

En route Nosy Be: Ruminations on Nigeria/Africa

By

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Our short stay in the land of the Amazon women who fought better than many a man was memorable. I had written an earlier piece “Christmas musings in Cotonou and the “japa” syndrome” on our Christmas experience. With Christmas over and our invitation elapsed, we had to move on. Rather than go through the nauseating demands at privatised toll collection points by Nigerians in uniform, by way of the Seme-Krake land border, we chose to leave Benin Republic through the Cadjehoun Cotonou Airport.

The journey to the airport on the morning of December 28, 2022, was smooth until we were stopped by the police along what I chose to call the diplomatic highway that has many embassies, the presidency as well as the statue of the beautiful Amazon woman overlooking the presidency as if in protection of Patrice Talon, the occupant. A senior officer stepped across to the car, told us to slow down and pick an over speeding ticket about 50 metres from where he had intercepted us. I learnt from Eusebe that an earlier policeman had clocked us as driving at 67 km an hour at a 60 Km an hour maximum area. There was no argument. We picked the penal ticket to pay 10,000 cfa. There was no reason for the driver to speed because I had built 3 hours into our departure in a small airport. No recriminations on the driver.

At the airport, Eusebe willingly and rightly accepted that he could not enter the departure lounge with us. Our son-in-law had invited us to spend the New Year in Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar.

It was a pleasant flight to Addis Ababa to spend the night in order to continue to Antananarivo on December 29th. To make our life easier, stayed at the Skylight hotel within the airport. This is a new addition. We did not have to go through immigration.

Addis Ababa Bole Airport is maintaining its lead as a major hub in Africa. With an Airline that is second to none in Africa and one of the best 20 In the world, Ethiopia is indeed living up to the tag of being the diplomatic capital of Africa, after all, it hosts the Chinese donated African Union imposing building.

It was nice to see a row of huge Boeing and Airbus planes parked at the hangars as well as on the expansive tarmac. I no longer remember when I first passed through Addis Ababa. My guess is that it was in 1981 on my way to Egypt enroute Pakistan to undertake my doctoral field research. It was a much smaller tarmac and airport hosting a few aircrafts. Subsequently, there was an expansion before the current huge expansion that links the previously phased developments. Ethiopia is one of the least liberal countries in Africa. A foreigner, (except there is a change since I left that neighbourhood), cannot own real Estate except through an Ethiopian spouse. The only exception being Americans whose government had threatened that Ethiopians would be denied all they owned in the US! So, Ethiopian Airlines uses up most of the huge space. And they have done well with 144 aircrafts, including many huge dream liners and 31 on order. In comparison, when General Olusegun Obasanjo signed off in 1979, Nigeria Airways had 22 Aircrafts and Murtala Mohammed International Airport had just opened with two wings operational: D & E. A.B.&C., wings were to be subsequently built in a phased approach.

Please do not ask me why those projected additional wings of Murtala Muhammed International Airport are not built till today. However, I read that the aircrafts that belonged to Nigeria Airways had reduced to 2 when the General returned as Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, President of Nigeria, in 1999. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) in 1987 had suspended Nigeria Airways from the international clearing house under the watch of General Ibrahim Babangida. There had been a number of safety issues and loss of lives too. Nigeria Airways, with an ironic “elephant on flight” as its logo finally got grounded and folded up in 2003. A friend who retired as a Captain at Nigeria Airways once told me that the curse of Reverend Ogunbiyi will continue to haunt all enterprises associated with the land he was robbed of to build the airport and Nigeria Airways headquarters. I took this as a beer parlour joke even though the story he told was over beer but at his palatial mansion. Ministers continue to take their shares of whatever was left of the ruins of Nigeria Airways. Of course, the Ministers continued different avenues to rake in money. Contracts were awarded at inflated prices not to build the A, B, and C Wings but to design small buildings as air terminals and they gave themselves concessions over trolleys and even internet provision that never works. Well, the story is not over, we are now asking Ethiopian Airlines to be the strategic partner on a new Nigeria Airways as another money-spinning venture for private pockets. For now, the consummated deal is stuck in court.

It is painful because I was once proud to fly Nigeria Airways as every Ethiopian must be when they listen to their language being at the fore-front of announcements on the state-owned airline. For instance, I once used the airline every weekend to go to Maiduguri to teach Political Economy at the University on a special request of support from my principal base, the University of Lagos. Professor Alaba Ogunsanwo had insisted that I was best placed to undertake the task. Those were the days when it was still a bit noble to be an academic.

