

## Christmas Musings in Cotonou and the “*Japa*” Syndrome

By

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Mr. Rufus & Mrs. Esther Sami are/were our treasured neighbours until the cold hands of death snatched Mrs. Sami in October. I could not but have attended Mrs. Sami's funeral at Imaka, Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria, on November 25-26, 2022. Imaka is next door to Imagbon, where the Ijebu people gallantly fought the British in 1892. The Ijebu tried to resist the further encroachment of British colonisation but they lost. A few months later, in the same year, the Fon people (a major ethnic group in Benin Republic), fought the French a second time at Adegbon, near Cotonou, thinking they could, halt the incursion by Europeans on to their land, but they also lost in spite of the bravery of a regiment totally made up of women - a special breed known as “Mino” (our mothers) who constituted a third of the Fon fighting forces.

The French and other Europeans acknowledged the gallantry of these women who they dubbed as Amazons borrowing an appellation from Greek mythology. These brave women fighters had shown their strengths in fighting and conquering other ethnic groups in their neighbourhood.

I was shocked when my third-year students scoffed at me when I told them that the Ijebu people gallantly fought the British and could have won but for the maxim gun the British had developed and some Yoruba treachery. Sad that the teaching of history was being wiped out by Nigerian misleaders thereby robbing our children of so much that could build self-confidence to better operate in today's world. If my students did not know about the Magbon war, I wonder how many Africans are aware of the Abomey/Dahomey Mino. I hear Hollywood has shown some interest in the courage of these women. I also read that Lupita N'yongo interviewed the last Amazon many years ago. She has since passed on leaving Lupita and others to tell more on the role of these women in trying to save their portion of Africa from direct control by Europeans.

Of course, since that domination, the Europeans have not given up with respect to keeping Africans in the position of continuously producing for their comfort.

An important portion of Mrs. Sami's funeral, for me, was the sermon or homily delivered by Rt. Reverend Dr. Peter Rotimi Oludipe of the Ijebu Diocese of the Nigerian Anglican Communion. Aside from entreaties to live a worthwhile life etc., he addressed an ongoing problem in Africa. (especially among Yoruba children), with respect to the “*japa*” syndrome (emigration of our best brains) of these days. He pointed out that we invested so much on our children in acquiring Western education as Medical Doctors, Engineers, Financial Gurus etc., only for them to leave our shores in order to meet shortfalls in manpower needs of the West rather than develop our lands.

The Bishop pointed out that every Yoruba parent prays for his/her offspring to achieve more than himself/herself. He wondered how that could happen with the lack of development in Imaka noting that, of necessity, the people of Imaka must accept their children moving on but they

should urge them to look back and make remittances to fix the Church and Vicarage both of which, he argued, needed upliftment.

It is very true that our children can only look for work in the big cities of Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt etc., and these days, in London, Washington, Ottawa, Berlin, Brisbane, Singapore, Johannesburg etc. While we celebrate remittances, we are being recolonised as our best brains leave for the servitude involved in the brain drain that is developing other lands.

For me, it is important that the Bishop in his sermon, left out the responsibility of Nigeria's leadership deficit from local, state, and federal governmental levels for the *japa* syndrome. Good governance and less stealing could have made Imaka to be just about 10-15 minutes of train ride to the heart of Lagos and about 2 hours or so to Abuja and Port Harcourt etc. And with constant electricity, there will be no need to move to the outskirts of Lagos for Imaka sons and daughters who spend 4-6 hours every workday in gruelling or actually "killing people softly", Lagos traffic.

We are not even talking of investments at Imaka or at neighbourhoods like Ijebu-Ode as a result of well-planned infrastructures. While Ijebu people dance annually at Ojude-Oba in their beautiful regalia, the city that had several major industrial ventures as I grew up is now a deindustrialised shadow of its old self. Surprising to note that an Adeola Odutola once thrived as a known international industrialist with his base at Ijebu-Ode.

Nigeria's leadership deficit has made stealing of national patrimony a competitive art in which huge figures of thefts are announced on television. We all know it's impunity galore with the President and his economic crimes agencies either mum or in the pursuit of small thieves. Or else, who has Nigeria prosecuted over Panama, Paradise or Pandora papers as has been the case in less corruption friendly climes like Finland? Why does anyone think the new round of media hype over the Gudaji files will amount to anything?

