

Retirement an opportunity to refresh and restart Part 1 & II

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It is exactly a year and 3 days that I returned to Lagos, Nigeria after almost 24 years of working at the United Nations at different peace operations. I had cut my teeth inside Somalia for almost 2 years under the Department of Peacekeeping Operations at a time late General Mohamed Farah Aidid wanted to kill meddlesome peacekeepers as a way to drive them out of his country. We relocated to Nairobi, where I continued my work on Somalia for 11 years before moving to Liberia on post-conflict peace keeping mission.

In Liberia, I put in a little over 4 years and moved on to Guinea-Bissau to support what was conceived as an integrated peace support office for another 4 years. I moved on to Darfur, Sudan spending almost 3 years and reached the then 62 years retirement age

The almost 24 years of living in hardship situations had its own allure. There was never a dull moment. In Somalia, we went to bed thinking a mortar round could land on our pre-fabricated rooms or we could be kidnapped while moving to and from the airport. The situation was a bit less dramatic but the possibility of being shot at during a carjacking situation or being kidnapped with the UN 4-Wheel vehicle loved by insurgents was there. So, to go for pre-negotiations in town involves support from soldiers in tanks. While in Mogadishu, each time I moved across the green line between north and south of the city, I had 12 AK-47 surround me. Many a time, I was in armoured personnel carriers (APC) to deliver messages. At the beginning, a friend dubbed me “Combat Political”. I had 2 clear close shaves with death and one kidnap attempt in my UN career. I do not know of the numbers that were planned but aborted.

Then there were several negotiations that exposed me to different countries around the world. Many governments hosted peace talks on countries I was involved with during my career. So, I was in Addis Ababa several times with respect to peace talks on Somalia and Sudan as well as Brussels, Luxembourg, Stockholm on the Somali peace process. Peace support on Liberia exposed me to Sierra Leone, Dakar and Brussels. Guinea-Bissau was not of serious attraction to most Governments with the exception of Angola and Portugal that remotely showed interest. East Timor did provide reasonable financial support and some presence coming after Nigeria that put a lot of financial resources into trying to avoid a total breakdown in Guinea-Bissau. Our meetings on Guinea-Bissau was mainly in Bissau except the opportunities to attend briefing meetings at ECOWAS in places like Abuja, Dakar, Abidjan and Yamassoukrou. There were also briefings at the UN in New York and a one-time briefing at the US State Department in Washington DC.

Qatar took the lead on Darfur when I was there. So, we had many meetings seeking to implement the agreement that had been reached with a good number of insurgents who joined the Government.

Then there were training opportunities in Addis Ababa, Cairo, Geneva, New York, New Delhi etc.

In effect, my time with the UN was a very active life. Then it all ended on March 31, 2017.

I happily attended many parties at El-Fasher, Darfur and a dinner in Khartoum, held in my honour by my multi-national friends from Sudan, Fiji, Gambia, Iraq, Bangladesh and of course my compatriots who really did me proud.

I spent a day and night in Addis Ababa on transit introducing my retirement plan as Yintab Strategy Consults to friends I had worked with at the AU and ECA.

I was happy to be returning home as a retiree. In 1981, while I researched for my Ph.D thesis in Pakistan, I had learnt about preparing for retirement. I had learnt from the experience of a friend's father in Karachi, who was quite wealthy, lived in a big mansion and had two beautiful children, yet felt very restless without having anything to do with his life in retirement.

Though the real reason I studied Law and got called to the Nigerian Bar after a Ph.D. in Political Science was not to prepare for retirement, I saw that such a professional status would help. The idea was to build something I could engage in by using my brains where no-one else can tell me to go home because I am no longer relevant to problem solving in society.

So began the retirement phase of my life, an opportunity to renew, refresh and restart on a good number of exciting contributions. The account of my one year experience follows.....(look out for Part II)!

Retirement, an opportunity to renew, refresh and restart —Part II

Babafemi A. Badejo, Ph.D

Arrival in Lagos

Arriving in Lagos on April Fools' day 2017 as a retiree, I was picked up at the Murtala Mohammed International Airport by my wife. On the drive home, I could see that she was nervous about a new life of being together all year round as we did for 14 years before I joined the UN. We had lived apart during my first and last years as a Graduate Student at UCLA. By the time she joined me for two years, she received credits for her NCE and was able to complete her first degree before returning home to have our second child as I went to Pakistan for my field research. I asked why she thought I should have asked for extension beyond retirement age at the last minute. She confirmed my observation. I reassured her that my retirement was nothing to be nervous about. In fact, I would say I had over planned for it.