I had also flown Nigeria Airways as I undertook my first air travel to Accra to represent the University of Lagos Student’s Union at the West African student’s Athletic Competition. I was never an athlete but the ULSU Executive decided I should represent the Union in my capacity as the Public Relations Secretary during the 1974/75 session.

My second international travel on Nigeria Airways was to the United Kingdom in 1975, as a student on summer vacation. It was no vacation but really a vacation job, to save money and acquire experience. Jason Iroapali, my friend, had pushed me to invest my Western Nigeria Bursary award on this venture. He argued that I would make more money. I did. Those were days when Nigeria counted in the world. We had a powerful currency and could visit many countries without visa ostensibly as “Citizens of the Commonwealth”.

Going to the UK was also an opportunity to reconnect with Tony Finch, my school father and former teacher at Ijebu-Ode Grammar school, who was visiting home from Saudi Arabia where he was teaching. The only relaxing time I had was to ride on a motor-bike with him to Ashurst (name of his family house), Hailsham, Sussex to visit his astronomer father who worked at Greenwich Observatory, his mother and sister. I remember that I was sweeping at the Chelsea Cloisters on July 29, 1975 when it was announced that General Yakubu Gowon had been overthrown a pleasing development as I was in discussions with famous but crafty Godwin Daboh who made fame by attacking Joseph Tarka, (a Gowon’s Minister), for being corrupt. As student leaders, we were willing to oblige on working with him towards General Gowon being overthrown as his regime (as opposed to his person), had become corrupt. But Daboh was arrested for duping a lady socialite before we could consummate our plan. Today, General Gowon should be saluted for leading a saintly military administration.

I also made a return flight on Nigeria Airways in late 1991 to New York. Major General Ike Nwachukwu, as Foreign Minister, had in October 1991, appointed me as Special Assistant to General Olusegun Obasanjo on his race to become the Secretary-General of the United Nations. My journey to New York was on a direct flight with our DC-10 aircraft. I had a first-class ticket that allowed a comforting sleep. I remember clearly that there were only two of us in that cabin. The other passenger – an Indian businessman in the textile Industry was very friendly. Before we landed, he told me how he made so much money in Nigeria. His clan told him never to argue with Nigerian Customs Officials who he deemed most corrupt. He was to pay whatever they demanded, move his goods and pass the burden of the “bakshish”, Indian word for bribe a.k.a “tua kitu kidogo” in Kenya to the end user. Little wonder Nigeria’s textile industry and consumption of cotton went comatose. And we wonder why 750 Nigerian Naira are needed to exchange for one dollar. Corruption literally decimated the value of the naira, hence our individual lives.

Nigeria Airways was on its death bed. Unfortunately, the International Monetary Fund came in with their Nigerian trained Economists to teach us that our problem is having state enterprises. We rallied against the enslavement plan to perpetuate neo-colonialism. The question that continues to occupy my mind is simple. Why has Ethiopian Airlines thrived and Nigeria has been a grave-yard of private airlines? All those private airlines served as money-laundering ventures for thefts from national patrimony. There have been too many to count. Money-laundering plays a major role even in current private airlines. But who really cares when it is a nation of impunity for corruption?

As we enjoyed the ease of having a place to sleep at the Addis Ababa airport, without going through immigration and security checks, I could not but wonder why Nigeria, the Lilliputian “Giant of Africa”, with so much in human and material resources could not serve as an airline hub in Africa, nay, even West Africa. Togo is fast emerging as the hub for West Africa. I like the Naija expression: “who did this to us?”

Boarding Ethiopian Airlines was about 20 minutes, walk within crowds in constant motion. On board, I had a row of three seats to myself at the exit. An older looking lady was advised to leave an exit seat that cost more than others given the leg room. She was not strong enough for the task. My wife also had a row to herself. People used to be begged to take such seats, but it is no longer so. You pay more for them. A Chinese guy jumped to seat by me. The supervising Air Hostess spoke to him about whether he would accept the responsibility of opening the door in case of an emergency. He responded in Chinese. The Air Hostess insisted he must return to his previous seat. She was correctly stern and refused to be persuaded by her colleague who wanted the Chinese left on the seat. I felt proud of her professionalism.

As a kid learning about Africa, I used to like Malagasy names. The capital, Antananarivo, sounds like a sweet sentence to pronounce. I was very much looking forward to landing smoothly in Antananarivo to make an overnight transit to Nosy Be.

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