At the end of the day, 1892, whether in the Magbon war or the Battle of Adegbon is repeating itself. Africa/Nigeria's children are voting with their feet by abandoning their respective African countries in the clutches of our misleaders.

There is a subtle, but greater damage to family systems and relations for many. For many parents at old age, it is a luxury to spend time with their grandchildren. We are having big voids in our lives. The younger ones to take care of us as we grow physically weaker and require hospital runs are no longer available. Business ventures to replace such needs will grow. However, immediate and extended family parties at Christmas and New Year, which are great opportunities for socialization are becoming unnecessary. In place, the older generation are needing to look out for themselves. So, when my long-term friend, Eusebe Hounsokou implored that we spend December 24-28, 2022 with him and his wife, we, without any qualms, eagerly accepted to make the journey to Abomey-Calavi, (sister city to Cotonou), Benin Republic.

The first time I visited Cotonou, it was the capital of what was then known as the Republic of Dahomey. Then came Lt. Col. & later General Mathiue Kerekou's coup of 1972 and his regime's declaration of a "revolution" in 1974. The revolution resulted in the change of the country's name to Benin Republic. The popular beer that I could not partake of given the fact that I was

about 13 years old during my said first visit was known as Sobrado. I could only drink Youki – a carbonated yellow sweet drink. Sobrado, like the country, also had a name change to La Béninoise. But the joke was that the beer, like the country, remained with the same content in spite of the declaration that Benin Republic had gone through fundamental change and under Marxist-Leninist ideology. In French, one says: plus ça change, plus la meme chose. The people succeeded in forcing Kerekou to undertake a Sovereign National Conference in 1990 and he lost the following election to Dr. Nicophore Soglo although he succeeded Soglo again.

During my Christmas 2022 visit to Cotonou, I started wondering if Nigeria had a hand in the 1972 Kerekou coup. Nigeria had just ended its civil war in which its immediate neighbour to the West, Dahomey, under Justin Ahomadégbé-Tomêtin, had made itself readily available for French support to the Biafran side during the Nigerian civil-war. Similar was the situation with Félix Houphouët-Boigny's Cote d'Ivoire which concretised its role by readily providing asylum for Lt. Col. & later General & later Chief Odumegwu Ojukwu.

I could not remember much about border crossings in 1968/69. I was in the company of expatriates, including Tony Finch, my teacher, mentor and school father at Ijebu-Ode Grammar School, Ijebu-Ode. His memoir on that period as he came on sightseeing and shopping in Benin Republic and Togo (as the impact of the Nigerian civil war bit harder), did not contain the publicly demanded bribery of today.

It was bad in 1997 when I returned with my young family with a visiting friend. The Nigerian police stopped us at a few checkpoints and I talked my way through to the Seme-Krake border where I hired an agent to process my car and passengers to drive through. For the return journey, we chose to use the Idiroko border post and the Benin side was difficult with an insensitive official who demanded bribery payment per passport. On the Nigerian side, I easily used my being a lawyer to persuade that I should be allowed to return home without paying personalised toll-fees to security agents. It worked.

However, my lesson for subsequent visits was to avoid direct dealings with Nigerian security officials anywhere near the border. So, I negotiated with a chartered vehicle driver and did not interfere in his dealings. The police and immigration officials demanded and received bribes in our face. The driver decided who he would give 200 naira or just wave his way through at some posts. At one post, he did not want to give. A Sergeant demanded and held his gun firmly as if he would shoot if not paid the bribe. The way he held his gun was scary and made me wonder about all the crocodile tears being shed by the Inspector-General of Police over the extra-judicial killing of my late learned friend, Mrs. Omobolanle Raheem on Christmas day. This incident has become one death too many, more so when we went through #EndSARS and a resident of Ajah, Mr. Gafaru Buraimoh, was killed at the same police station 18 days earlier than the killing of Mrs. Raheem. If the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), had lived up to the expectation of its logo and had raised hell on the December 7, 2022 killing of a hapless Nigerian, we could have avoided the repetition of the killing of Mrs. Bolanle Raheem at the same Ajiwe police station.

Why do we need police on the road to the border at intervals of 50/100/1000 metres at several points? Seems the IGP is condoning extortion and has agreed that his officers can augment poor salaries by extorting citizens.

