

Rich on Other People's Money

Monday, 27 July 2009

By Okey Ndibe

A few years ago, a cousin of mine told me about a night visit to a fellow townsman's home, a longtime friend who never managed to make it past secondary school. Both men had met infrequently since their paths diverged after secondary school – the one man going on to the university and then a corporate job in Lagos whilst the other remained home-bound, scratching at life.

My cousin was in town to spend part of his annual vacation in the country. Recalling his friend's flair for telling jokes, my cousin grew nostalgic. He decided to surprise the man.

The man was outside, his body hunched over a small fire that burned from tiny sticks. A faint scent of roasting meat wafted in the air. My cousin, still concealed by the darkness, was about to joke that he wanted a piece of that meal, but something forced him to hold back. As soon as he heard somebody's footsteps, the hunched figure seemed to tense up. Then he snatched something from the fire and tossed it under a low stool.

The two men exchanged pleasantries, then bantered and reminisced about their long-ago adventures.

But as the visitor lingered, my cousin got the distinct impression that the man was uncomfortable. A certain tinge of irksomeness had crept into his host's

demeanor. More and more, the man's laughter seemed forced, not hearty and carefree. The dying fire hissed intermittently and shot fleeting sparks into the night air. With the air sounding less and less convivial, my cousin knew that it was best to bid farewell and leave. Yet, he didn't do so.

Soon, the man reached underneath the stool and hidden what he'd hidden as my cousin arrived. It was a half-roasted rat, pitifully small.

With something of a groan, the man said, "My brother, we've known each other for a long time. Things are hard."

His tone haunted my cousin – it was between anguish and shame.

My cousin remembered being so startled that he momentarily lost all speech. Whatever sentiment he felt to express seemed strained or odd. He watched, dumbstruck, as the man stoked the fire and resumed the roasting of his quarry.

Somehow I recalled this harrowing narrative of the kind of wretched dinners eaten by millions of Nigerians as I read reports in last week's papers about just-retired Inspector General of Police Mike Okiro and the stupendous sums he owes a bank.

The Daily Independent went to the heart of the matter. It reported that "The Nigeria Deposit Insurance Corporation (NDIC) has accused the Inspector General of Police, Mr. Mike Okiro, of being a culprit in the failed banks saga. Mr. Okiro was alleged to have failed to repay the N166 million loan he sourced from the liquidated Lead Bank Ltd."

If the reports hold up, then Okiro, a serving police officer, was able to run a business on the side. And he somehow talked a (now failed) bank into lending him more than one million dollars to enable him to "finance a pipeline laying contract...he won from Nigeria Agip Oil Company (NAOC)." The ex-police boss reportedly obtained the loans between 2000 and 2001 through Hekiro Nigeria Ltd, a family business.

This story has ramifications that ought to trouble all citizens, including even those who choose aloofness about Nigeria's stupefying ways.

First, what are we to make of the nation's topmost police officer who ignores the rule barring civil servants from engaging in private practice? When a man charged with running the police busies himself with chasing after million dollar loans for his family business, should we be surprised at the ghastly state of law enforcement in the country?

It gets worse. On what basis did Okiro secure the loans? Were the applications subjected to proper scrutiny and vetting? If the newspaper accounts are accurate – and, so far, one is yet to read a rebuttal – then we must concur that Okiro's questionable business practices contributed to the demise of a major bank. Imagine all the thousands of

employees this man has herded into the jobless sector. Does he realize that the rising crime wave in Nigeria is fueled, in large measure, by upsurge in unemployment?

More than seventy percent of the Nigerian populace, it's reported, feeds on about a dollar per day. Think about that for a moment: these men, women and children are reduced to hunting mice. At that rate, the mice in city sewers feed better than the vast majority of citizens in Africa's most populous nation. Yet, the Okiros in our midst relish playing rich games with other people's money.

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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