

# Ojo Maduekwe meets Barack Obama

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*By Okey Ndibe*

Ojo Maduekwe's recent account of a supposed encounter with President Barack Obama pointed up the profound confusion of Nigeria's misruling elite.

Maduekwe, who's Umaru Yar'Adua's foreign minister, described meeting Obama in Italy during the recent G-8 summit. According to him, "President Barack Obama told me that he will be visiting Nigeria very soon."

In what was a textbook case of diplomatic gaffe, Maduekwe claimed that he "walked up to Obama and said, Mr. President, nice to meet you. I'm the Foreign Affairs Minister of Nigeria. President Obama was warm when I introduced myself. He held me by the shoulder and said to me 'well, Mr. Minister, I will be visiting your country very soon.' The second time he told me that 'Mr. Minister, wherever goes Nigeria, goes Africa.'"

Forget that US embassy officials in Abuja have told Nigerian reporters that they were not aware of any plans by the American president to visit Nigeria. Such blunt repudiation is embarrassing enough. But it's even sadder that Maduekwe should make a statement, in public, that is so jejune as to guarantee him - and the regime he serves - instant

ridicule from Washington and within Nigeria.

Poor Ojo Maduekwe! Like many in Yar'Adua's circle, he's infected with what one may categorize as Ghana envy. Yes, Obama visited Ghana two weeks ago and spoke charmingly about Nkrumah's nascent nation. Not only did the American leader laud Nigeria's much smaller neighbor, he also spoke in barely veiled accents about Nigeria's deepening pathologies. Nigeria, once self-proclaimed giant of Africa, has cast itself in the tragic position of now looking up to Ghana. Even if Nigeria were to get a thinking, visionary leadership, not the comatose usurpers now in place, it may well take a decade or more to attain Ghana's level of infrastructural development and civic order.

But the usurpers sulk and chafe when a man like Obama, a figure whose emergence as US president is suffused with historical symbolism, snubs them. Obama is no fool. He knows that, to be seen consorting with the vote thieves in Abuja, is the quickest way to deplete his moral capital and political assets. So he went to Ghana, a country governed with a measure of vision by decent men and women.

Aware of his boss's pain at being ostracized by America, Maduekwe bravely decided to save the day. Seizing his moment in Italy, he boldly walked up to Obama and (no doubt, self-importantly) introduced himself. He reported that Obama was "warm." What a merciful thing that Maduekwe is a poor mind reader. How he would have frozen and recoiled in fright to discern the pity and contempt with which Obama regards his ilk - the pompous derelicts who frolic while their nation withers.

Isn't it something that Nigeria is now reduced to fantasizing about an Obama visit? Isn't it sad that Maduekwe, much older than Obama, should salivate at the idea that Obama "held me by the shoulder" - much like a primary school pupil getting giddy on account of the principal's endearing attention and touch?

If Maduekwe were schooled in the basics of diplomacy, he would have known that state visits were not negotiated at chance meetings in hotel hallways. Even if Obama broached a visit, a minister of foreign affairs should have known better than to go to a public forum and blab about it.

But Maduekwe, like the regime he serves, is a desperate man. The likes of Maduekwe have put Nigeria in the position of a sophomoric nation, desperate to prove that what Ghana can do, Nigeria too can do.

What if Obama said, as Maduekwe claimed, that Africa's fortunes are tied to developments in Nigeria? Did Maduekwe have to hear it from Obama to believe it? Had he not heard Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and hundreds of other patriots enunciate that point before?

Desperate to snatch cheer out of a charred narrative, Maduekwe failed to recognize in Obama's (ostensible) words a rebuke about Nigeria's addiction to failure, its miscarriage of promise, and its habituation to mediocrity. Think of the kind of hope Ghana has given to many West Africans by getting the basic things - credible elections and infrastructures - right. Imagine, then, the kind of powerful, positive jolt Nigeria would have offered to the rest of Africa if, somehow, the worst among us did not always conspire to hijack the nation, and to reduce it to their banal level.

Obama accorded Ghana the respect its leaders and people have worked hard to deserve. Maduekwe sneaked up on Obama in Italy and, in the fashion of those who abort Nigeria's highest aspirations, attempted to rig respectability for the Yar'Adua regime. It backfired!

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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*.

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