

# “Let nobody tell me!”

Monday, 17 August 2009

*By Okey Ndibe*

The Igbo have this cautionary tale about the perils of royal hubris. It concerns a man named Eze Onyeagwanam – roughly translated as: “King let nobody tell me.” This royal personage is credited with combining disastrous decisions with hectoring pride. If anybody sought to persuade the king against treading some ruinous path, the king screamed: “Don’t tell me!”

In time, the king’s aides learned to keep their counsel to themselves. Even when the king took a manifestly foolish step, his hapless advisors assured him that his action was the paragon of wisdom.

There are different accounts of how the king came to grief. Here’s my favorite: One day, the king set out for the marketplace. He was stark naked, in a drunken revelry. As he strode to his destination, none of his scandalized subjects dared warn him about his flapping manhood. The imperious man stunned onlookers when he finally arrived at the market.

It was one scandal too many for his subjects. Acting swiftly, they deposed the man and led him away to an asylum – where he spent the rest of his days among other deranged habitués.

Lately, I have been thinking about the undeniable connection between Eze Onyeagwanam’s legend and Nigeria’s crop of crass leaders. Nigeria appears cursed, not with one, but a multitude of Eze Onyeagwanams. Morally and ethically naked men and women dominate the country’s public space, but pass themselves off as lavishly dressed.

Last week, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made an Abuja stop as part of her 11-day tour to a number of African countries. Even before she arrived in Africa’s most populous – and most grandly disappointing – nation, the American media were speculating that she would speak candidly about Nigeria’s woes, especially corruption and record-setting history of fraudulent elections.

Mrs. Clinton lived up to the billing. At a town hall meeting in Abuja, she spoke in a manner that was uncharacteristically direct for a chief diplomat. “The most immediate source of the disconnect between Nigeria’s wealth and its poverty,” she said, was “a failure of governance at the federal, state and local levels.” In a country where militancy has become the disorder of the day, the American secretary stated that “Lack of transparency and accountability has

eroded the legitimacy of the government and contributed to the rise of groups that embrace violence and reject the authority of the state.”

In speaking so directly, Mrs. Clinton gave Nigeria’s rulers (yes, they rule, but don’t know a thing about leading) a taste of what President Barack Obama thinks of them. Obama riled Nigeria’s rulers when he snubbed them and instead visited neighboring Ghana in July.

Mrs. Clinton took a swipe at Mr. Umaru Yar’Adua’s non-record in the fight against corruption. Her verdict on the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission was unflattering. “The EFCC, which was doing well, has kind of fallen off in the last one year,” she said. “We will like to see it come back to business to be able to partner with us.”

Her dour and – going by the enthusiastic applause she got – accurate portrait of Nigeria elicited the laughable pledge by Yar’Adua to continue combating corruption.

Once Mrs. Clinton left Nigeria, the Eze Onyeagwanam impulse was activated. Officials of Nigeria’s ruling party assured that nothing was amiss in Nigeria. David Mark, who presides over a high-priced but largely sleeping Senate, echoed that sentiment. A man who left a career in the military with amazing wealth, Mr. Mark told reporters that Mrs. Clinton’s take on Nigeria was misconceived. Where she abhorred Nigeria’s wishy-washy elections, the senator argued, “We will decide for ourselves what we want as our democratic system.” And the kind of

system “we” have chosen is one where the ruling party captures any states and posts that catch its fancy, regardless of what the voters say!

Mark, a beneficiary of a questionable election, asked with a straight face: “What is the problem with the [Nigerian] electoral system?” For him, Mrs. Clinton’s statement that Nigerians lack a credible register of voters arose from her inadequate education. “That is the sort of thing we get ourselves into when we don’t educate those we ought to,” he bemoaned. Had the US Secretary attended Mr. Mark’s classroom, she would have learned that “This country is a sovereign nation, Nigerians belong to Nigerians and we would decide for ourselves the way we want to move ourselves forward.”

How exactly are Mr. Mark and co moving their nation forward? Here’s a sample. New Inspector General of Police Ogbonnaya Onovo has asked the legislature to empower the police to shoot during elections. Does anybody in her or his wildest imagination foresee the police shooting supporters of the ruling party? Mr. Maurice Iwu, who oversees Nigeria’s infamous brand of elections, recently stated that only the military can conduct credible elections. As I sat down to write, news came that veteran actor and broadcaster, Pete Edochie, had been kidnapped in Anambra.

That’s a portrait of Mr. Mark’s country marching forward into perdition.

## Readers' Favorites

1. From Mount Accra Obama Chastises Nigeria
2. 27 Betrayed Soldiers
3. They're All Thieves
4. Greed Dressed As Vision
5. Nigeria's Real Witches And Wizards
6. Nigeria's savaged children
7. The war we ordered is here
8. What I saw in Nigeria
9. Murder Incorporated
10. No Longer at Ease
11. My Vote for Andy Uba
12. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
13. My Biafran Eyes
14. My Father's English Friend
15. A female speaker's manly vices
16. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
17. The triumph of barbarism
18. Achebe's apt censure
19. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
20. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
21. Why I Take It Personally
22. Andy Uba's highest bid
23. The folly of the Nigerian elite
24. Fraud Incorporated
25. Etiaba's father, not mine
26. Our laughing president
27. Fayose and God's response
28. My 419 Call
29. A feud of three bulls
30. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
31. Who does Obasanjo work for?

Read or download more titles at

<http://www.okeyndibe.com>

### 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

To discuss a speaking engagement, please contact Okey Ndibe by e-mail ([okey@okeyndibe.com](mailto:okey@okeyndibe.com)) or by phone (860.306.7843).

PDF conversions done with Adobe Acrobat Professional 6.0 (US & International Patents) under license to All Hands Business Solutions, Inc.