If in Doubt, Blame the Crafty Nigerians

By

L. Muthoni Wanyeki

Nigeria, undoubtedly, is the one African country we love to hate - except when it comes to its soccer team.

Those of us who have interacted with Nigerians have stories to tell - stories of awe and glee. For everything they and their country do is on a scale the rest of us find hard to understand. All of our problematic characters and events just pale into insignificance when set against the theatre that Nigeria is.

But let me clarify that I have met many Nigerians who, like us, are simply trying to get by. So the preponderance of audacious Nigerians is only due to the fact that there are simply so many more of them than any other kinds of African. The statistic often given is that one in four Africans is a Nigerian.

But I must admit that I derive great, if guilty, pleasure from hearing stereotypes that abound, not just about Nigerians but about all Africans. So I was thoroughly entertained last week to be sitting with a Nigerian colleague and a Kenyan who had worked in Nigeria and getting a whole new batch of stories.

The session was punctuated with exclamations such as "No! That cannot be true!" and with much mirth. For, although we had started with a fairly serious discussion, I could not believe what they were saying. I suppose this is our saving grace. What happens to us is so crazy sometimes that all we can do is laugh.

Consider this tale, dating back to Mr Shehu Shagari's presidency in the early 1980s before he was thrown out in a military coup d'etat. I can't vouch for its truth, although my Nigerian friend swore it actually happened.

A man had contested and won a seat in the House of Zaria state. A local millionaire, an illiterate made good with trading, summoned him to his huge house, replete with an internal mosque and swimming pools. He asked him how much he had spent on his campaign. The man said $3 million (about Sh234 million). The millionaire gave him $6 million and took over his seat. Just like that.
Or take this, which played itself out early this year under Mr Olusegun Obasanjo's presidency. The Governor of Enugu state, where my friend lives, was frustrated by perpetual MPs' absence from the House.

He purportedly had to pay them to sit through the budget hearings in the first quarter just to get the budget passed so he would have something to work with. An aside: This is not intended to give our recalcitrant MPs any more ideas than they already have.

As though that was not bad enough, in the second quarter, he had to recall them, again with inducements, to pass the supplementary budgets. The entire year's budget had been spent in the infinitesimal slice of time between one quarter and the next. Where did the extra money come from?

Oil. How so? Isn't oil accounted for in the federal budget? I got one of those sucking-of-teeth answers and an expression that says all there is to say. "We have no idea how much money is brought in by oil," I was told.

"We have no idea how many barrels are sold a year. It's the perpetual reserve, being added to by millions of dollars now being returned to Nigeria from the foreign accounts of former military dictator Sani Abacha."

Or, finally, sample this tale - also under the current presidency. It can be verified for it was captured and broadcast live to all of Nigeria by the National Television Authority, the public broadcaster.

Mr Obasanjo had apparently been embroiled in a battle with the President of the Senate, Mr Okadigbo, for some time. The Senate was meeting to decide whether to remove Mr Okadigbo from that presidency. Before the eyes of millions of Nigerians, mountains of the infamous "Ghana must go" bags were brought into the Senate.

Another aside: "Ghana must go" bags are large plastic chequered bags that West African women traders move all over the place. They are so named as they were used to hastily pack up and transport personal belongings during the forced removal of Ghanaians from Nigeria.

Back to the story. In front of television cameras, the bags were opened to reveal stacks of naira. Senators scrambled to send their aides and assistants to the markets to get more bags to carry their shares away.

Nigerians joke that, on that day, Abuja actually ran out of bags - to the point that somewhere in the frenzy the naira were replaced with American dollars to make it easier to carry away. In the end, Mr Okadigbo was removed from the presidency. No one was ever charged with this obvious display of corruption.
This in a country headed by a former board member of Transparency International, the largest and most respected anti-corruption organisation in the world. This in a country whose president has been hobnobbing with G8 presidents and prime ministers, exchanging pledges of good governance in return for more aid, investment and trade.

The stories are so out of this world that they assume a mythical, surreal, edge. But entertainment value aside, I was horrified. I asked my colleague how she managed to live and do political work in such an environment. For the implications of the stories are so immense that anything one can do would seem utterly irrelevant.

One would think that any thinking person would quickly become suicidal. Yet Nigeria has a vibrant arts and media scene that continues to cover all of this indefatigably. It has forceful intellectuals, strong political parties of all ideological shades and an active civil society. My friend said: “These things are what keep me going”.

We started comparing the situation to Kenya. And, really, after stories like that, we have no excuse for not being able to turn things around. In relative terms, we have no problem. One begins to understand our President's anger at his categorisation as one of Africa's bad boys.

But the fact is that nobody lives in relative terms. We can only deal with what confronts us daily and what we know. And from where we all sit, what we confront is starkly depressing.

In the end, the point is simple. We might not know what it was like to be a Nigerian under Mr Abacha. But if Nigerians could get rid of him and continue to work at change, we have no excuse for not getting it right ourselves.

Ms Wanyeki is the Executive Director of the African Women's Development and Communication Network.

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