

# Lekki Headmaster Chapter 9

## Laughing Waterfalls

STARDOM Schools had been on an excursion to Badagry before. In the past 10 school organised a retreat for teachers, lodging them at the Whispering Palms Resort. On the part of the students, they visited renowned and iconic sites in the historical town. JSS 1 students also went on an excursion as part of their Welcome to Stardom package, visiting the city of white sand and coconuts.

While teachers, some staff and parents might have complaints about the school management, they could not deny it well deserved credit for giving students great exposure and making learning fun. Apart from never lagging behind in the celebration of special days-Children's Day, Mother's Day and Teachers' Day-it organised parties, concerts and lectures that featured experts from different fields.

Some of these programmes even took the pupils out of Lagos.

During his two decades plus with the school, Bepo successfully sold to the management the idea of an excursion per term, to a place of attraction within the country, and an annual international excursion. There were few occasions when the management could not keep to the yearly schedule. Nevertheless, it kept the idea running over 70 per cent of the time. Bepo wanted the students to have a thorough grasp of their country. He was aware many of them came from elite families that would eventually send them abroad after secondary education. He believed the knowledge the learners gained about the country while in foundation schools would enhance their intimacy with the fatherland in the future, because many would never come back.

Based on this philosophy, students of the school visited quintessential places like the Ikogosi Warm Springs in Ekiti State, Erin Ijesha Waterfalls in Osun State and the Owu Waterfalls in Kwara which is the highest in West Africa, measuring 120 meters above water level and cascading 330 feet down an escarpment. The students also went to the Gurara Falls in Niger State.

A symbol of Nigeria's rich tourist attractions, the waterfalls exude a gripping natural ambience and wondrous allure. And while they boast ever gurgling waters splashing against joyous ribs of lucky rocks, some of them radiate very interesting stories. For instance, the Ikogosi was, in 1852, discovered by Rev. JohnS. McGee, from his mission base in nearby Igede-Ekiti. He had defied warning by the natives that visiting the springs could be fatal, invoking the wrath of supernatural forces. McGee, however, conquered the myth and wrote.

After seeing it I felt it could be used for a good purpose. I discussed the possible use of it with some of the mission and (Nigerian Baptist) Convention friends. With the growing interest of Royal Ambassador work, and youth work we felt that it could best be used by building a Youth Camp. I took it up with the Ekiti Association and we decided to build a camp for our R.A.s and G.A.s. The land we secured through the Convention."

The state government eventually took over the site and developed it for tourism purposes.

The Gurara was said to have been discovered by a Gwari hunter, called Buba, in

1745; almost two centuries before some Europeans chanced upon it in 1925. The Erin-Jesha Waterfalls—also known as Olumirin—was discovered in 1140 AD by one of the daughters of Oduduwa, forebear of the Yoruba. One source, however, notes that hunters discovered it in 1140 AD. Another, yet, says the site was discovered by a woman called Akinla, the founder of Erin-ljesha town and a granddaughter of Oduduwa, during the migration of Ife people to Erin-ljesha.

To show that Stardom meant business, it listed other waterfalls it planned to visit as the years rolled by. These included the Kwa Falls in Anegeje, Calabar; Assop in Plateau; Karu in Nasarawa; and Barup in Gembu, Taraba State. Also, on Bepo's personally researched list were the Awhum Waterfalls in Enugu, Owerre Ezukuka in Anambra, and Agbokim in Cross River State. Others on the to-visit list were the Farin Ruwa Waterfalls in Nasarawa State and the Matsirga in Kafanchan, Kaduna State. Bepo recalled sadly that the students, when they visited Ikogosi Warm Springs, did not have enough time to see the Arinta Waterfalls nearby. He hoped that even after he might have left Stardom, the school would, one day, be on the road to Arinta, a waterfall surrounded by mini rocks, uniquely flaunting seven distinct steps.

Stardom had also been to the Yankari Games Reserve in Bauchi, the National War Museum in Umuahia, Abia State; the Hanging Lake in Ado Awaye, Oyo State; the amazing Kano Palace in Kano State and multi-layered and culture-imbued Ooni of Ife Palace in Ile-Ife. Bepo recalled that the students also explored the site of the tall Oranmiyan Staff (by which Oduduwa, the forebear of the Yoruba, was said to have descended from heaven) as well as the elegant ambience of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, where Mrs. Ibidun Gloss graduated with a Law degree.

