

# Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



## Readers' Responses

READERS, I was very pleased to read from several of you and I have responded to each individually. I am delighted that letters came from a variety of places and made cogent points. Permit me to quote briefly two examples: Chukwuemeka Onyekwere from Amarata-Yenagoa, Bayelsa State comments on the right of expatriate Nigerians to vote in Nigerian elections: '.... they would vote according to the dictates of their conscience and would not easily be swayed by material gifts or fake electoral promises.

Most important is that these are people who have seen democracy work and have reaped the fruits.' Sergeant Abiodun Harold Akinyele, Okpoko police station, Ogbaru, Anambra State complained to the editor of *Vanguard* that articles he wrote criticizing the media attacks on the police force have either not been published or else edited and asks if feedbacks are not published or impetuously edited. Can this be regarded as 'feedback' in journalism?

I am sure many of us share Akinyele's frustration of having views to express but no access to or control over an available medium. With the best of intentions, no editor can publish all the correspondence received. In Nigeria, the great majority of readers have to rely on the postal service, which means their letters usually arrive late before the newspaper publishes. A minority have access to facsimile communication and for a tiny technologically privileged elite, the Internet offers an international audience and electronic mail, instant communication. Ultimately, in the long-term future, Nigeria will, at last, reach India's current level of mass usage of electronic mail even in the rural areas, (by which time India of course will have attained or surpassed the USA level). Then, all communications between readers and editors of newspapers (in print and online), will be e-mail.

The advantages are obvious: it arrives quickly but sits quietly on the electric mat until you wish to read it and can reply. It is kind on the most drastic difference of time zones. You do not need stamps or envelopes to rush for the last collection of mail or wait anxiously for the postman to arrive before you leave home. For the huge number of Nigerian families who have young members living abroad and are frustrated by insecure and irregular postal services, e-mail provides a way to keep in close, constant touch.

There are also disadvantages. Email is not secure or private. Monica Lewinsky was wrong to assume that 'trashing' her emails annihilated them, as they survived long enough on the server to be retrieved. Many faxes and emails must be floating around in cyberspace, lost forever, like Peter Pan. Even when emails do "land" at their destination, unless the sender or the addressee makes a

conscious choice to preserve it by printing it out, there is no permanent preservation. Most servers clear out trashed emails within weeks without keeping a control record of messages they handle. If stored on the computer hard disk, after five years it is liable to crash. If saved electronically on floppy disk or CD-ROM, in about 20 years the software may not be supported i.e., readable.

Electronic mail is a temporary medium that encourages chatty or business-like exchanges that usually no one keeps. Our basic comprehension of text on screen is markedly inferior

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or to our reading of print on paper; which is why, if you send someone an email with three or four points in it, the reply will fail to address at least one.

Sender and recipient can print "it" out but "it" remains elusive, there is no physical object.

Etiquette, smiley-faces, lower-case codes and net language make it difficult to communicate full adult feelings. Faxes are more secure in that as facsimiles, the original stays with the sender who writes with pen on paper and then feeds the letter into the machine. Seconds later, someone streets or seas away is reading it. However, the received fax will probably be printed on heat-sensitive paper and will fade to illegibility unless photocopied. Even then, the fax is vulnerable to the same old dangers as any paper: fire, food, rats, vandalism, carelessness etc.

You may have noticed a few unusual usages in the above paragraphs. In fact, in the last few years, many new words associated with computerization have entered the general language while many old words have been given different meanings. When is a mouse not a mouse? When it is the master key to a computer. How can a surfer not get wet when surfing the net? In what café can you not drink coffee? In a cybercafé. Point made?

The Internet is pouring out a wave of few words, idioms and acronyms that amounts to an entirely new language. In the US hacker's dictionaries, cyber speak lexicon is now in the bookshops.

In the past, revolutionary new technologies also shaped language. In the days of sail, you got 'scuppered' or 'spliced' if someone liked the 'cut of your jib'. The railway age allowed us to 'pick up steam' or 'go off the rails'. When automobiles arrived, we could 'rev up' and 'blow a gasket'. Nuclear technology offered 'going ballistic', 'nuking someone', 'the balance of terror'. Space technology is about to 'jet propel a new word into orbit'.

All the above words entered the general language and attained wider meanings but cybers peak so far is only for the Internet

The euthanasia campaigner, Jack Kevorkian, has become a verb in the new parlance: to 'kevork' is to kill off something, usually prematurely. A 'thinko' is the mental counterpart of a 'typo,' a minor and momentary lapse in cerebral processing. The new lingo and acronyms: WOMBAT, a Waste of Money, Brains and Time; OTOH, on the other hand. Acronyms are also terms of abuse for those out of touch with the new technology: a PONA is a person of NO account; a PEBACK, Problem Exists between Chair and Keyboard and KISS, Keep It Simple, Stupid.

There is another revolution in technology that is also impacting our language: the transformation of human reproduction. Banks are no longer repositories for cash and valuables only but also for sperm. Eggs are no longer just for eating and cooking but for freezing for future fertilization. A surrogate is no longer a substitute or a deputy but a woman who bears a child born by artificial insemination for another woman (or for man). Cloning is no longer restricted to animals and plants but extends to human beings.

So, readers, in future if you wish to respond to my column, please feel free to do so by snail mail, fax or email ([ninamba@usa.net](mailto:ninamba@usa.net) or *Vanguard's* email on its back page). As a historian who has derived great excitement and knowledge from reading archival records, private papers and correspondence, I must confess I find words on paper that I can read and keep the most comfortable and informative medium.

In my column of two weeks ago 'Taking Ivories: Women and Tradition' I explained that I could not reveal my new Odu title name until after my initiation. I can now inform you, in words, in print, that my title is ***Omelu-orafu*** which means 'somebody who has achieved something of value, attested to by the people (society)'. I hope my readers will attest that my column is of value by responding through their preferred medium of communication.