

# The Strange Career of James Ibori

Wednesday, 23 September 2009

*By Okey Ndibe*

One easy way to describe James Onanefe Ibori is that he is a former governor of Delta State. It is also the least interesting way to describe the astonishing career of a man who mirrors much of what is wrong with Nigeria.

Here's a more interesting fact about Mr. Ibori: Long before he became governor, he'd been convicted twice for crimes committed in Britain. In 1991, he and his then girlfriend (and now wife), Theresa Nakanda, were found guilty of theft. Mr. Ibori was fined 300 pounds sterling and ordered to pay another 450 pounds sterling as cost. A year later, Mr. Ibori was convicted again, this time for handling a stolen credit card.

Here's another, even weightier, narrative: In 1993, during the reign of bespectacled Sani Abacha, somebody wired more than a million dollars into Ibori's account in the US. That transaction drew the due attention of American law enforcement officers. Puzzled American officials were curious to know how a man - that is Ibori - who at the time lived in a subsidized council flat in London could have come by so much cash. The US government, suspecting that the money came from one 419 scheme or another, asked a judge to freeze the account. Ibori explained away the cash by passing himself off as a

consultant, and he produced a letter from the Abacha regime to back him up.

Listen to yet another tidbit about the man. He and his associates currently face prosecution in Nigeria and the UK on charges of laundering billions of naira of public funds during Ibori's eight years as governor. Nuhu Ribadu, who ran the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission until December 2007, has said that Ibori tried to "persuade" him with - wait for it - \$15 million to discontinue the agency's prosecution of the former governor on embezzlement charges.

Mr. Ibori looms just as large in the mystery department. On September 28, 1995, the Bwari Upper Area Court convicted a man named James Onanefe Ibori of negligent conduct and criminal breach of trust. Yet, when two men from Delta invoked the case in pleading that Ibori be declared ineligible to serve as governor, the case went all the way to the Supreme Court and produced a confounding verdict. Nigeria's highest bench decided the plaintiffs had not proved that James Onanefe Ibori the governor was the selfsame James Onanefe Ibori the convict.

Ibori has a hardworking (but luckless) handler in Tony Eluemunor, a former journalist. Mr. Eluemunor's unvarying mantra is that his master is a victim of a carefully choreographed malicious slander. Sadly for Ibori and his handlers, the repetition of this line has done little to improve its credibility index. And neither Mr. Eluemunor nor his principal has come forward either to identify those who are after Saint James or to convincingly prove the falsity of the many counts of corruption tagged to Ibori's person.

If Ibori's were a simple story of a public official whose greed overwhelmed his sense of restraint, he would be a commonplace. In the arena of Nigeria's gubernatorial politics, too many stealer-governors love to play in the First Division. They often cart away more than half of the revenue accruing to their states.

Mr. Ibori's genius lies in the way he has parlayed his criminal record into a swaggering performance. His political trajectory has been nothing short of amazing. From his humble beginnings as a petty thief in London, this man rose to the commanding heights of Nigerian politics. Nigerians ought to wonder why such a man - why men with similar pedigrees - are routinely permitted to rise to leadership.

Nigeria has a case against Ibori in a federal court in Asaba. Yet, that fact did not stop Umaru Yar'Adua from putting Ibori on an official delegation to this year's Beijing Olympics. That fact did not inconvenience the ruling Peoples

Democratic Party which recently elevated Ibori to the rank of "party elder." That exaltation made Ibori a custodian of the party's mission and exemplar of its deepest mores.

Several of Mr. Ibori's front companies are on the list of rogue debtors whose delinquency brought some Nigerian banks to the brink of collapse. Even so, the former governor enjoys, and flaunts his, open access to Mr. Yar'Adua. Nobody in Aso Rock has the sense (forget the sense, how about courage?) to warn that Mr. Yar'Adua's dalliance with Mr. Ibori, an ex-convict who happens to be the principal accused in trials on two continents, sells Nigeria as precisely the kind of crooked country that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described.

The day Mr. Ibori and his ilk begin to cower, instead of strut the stage - that day will mark the beginning of a new, salutary ethos.

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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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