

# Lekki Headmaster Chapter 10

## Passport Pains

BECAUSE Bepo had not been keen on relocating abroad, he did not bother to renew his passport duly. The document expired two years earlier. Initially, he weighed the possibility of calling a contact at the immigration office in Lagos, Ikoyi. He wanted to put the staff on notice. But he did not do so in time. Then COVID-19 set in. This made renewal impossible. Even after the pandemic had lost its war against humanity, Bepo was not one of the first persons at the passport office. At a point, he developed a phobia for the renewal, having heard tales of new rules, hassles applicants were experiencing, and non-availability of booklets.

By the first quarter of 2022, when Bepo realised he could no longer resist pressure to travel from his family, getting the passport renewed had become an emergency somewhat. Besides the anticipated stress at the immigration office, the Japa syndrome had greatly swelled the number of heads turning up. The maddening rush at every passport office, especially in Lagos, scared Bepo. Since he could not afford to waste time or sleep on the veranda of some pot-bellied passport official, out of desperation for a renewal, he had to explore other options.

One of such was to prepare an amount larger than the normal fees, collude with an agent, or find an officer that could be bribed. He was told he would need up to N200,000 or N250,000 to have the passport renewed within a month or less. He could even have it in fewer days if he was ready to drop more cash. Another alternative was to travel to the Immigration Service in any of the neighbouring states, such as Ogun, Oyo, Osun and Kwara. In these places, there would be less crowds than in Ikoyi or Ikeja.

Bepo eventually settled for Ibadan, the Oyo State capital, where he found the contact of an agent that could hasten the process. The government as well as the immigration leadership had repeatedly announced that the process could be done online or manually without bribing anyone. The use of middlemen had been outlawed, with a threat that anyone found interfering illegally would be prosecuted.

But, as the agent in Ibadan told Bepo, the law existed only on paper. Making an attempt online could be very slow or erratic: many people abandoned it halfway and returned to the passport office. Some even suspected that the glitch was caused deliberately to frustrate folks who would have no other option than pursue their applications in-person. As Bepo found out, the so-called agents were actually working hand in glove with officials of the Immigration Service

Bepo spoke, firstly, with the agent on the phone. The man, called Tai, asked him to pay N100,000 for a 10-year renewal (64 pages) instead of the official N70,000. The pushed-up charge was a capricious action the two major initial processes that included data capturing. "After capturing, you could pay N20,000 to make the collection faster," Tai had explained.

On a Tuesday afternoon, Bepo set out for Ibadan, hoping to keep an early Wednesday appointment at the immigration office. He planned to spend the night in the ancient city and be at the Agodi-Gate passport office as early as 7:00am - the time fixed by Tai. He decided he would not go in his car: it had been long since he travelled on the Lagos-Ibadan route. Besides, he was worried about security issues.

At the Ibadan end of the road, there had, around the time, been few cases of kidnapping, fuelling the fear that bandits had relocated to the area. The country was just beginning to have some respite, security-wise, following renewed assault by the military on insurgents and bandits in the North. The numerical strength of the criminals was getting depleted. They appeared to be seeking less risky grounds, raising concerns that they were finding a new footing in the South-West. Bepo felt he had better travel by a public bus. He knew that no vehicle type was immune to onslaught by the scoundrels, but he was satisfied the commercial drivers understood the area better.

He boarded a six-passenger Toyota Sienna car at the Ojota park. Unlike days when people faced heavy traffic on the popular road, the trip was entirely stress-free.

This was, especially, the case between the infamous Ojota and Berger-Kara stretch, up to OPIC, where the road led to Isheri Estate-the headquarters of Channels Television.

The biggest surprise that awaited Bepo was that barely 50 minutes after, he and the other passengers would be touching down in Ibadan, thanks to the nearly completed reconstruction the Federal Government was carrying out on the road. The last time Bepo was on the route was 10 years earlier, when he led Stardom students on an excursion to Ile-Ife, Osun State. At the time, the expressway was terribly damaged: the journey, which now lasted less than an hour, had dragged on for over two hours. The road was now wider on both sides - at least, three lanes each.

The bus left EPIC ESTATE at 5:00pm. As a result, Bepo could still, observe developments on the expressway, described as the most important in the country. He wondered whether pundits arbitrarily arrived at the ranking. What yard-stick did they use? Bepo chuckled at the thought of the question it was the main road that led to Lagos, the country's commercial nerve center and biggest melting pot. Some had also claimed that up to 250,000 vehicles plied it daily. Bepo believed the figure would very likely have increased. Perhaps, the number of vehicles plying the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway was growing in tandem with the country's petrol subsidy. Bepo smiled at his mischievous thought.

The subsidy scheme was designed to make petrol affordable for citizens. But with every passing year, the ever-growing billions of naira it gulped left citizens thinking the more they looked the less they saw. Were the statistics enough to conclude that the Lagos- Ibadan Expressway was more important than, say, the road that led to Bayelsa, from where the country derived its largest volume of oil? Bepo reminded himself he ought to calm down as his mind was beginning to wander needlessly into politics.

Apart from filling stations, which had increased in number, he found that religious organisations and schools had also taken up a larger share of space on either side of the road. In the past, it was

the likes of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministry (MFM) that were most noticeable along the expressway. But things had changed. While MFM is the first big one you see on the left, at Magboro, as you come from Berger, you would notice the Christian Pentecostal Mission on the right, after Ibafo. Shortly, by Aseese, you would get to the Christ Embassy ground, also on the right. About a minute's drive after, by the left, was the headquarters of NASFAT, the first major Islamic organisation on the route. Adjacent to NASFAT (Nasrul-lahi-il Fathi Society of Nigeria) was the Deeper Life Bible Church, with the Redeemed Christian Church of God's expansive Redemption Camp nestling about a kilometre away. The religious organisations had all along been there before the construction of the road. Now, Bepo thought, the grandeur of the new-look Expressway was making them even more noticeable.