Founding Yintab Strategy Consults (YSC)

I started working immediately as the CEO of Yintab Strategy Consults (YSC). On April 4, I took over all documentations from Lawyer Tunde Koya who spent February and March to work on the incorporation of YSC as well as ensure that all my dues to practice law in Nigeria were paid and I got issued with the appropriate seal. During the prior year's Christmas break, I had started building the YSC website with the assistance of a very able designer Olufemi Olapegba. Some of the best people across cultures who I had met in my 60+ years of existence on earth agreed to assist my retirement plan by being on the Board of YSC. These fine people are detailed in YSC's website (www.yintabstrategyconsults.com).

Lagos State Mediator

Tunde Koya had also handled all that was necessary for me to attend two certification courses. From April 24-28, 2017, I attended a certificate course on mediation to become a certified mediator in the Lagos State of Nigeria's court system. I passed and fulfilled all conditions and started deriving fulfillment from mediating all sorts of cases: contracts, divorce and tenancies, in particular. Helping people find solutions instead of being bogged down in Courts that could take years is satisfying. It also provided an opportunity to attend a few training-like seminars that helped in refreshing my brain on law

I also attended arbitration training under the UK based Chartered Institute of Arbitration from June 14 –16, 2017, I received my certificate in September and got inducted into the Nigeria Branch in November 2017 at the end of a major two-day national conference on arbitration which I attended.

Joining President Obasanjo to fight Hunger in Nigeria

On May 8, 2017, I accepted a post as Senior Advisor to former President Obasanjo on Projects/Initiatives at no pay. This was a very pleasing development that I did not plan for. It got me involved in efforts towards "Zero-Hunger in Nigeria" by 2025. This effort is towards implementing the UN Secretary-General's SDG 2. Being part of Zero-Hunger implementation allows me to learn a lot about food security and other things through travelling across Nigeria to places I would not have otherwise visited. I am also making new friends.

In addition, under my role as Senior Advisor, I was involved on dialogue at Abeokuta, between the Olusegun Obasanjo Presidential Library and Afrexim Bank, headquartered in Cairo on collaboration on a number of areas bothering on sharing knowledge about Africa with the wider world.

From August 24–25, 2017, I was in Johannesburg as I accompanied President Obasanjo to a high level conference on security in Africa at which he was the Keynote Speaker. I learnt a lot and refreshed my memory on recent thoughts on the nature of conflict in Africa. I found sometime to engage in photography, including of The Conqueror sculpture. Prominent at the Emperors Palace in Johannesburg, The Conqueror is claimed to be the largest one piece horse sculpture in bronze ever created.

Furthermore, it was a great pleasure to be part of President Obasanjo's delegation to the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa from January 25–31, 2018. It was as if I was still Head of Political Affairs at UNAMID. The re-union with many UN/AU/ECOWAS colleagues brought back a lot of pleasurable memories about my UN career. It was also a pleasure to see former President Abdulsalami Abubakar, with whom and President Thabo Mbeki, in the lead, I had collaborated with on the Darfur Peace Process.

Partnering with former University of Lagos colleagues on Magodo Associates

While out of Nigeria as an international civil servant, I had joined and sustained my membership of Magodo Associates which comprises a group of serving and retired academics from the University of Lagos and other professionals. Nine months into my retirement, I was asked to become the Secretary of the association. I accepted. I have since been working within the Executive Committee of Magodo Associates to fulfill the laudable goals of the organisation to pay back to Nigeria and mentor the succeeding generation by sharing our experiences. Even before this development, I had been involved in Magodo Associates' collaboration with an NGO called PAIGAS, the National Youth Service Corps and the EU to address fresh university graduates undergoing the compulsory one year national service on the need to avoid illegal migration into Europe.

Currently, Magodo Associates is working on holding a major national symposium titled: "Nigeria: Which Way Forward" on May 3rd, 2018. This is costing me a lot of man-hours aside from undertaking research because I plan to speak on corruption avoidance in Nigeria at this event. Four other Guest Speakers will address other issues including reshaping Nigeria; colonialism and endemic problems in Nigeria; organizing for change in Nigeria and very importantly, empowering women and the youths towards a new Nigeria. The Symposium is scheduled to hold at the University of Lagos, Lagos.

Burials and farewells

There were deaths of family and friends within my first year of retirement. David Bell who I had shared many negotiation ups and downs on Somalia unexpectedly gave up the ghost On March 27, 2018. We had shared a meal at his insistent while I visited Nairobi in July 2017. Before his death, I lost a close friend and mentor in the struggle for a better Nigeria On May 7, 2017. Late Prof. Funso Akingbade and I had collaborated in our struggles against military rule in Nigeria under the auspices of the Academic Staff Union of Universities. Each time I visited home he was one of 5 or 6 with whom we shared dinners and wine at each others houses as we engaged in all sorts of discussions, ranging from philosophy to religion and of course, the failure of leadership in Nigeria etc. He was 76. His burial took me to Ijero-Ekiti, his birth place. That was my first time in seeing the town with pristine-like forest from the window of my hotel.