At national festivals too, Stardom sometimes stood to be counted. Its students had been part of the Calabar Carnival, Osun Osogbo Festival, Argungu Festival in Kebbi, and the Ofala Festival in Onitsha. Bepo believed *ile la tii kesco rode-a* Yoruly proverb meaning charity begins at home. Thus, Stardom students and graduands should have Lagos tourism etched on their memory. It was why the pupils regularly visited the National Theatre, Iganmu, Surulere; the National Museum, the MUSON Centre and City Mall—all in Onikan. They had been to the Epe Fish Market, Ijede Warm Spring in the Ikorodu area as well as the Sungbo Eredo in Epe- Ijebu, described as a system of defensive ditches built in 80X-1000 AD, in honour of the let matriarch, Bilikisu Sungbo,

Other places they toured in Lagos included the University of Lagos, Akoka; the Lagos State University, Ojo; Lagos State Broadcasting Station, Agidingbi; the NTA station on Victoria

Island and African Independent Television station in Alaghadho They had also been to the headquarters of several big companies such as Chevron, Lekki; Shell, at Broadstreet; UBA, First Bank and ConOil Towers in Marina; Globacom on Victoria Island, MTN in Ikoyi and 9Mobile on Banana Island. To show the students that life is a potpourri of opposites, the students visited high-class environments like Banana Island, Snake Island and Magodo; and largely derided zones like Mushin, Ajegunle and Ijora. They also visited the SOS Village in Isolo and other charity homes

"Being born in a place like this does not condemn one to a life of penury," Bepo told the students the day they visited Ajegunle. "If you are determined, committed to education, make the best use of your talent, time will move you from slum to limelight. You will be surprised to learn that many of those you see on Banana Island started off in slums somewhere in the country. Life is about movement; it is ever ready to move upward folks who make the best use of their talents, money and opportunities.

He reminded them that music and soccer stars such as Odion Ighalo and Victor Osimhen grew up in the low ends of Lagos.

Under Bepo's supervision and insatiable appetite for education-by-adventure, Stardom had been to the Iju Waterworks in Adiyin, the Yaba Psychiatric Hospital, where the students were addressed on the evils of hard drugs; the OYASAF Foundation House in Maryland, which has over 7,000 artworks collected privately by Prince Yemisi Adedoyin; and Lagos Blue Rail mega station in CMS. But in the spirit of World Slavery Day, they were back in Badagry, where the excursion, led personally by Bepo, would have implication for his proposed relocation.

Badagry is a significant town in Lagos State and in Nigeria because of its pioneering contact with Atlantic slave traders. It is home to monuments such as the First Storey Building in the country, built by Henry Townsend in 1846 and where Ajayi Crowther stayed and made the first translation of the Yoruba Bible. Badagry is the base of the Agiya Tree under which Christianity was first preached in Nigeria, the Mobee Royal Family Slave Relics Museum, which houses chains, padlocks, rods etc., used on the slaves kept there, enroute to the Point of No Return; and the Seriki Abass Slave Museum, originally built by an ex-slave-turned slave trader.

During the last excursion, the first port of call for the Stardom team, which comprised 40 students from SSS 1 to SSS 3, was the palace of the Akran of Badagry.

The king hosted the pupils and served them some refreshment. The monarch explained to the students how Badagry was founded in the late 1720s by Popo refugees from wars with the Fon people of Dahomey. Its contact with white explorers and slave dealers made the town a harbour from which slaves were exported to the Americas.

But the story of our industry is far bigger than that of the unfortunate slave" the king had said. "We are strategically big in business, in agriculture and tourism. As far back as 1820s, a British trading post was established here. We actually developed as a palm-oil port, just as we were big in the importation of clothes. While the return of freed slaves in the 1830s also enriched our history, culture and business, coconut plantations had been established here by the 1880s."

There was a comic interlude when one of the students asked Kabiyesi if it was true that the name, 'Badagry, was derived from Aghadargi. The monarch affirmed the story.

Then the trip continued with a visit to the First Storey Building, where the students spotted the first copy of the translated Bible. They moved to the first primary school in Nigeria -the Anglican Nursery and Primary School, formerly Nursery of Infant Church, located in the Tapo area of Badagry. It was established in 1843. They were also at the Point of No Return, where natives captured as slaves were thrown into ships that took them to Western countries. These slaves were, thereafter, resold abroad and taken to the farms of white masters.

At the Black Heritage Museum, Bepo was emotionally moved by the memory of the ugly experiences the enslaved went through. This was after he had seen relics and listened to a narration by the museum officer. He felt Africans had always been targets of barbarity and embarrassment. That was what happened during the transAtlantic Slave Trade between 1500 and 1900.

But the principal had more questions. How, for instance, would anyone explain what had become the vogue? That is: Africans themselves, especially Nigerians, in Japa fit, voluntarily and desperately walking into the workforce of who seemed to be the yester masters. The new slavery, as he saw it, was what many were now dying to be part of. They were having sleepless nights, praying and fasting to get visas. They were selling all they had to pay fare. They are abandoning families, schools, work, businesses and professions they built over the years, just to escape the harsh environment at home and collect high-valued dollars, pounds and euros abroad. In the process, many took up all the oddest jobs and became the ever-weeping race, accursedly rushing into enslavement after centuries of the Trans-Atlantic. The sentiment and resentment swelled through Bepo as he pictured himself also on the streets of Europe.