While the conventional Christian and Islamic faiths stood to be counted, there was the Guru Maharaj base, shortly before the Ibadan Toll Gate, whose arrival in the area even preceded those of many of the aforementioned. He pondered the multiplicity of religious organisations on the road and its attendant irony. Nigeria, arguably, has many religionists but few godly people. Bepo restrained himself at the thought. Was he not becoming judgmental? Were there not truly many good Christians, Muslims, and traditionalists? Was he, Bepo, a saint after all? He smiled.

He was consoled by the fact that more business organisations were also springing up along the route. This was the reason many observers believed Omo and Ogun State governments needed to take the axis more seriously because it promised a huge industrial base. Ogun particularly was benefiting more in terms of the number of companies rising here and there on the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway. These included Mikano, a multi-faceted industry on the Long Bridge; Multi-Trex at Wawa, which was distressed due to debt issues; Punch Nigeria Limited and Lifemate Furniture in Magboro. He saw the signboards of McPherson and Babcock universities. No wonder, he thought, Ogun prided itself as possibly hosting the highest number of universities in the country.

Bepo observed that at the Ibadan end in Oyo State, some new business outfits were being developed, although their owners were yet to erect signboards. He noticed private universities springing up, including Dominion and the Oyo State Government-founded First Technical University, both at the Ibadan end. He also witnessed some changes in Ibadan township too. At Challenge, for instance, he discovered that a defining roundabout was no more there. The area had been redesigned to ease traffic congestion. He loved the sight of the brown roofs his eyes caught as soon as the Sienna descended the Molete overhead bridge. The sight became even more phenomenal as the vehicle reached the top of the hilly bridge after Bere. The scene reminded him of the legendary poet, J.P. Clark, and how he described the city in a poem titled, 'Tbadan. Bepo struggled to recall some of the lines. Then he asked Google, which answered him:

Ibadan, running splash of rust and gold-flung and scattered among seven hills like broken china in the sun.

Such an evergreen and intense piece of art! He, however, felt worried that decades after Clark wrote the piece, the roofs he alluded to remained obstinately brown. The buildings, mostly constructed with mud, could be seen at the Idi Arere area, Oja Oba, Bere, and the Aremo zone, and many interior locations. While searching on Google for Clark's poem, his eyes had also

caught the title of a novel — Under the Brown Kusted Roofs, by Abimbola Adelokun. Bepo hoped to read it later.

He remembered the innocent disgust some of his students expressed when they visited the University of Ibadan. They had followed the Challenge route instead of Iwo Road, which (the latter) was more direct from Toll Gate. Bepo had made the Stardom bus pass through the belly of the city, so that they could appreciate its ancient essence:

They returned to Lagos via the Agbowo-Iwo Road. As they passed the interior of the city, on their way to the university, one of the students had asked if Ibadan was a big Village Bepo answered that it was not. He explained that there were many elitists area, that include Ring Road, Oluyole, Bodija and Akala. He also enlightened them on the political and pioneering status of Ibadan- host to the first university in Nigers, the first stadium, and the first television station, among others.

By 6:40am the following day, he was already at the passport office in Agodi. That was the Ibadan miracle of commuting: never to be likened to Lagos. Because Lagosians always travelled with the fear of traffic palaver that is often their lot, Bepo left his hotel room at 6:25am, fearing he would not be able to keep the 7am appointment Tai gave him. He woke up late-6:05am, having barely slept until around 3:00am. His wife had called and engaged him in a lengthy phone conversation; and, hard as he tried, he could not have her shorten the talk time. At the immigration office, Bepo tried to enter the premises before phoning Tai.

But security officials stopped him at the gate, asking what his mission was. Bepo explained that he had come to resolve passport matters and needed to see someone first. The officers suggested he put a call across to the concerned. But rather than ask Bepo to walk in, Tai directed him to an open space opposite the office, which harboured several business centres. As it turned out, Tai was no immigration personnel and was not domiciled on the premises either. He was just an ordinary business centre operator, working in cahoots with some immigration staff. While some would call the guy a consultant, others might brand him a racketeer.

Bepo made payment to Tai, who retrieved and filled in details of the old passport. He also verified Bepo's National Identity Number (NIN), so that there would not be any issues during data capturing. The result of the check did not give an all clear to the principal: he would still have to visit the NIN office to validate his number. Bepo collected necessary data from Tai and went to meet the official Tai worked with. After exchanging pleasantries, the official took the documents in for validation. Fifteen minutes later, he returned with the old passport and asked Bepo to return for data capturing in three weeks. The applicant was happy the exercise did not last up to two hours.

"Is that all for today?" Bepo asked the personnel.

"Yes," the officer replied, confidently. "That is what you paid the extra amount for. If you had followed the normal channel, you would still be there with them," he added, pointing to a large crowd of people seated or standing inside a hall at the entrance of the premises.

"Thank you," Bepo said, handing the officer an extra N2,000 tip.

The man received it gratefully, gave Bepo a business card, and asked him to turn up early for the data capturing on the given date. He further reminded him to visit the NIN office first.

But Bepo had a nasty experience at the NIN office. This was despite the fact that he wanted to, as the saying goes, be nice to anyone that was prepared to help him: just as it happened at the Immigration Service. But network glitches were terrible. He had to wait three more weeks for validation; by which time, he already risked missing his travel date.

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