Blogging and legal work

Still on my being relevant in retirement, I had defined different research plans and started writing on some, including on the challenges of negotiating peace in Somalia just before Al-Shabab.

Upon consultations with my son, I decided to keep a blog and engage in other social media interventions instead of persuading owners of print media that I can be of use. I was surprised when I met the Executive Director of UNFPA at the AU Summit and she had read my blog contribution on African illegal migrations into Europe.

I prepared 4 legal agreements for which I did not receive any pay. Other Lawyers told me I must insist on payment first. I also took on a legal assignment for a client only for him to disappear when I sought discussions on mode of payment. On preparing the agreements, I was pleased in two respects: I had to read up again in order to exercise due diligence on huge contracts. Secondly, I derived pleasure from the fact that I gave something of me back to my rich friend who had eagerly gone out of his way to socially support my reintegration into Nigeria. I have been providing similar gratis services to my children who required my professional support.

I had tried to recruit two Assistants, including one being an Attorney. However, my failure to find candidates who could measure up to the capacity I was used to at the UN led to my shelving the search and operating at a less optimal rate. Mr. Abraham Ameh, a fresh history graduate, who I had reluctantly agreed to his spending his National Youth Service Corps primary assignment year with Yintab Strategy Consults has turned out to be very supportive since June 2017.

Joining my wife on Yintab Private Academy

Being back in Nigeria, it became possible to pay some attention to Yintab Private Academy (YPA) on which I had invested a sizable amount of time and funds over the 28+ years of its existence. My wife had also invested all her energy, and life earnings into providing education from creche to Secondary School level at a low income place and at another low medium income part of Lagos. This has been rewarding as the students competed at the US Government and the Olusegun Obasanjo Presidential Library sponsored introduction to artificial intelligence. They held their own and came 5th in the pack of close to 40 selected schools. The school had been doing well at football competitions including carrying the cup at the Lagos State level once. It was a pleasure to spend February 21, 2017 at the school's Inter -House Sports. Being around encouraged some of my friends to also participate at the event as Chair of the occasion and Special Guests. This was positive as it exposed the children to other role models who are different from those national thieves we have as leaders who are currently challenging themselves on national media on who stole less/more in office.

Golfing, traveling, partying and other leisurely activities

I have always preferred a balance of work and life that is not compartmentalized as tends to be the case in the West. So, I started being a regular at my golf club very early in the day, about thrice a week and then face whatever task I planned for that day. My friend Major-General Muhammad Tahir (Rtd) from Pakistan had encouraged me to learn how to play golf when we served in Liberia. I was Head of Political, Policy and Planning Section while he was the Deputy Force Commander. We had also served in Somalia together when I was a young Political Affairs Officer and he a Lt. Col. He had assured me that golf would help me later in life. His words have become very true because these days, I enjoy the game and exercise at the same time. In retirement in Pakistan, he has been churning out fantastic paintings of such great qualities which he regularly displayed on Facebook.

I had transited through Dubai, many times and was there for a conference in 1998 or so. Whenever, I went to meetings in most places, it was airport to the meeting and back to the airport. For a change, with my wife, I was able to spend sometime in Dubai from September 7-11, 2017, courtesy of two free tickets from my first daughter and her husband. Aside from a Real-Estate Company thinking I was loaded with Nigeria's

wealth and struggling to sell me apartments, historical city tour, ride to the top of Burj Khalifa, Carmel riding and desert driving were some of the attractions. We made a new friend in Radu Velea from Romania who was our guest at our 40th wedding anniversary dinner immediately after a short sea cruise.

I also found time to visit my amiable former boss and friend, Mohamed Ibn Chambas from November 15-17, 2017 as he spent some time at his country, Ghana. It was nice to return to Accra and see developments there since my Liberia days. Accra used to be a transit point and given the awkward flight arrangements; each transit used to involve an overnight stay.

My wife used to be the only one keeping up with the larger family and friends' celebratory obligations. Now, it became possible for me to attend weddings, birthdays and funeral parties that Yorubas are noted for. Immediately below was my high school friend, Tayo Eboda's daughter's wedding followed by Mrs. Aderinwale's 50th birthday party. I also was honoured as the Chairperson at the wedding of my long-term friend Justice Doye Olugbemi's daughter.