A new border post had been opened after our 2016 visit. At the border, the driver advised us to wait in the car as he went to stamp our passports. He knew what to pay the syndicate on both sides of the border. I saw nothing and asked no questions. He brought our passports duly stamped as we did not want to have the Sunday Igboho treatment of being pulled off a plane to explain how he had entered the Republic of Benin since he did not have entry stamp. We all know that his was political. Our lawless government actually wanted to repeat the extraordinary rendition it successfully pulled on Nnamdi Kanu, the IPOB leader.

A citizen of Benin Republic took charge of driving us from the border to Jonquets, a central motor park in Cotonou. About a kilometre from the border, we were stopped by customs officials. I asked the driver about the going rate for extortion on the Benin side. He corrected my view claiming the customs were stopping us because of people who would have used non-conventional access points to smuggle products from Nigeria on foot returned to use the main border road.

There were policemen controlling traffic and pulling some cars over. I announced that the police in Benin are just like on the Nigerian side. He had condemned the behaviour of the Nigerian police and told me he was contented with carrying passengers only on the Benin side.

He stated that my observation was wrong and that the police were making all white garment dressed people go off the main expressway to use the side road to reach Oschoffa Beach where the Celestial Church people were gathering to pray from 24<sup>th</sup> into December 25<sup>th</sup>. He reminded me that Oschoffa had started the Celestial Church on that beach and the place (not Imeko), remains the capital of the religious group. He stated that they would return to pray over the new year's eve into January 1<sup>st</sup>.

As we drove towards Jonquets where my friend was to meet us, I observed that motorcyclists carrying passengers called Okada in Nigeria and "Zemidjan" in Benin Republic were operating on a small portion of the road demarcated for their purpose. I remembered that privately owned motorcycles dotted the road in the 1968-69 period unlike in Nigeria. They moved like swarms of bees as there were fewer cars. Motorcycles jostling all over with passengers reflects failure in planning mass transit for people.

As we approached town and after we were picked up by our friend, I could see jerry cans with 450 or 475 or 500 written on them. It was explained to me that those were legal points of sale for petrol smuggled into Benin Republic from Nigeria. In contrast to such prices, it was 650 cfa at petrol filling stations. There were hardly any cars buying at those stations.

Christmas lunch on the following day was great. Tilapia, goat suya and chicken were in abundance. I could not but disobey my dietician who had counselled against taking more than a few grams of protein per meal. Though I am also staying off alcohol, I knew from working at the UN that one is not a good friend to turn down wine with a meal at the residences of Francophone colleagues. So, I disobeyed my doctor again but assured myself that it would be largely water after Christmas and New Year.

We discussed about Dr. Arikana and her cries on the "pact for the continuation of colonisation of African countries" when they were being given flag independence. My friends called it the

“secret pact” and noted that no political leader ever talks about it as they are either beneficiaries of the perennial looting of Africa or are too scared to die since they saw what happened to Sylvanus Olympio in Togo in 1963, Patrice Lumumba, in Congo, Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso etc. However, this problem is not limited to French colonies. We need to look deeper at post-second world war relationships between the countries of the North and those of the South. But academicians like myself are failures to Africa as we continued to teach without learning from late Claude Ake that Social Science is Imperialism.

Sad that we did not come up with any way forward to avoid the active recolonisation of Africa that our misleaders have acquiesced to. Afterall, Dr. Arikana was fired at the African Union for speaking up for Africa and no African government, including her own, raised an eyebrow.

We rested fully on the 26th and celebrated Noella Masirika’s (our hostess) birthday on the 27<sup>th</sup>. In addition, we went on sightseeing all over, especially at the diplomatic enclave facing the beach. The beach in the 1968-69 period was very beautiful. There were palm trees covering the landscape. It was fun being offered coconut drinks those days. This time, however, the slightly reddish sanded beach was barren but with coconut trees being regrown in some portions. The streets were clean and we could see street washing with water taking place in some portions.

The beach also hosts a well-deserved 2022 built statue of a giant Amazon woman in a position as if protecting the presidency opposite her poise with the National Assembly on her left side. Her left side had her gun in a ready pose to shoot from the hips (as opposed to from the shoulders) mimicking how her ancestors shot to conquer others and took slaves and sold to Europeans, which was bad, as well as tried to protect the land from European thieves, which was good. The latter role should be an inspiration to today’s African women in saving Africa from the combination of visionless bad governance and external recolonisation.

My wife and I left Benin Republic as planned on December 28, 2022. If there is life, I hope to provide an account on our departure and immediately thereafter in the not-too-distant future.

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