femi Fani-Kayode, speaking in his master's name, vilified the novelist in

the most caustic language. Yet, the same Obasanjo championed “Andy” Uba, a domestic aide who smudged Nigeria’s image by ferrying cash of \$170,000 on a presidential jet bound for New York City – and had to pay a steep fine to the U.S. for breaking their currency declaration laws.

The self-same Fani-Kayode once had occasion to dismiss Wole Soyinka as godless. He even went further, asking Nigerians to henceforth ignore the Nobel laureate on account of Soyinka’s alleged atheism. The dramatist’s real sin, we knew, was a refusal to shriek “Amen!” to Obasanjo’s divine delusions. In one breath, Soyinka was insulted; in another, Obasanjo feted Adedibu, a self-confessed thug and liar, describing the man as his leader and mentor.

At best, then, Chikelu’s re-branding project had zero impact. At worst, it reminded the world about Nigeria’s habit of trumpeting its worst and ostracizing its best.

Chikelu’s public relations campaign was fundamentally misconceived. It fizzled quickly, even before its author’s rustication from the cabinet.

This being Nigeria – a space where bad ideas are routinely granted new leases – current Information and Communications Minister Dora Akunyili has decided that re-branding (as re-tooled by her) is, again, what Nigeria needs.

Akunyili is beloved by many Nigerians. Many of these admirers hope that, by some magic or miracle, she would succeed. But no magic or miracle would suffice. Her re-branding effort is as ill conceived as Chikelu’s version.

One hates to rain on Mrs. Akunyili’s party, but the truth is that her re-branding project came stillborn.

There’s no international conspiracy to give Nigeria a bad name. Nor are Nigerians sourpusses who invent untenable grouses against their government. Nigeria is a potentially soaring story that’s become a tragedy-in-progress.

Part of Akunyili’s predicament is to serve a government produced by electoral fraud. How does she re-brand that? The same government, from the look of things, is gearing to rig the elections of 2011. How re-brand that?

Before our very eyes, and those of the world, the Obasanjo government squandered billions of dollars in an apparent scam that used power projects as an excuse. Yet Umaru Yar’Adua, the man Obasanjo handpicked, and other political “forces” in Abuja have effectively squelched a legislative report on the power scam.

I’ll wake up and applaud when Akunyili persuades Yar’Adua to prosecute the “stakeholders” implicated in Halliburtongate, Siemensgate, Wilbrosgate, and a plethora of other scams.

It’s not enough to wrap feces and present it as moi moi, to spray perfume on cow dung, and to apply deodorant on unwashed stinky armpit.

## 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 and political activist. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." He 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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