During one of the partying ventures, I was joined by Mrs. Grace Johnson-Olaniyan and visited the important River Osun that is sacred to Yorubas, not at its shrine at Oshogbo, but as it meanders to the sea and forms a border with Idode, my mother's birth place. The need for food security through the clearing of land for irrigation I found to be in conflict with the preservation of the environment. The river had lost much of its allure as a mighty body of water that has reasonably dried up. I remembered with nostalgia stories my mother told me about crossing the river to farm and trade in farm produce at "ẹhin Osun" literally meaning behind the river as politically stronger late foremost Nigerian Industrialist of yore, late Chief Adeola Odutola had seen to the diversion of the bridge meant for Idode to where it was more useful for him at his vast rubber plantation. I did visit the fuller river as a kid and as an adult in the late 80s.

As part of my psychological reintegration into Nigeria, my larger family held a party for me at the residence of the oldest male on my maternal side. The highlight was the rendition of welcoming songs by my cousin's young son and daughter. All that reinforced a psychological frame of mind that I should not be looking back towards the external arena that had been my base for 24 years.

In addition, I found time to join the traditional "apepe" dance that has always gotten me into the possessed spirit mode whenever I listened to their drums.

Driving in Lagos is an art that requires a lot of dexterity. Each time I came home in my 24 years, I had to rely on someone within the family to drive me around. At a time, it was my friend who became a Judge while I was away and his new status abhors such. I lost my capacity to meander through and avoid hitting or being hit by someone.

On my return to Lagos, everyone concluded I could no longer drive and I started searching for a driver as a cousin assisted in the interim. However, seeing many older friends and relations on the driver's seat, I gave up the search for a driver and got on the steering wheel on my third month of return.

Eldorado?

Sounds like Eldorado? No. I miss my multi-national friends and environments that allowed diverse perspectives on many world issues. I had built a strong level of trust in a number of people with similar attitudes and orientation towards life. Listening to accounts on corruptions day-in day-out in Nigeria is demoralizing. UN socialization to abhor corruption has put me in an uncomfortable situation but one that I actually like. I keep hoping I could be part of a pressure group on anti-corruption.

I am not yet worried about my radical income reduction although I have reduced my material giving spirit. Instead I offer advice freely with the hope that I would earn with time.

About 3 months into my retirement, I lost access to the UN email address that had been mine for long. This hit me more than the radical reduction in income. I expected it to happen but did not realise it would be so fast. I reached out to the colleague managing UNAMID email arrangement. I requested in writing to be allowed to finish the process of dis-engagement with the UN check-out office at Entebbe, Uganda. I did not get a reply till today. I psychologically persuaded myself that I should put this behind me as a petty issue after all the Yoruba in me had told me from 1993 when I joined that I would not ask for a day of extension unlike many who would pretend they are ready to go but would surreptitiously be begging for more time because of the salary and fear to return home.

The need to plan for retirement

Each retiree would have different experience. For instance, a friend invested in production efforts in an area in which he had no experience and totally lost his retirement benefit. Another told me he needed to rest for two years doing nothing but travelling and being happy. I could not have operated in the shoes of both friends.

I have been happy in retirement because I had been conscious about the need to prepare for it since 1981. I needed to continue to be relevant in a manner not too far from the exercise of my brain as was the case before retirement.

While working for the UN, I saw people begging to be allowed some 1–3 months extension time as if their respective lives depended on such additional time. One was restless at home and begged to be given a chance to work again as a way to preserve his life. Another begged and succeeded in getting a break only to be trying to convince anyone that would listen that the organization begged him to return. Those who know me know that I avoid begging, so I knew I had to be ready for retirement doing things not too far dissimilar to things I had been doing during my working life.

Furthermore, while at the UN, I learnt to put countries I got reassigned from behind me and not keep wanting to know what was happening in the peace process there. This has been extremely useful in moving on from the UN towards finding relevance in Nigeria by engaging on new issues.

Of course, I cannot discount the importance of my pension. Without it, I would have been miserable in Nigeria where many persons do not account for national patrimony in their respective care and dip their hands as they like. It would have been an excruciating problem to have to chase goods and services with these looters. In order to reduce the pressure of the pervasive corruption, I chose not to seek consultancy jobs from any level of Government in Nigeria.

Medical services was of concern as I retired. However, I am happy that my UN health insurance, being paid for on a monthly basis out of my pension has been very helpful. I probably could have joined the statistics of UN staff deaths in the first year of retirement without the good health support I received when I suddenly took ill from infection of my inner ear on October 1, 2017 and for five weeks I had to recuperate, including relearning how to walk. I overcame this and returned to golfing.