

Lekki Headmaster Chapter 11

Point of No Return

A 3D banner stretched colourfully across the length and breadth of the wall that overlooked the stage at the main hall of Stardom Schools. The school's purple and black colours enlivened the background. A large image of Bep, laughing, gracefully, was on the banner, headlined, FOR HE GAVE STARDOM HIS VERY BEST I was subtitled, Memorable Farewell for a Most Committed Principal Adetep, Adewale Not until the day, many members of Stardom's community never knew that Bepo had, actually, been the shortened form of Adebepo

Confusion and debate concerning his future were over. He and the school had come to terms with the reality that he would depart. The only sacrifice Bepo had to was to alter his departure date. This would give the management an opportunity to offer him a befitting farewell. He called Emirates airline to inform them he would shift his flight by a week. For this, he was asked to pay a \$100 fine which the school gladly paid

The farewell programme began on a Wednesday with a novelty match between the school team and the staff. The event featured a lot of hilarious fraud, as the games master, Mr Ibe, who was also the referee, ensured the staff win 12. Every time the student came close to scoring, he would blow the whistle, citing a mysterious foul play. Even the staff's second goal came via a penalty that weirdly had to be taken five times until the hit player managed to beat stardom's goalkeeper, Chido (Chat) So good was the young, goal stopper, he had been invited to the country's Under 17 team But in this abracadabra match, no one could really stop Me Me's most interesting, After the staff had netted the third goal eight minutes to the end the games master blew the final whistle, swearing, the time was up. He had sensed danger that the side could equalise and was not ready to take chance. But it was all fun as its players capped the game with singing and dancing around Bepo

On Thursday, a debate was held in his honour. The arena was the arts have contributed more to development of the country than the sciences Representatives of 'S' opposed the assertion, while their 999 2 counterparts proposed in its opponent, predictably, sought to win the audience over by espousing the values of science in health, energy, technology etc. The proponents, on the other hand Inspiringly, shook the table by highlighting the fact that Nigeria's arts, culture, and entertainment sector had blessed the country with more appreciable impacts than

cted the fact that Nigeria had not won the Nobel Prize in Science whereas Mosteror Wole Sayinka earned the Nobel Prize for Literature as far back as 1986 "even long before our opponents were born"

The audience roared excitedly, following the ingeniously delivered long, before our-opponents-were-born. It was an upper cut. Bepo was glad that Maryam, the lead debater for the in detains. Handed the jab, which underlined the important modest humour in debating. He always stressed this as one of the techniques to be deployed at speaking competitions, The arts advocates also noted the role Nollywood had played in Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product, diplomacy, and recreation. They even argued that music was, at the time, the nation's biggest export.

At the end, SSS 3 was adjudged the winner. Nevertheless, Bepo felt fulfilled at the brilliance, initiative and candour displayed by the students. He saw this as the fruit of a seed he had sown. He always believed the Yoruba proverb: B'Onirese ofingha mo, eyi to ti fin sile ko le p'arun. That is: even if Onirese, the master carver, eventually bows out of the trade, the carvings he has bequeathed to the world will live on.

From 1:00pm to 3:00pm, every Friday, Stardom had socio-cultural activities.

That was why the school easily and predictably dedicated the programme to the grand finale of the Bepo send-off. The choral group opened the floor with an inspirational performance. It was followed by comedy skits by the drama club, which

'principally' imitated Bepo. Humorously, the comedians aped the way he often spoke on the assembly ground, with his trademark 'other things being equal..., "by the way...' and if you say education is too expensive try... He always allowed the students to complete the popular saying, by chanting "...try ignorance!" Of course, they also did not forget the 'principl' pronunciation.

Bepo might just have realised for the first time that he actually loved putting his left hand in his left pocket while speaking. Most revealing, perhaps, he discovered he could get naughty while reprimanding any teacher who failed to be punctual in class.

An imaginary encounter the skit makers staged also indicated he was not immune to hot temper, especially when a teacher became lackadaisical.

The last main offering of the day was a string of dances by the drama club. These included the Bata, Atilogwu, Koroso and Canoe dances. The Yoruba Bata involved mathematical movements of the arms, shoulders and legs, fired by the Bata drum.

(Because the instrument was not available, the students improvised with the djembe.) The Igbo Atilogwu dancers dazzled the crowd with spirited body movements and acrobatics. Koroso, one of the popular Hausa dances, featured the performers wearing identical outfits and moving their bodies simultaneously. Bepo was delighted at the richness of Nigerian arts and culture. He worried that he could miss these in faraway UK.

Then the last dance came. It was the Canoe dance of the Badagry people, which showcases the performers as travellers in a canoe, floating on a river. Bepo recalled how, three years earlier, he had invited a professional dancer from the National Troupe to teach the students the unique movements. That was after an October show he led them to see at the National Theatre in Lagos. There, the Troupe performed the dance, alongside other varieties from parts of the country. Even as he was leaving, Bepo was happy the dance had come to stay at Stardom Schools

Is became more emotional when the dance transported him to Ibadagry, where he vividly pictured slaves and their agonies. Towards the end of the performance, he saw himself back at the Heritage Slavery Museum, watching a documentary on the inhumane treatment slave-masters meted out to the captives. As whips fore the flesh of the naked slaves, and blood oozed from their skins, Bepo felt their pains. Greatly distressed, he wondered why nobody stepped in to stop the cruel handlers. A flame of anger began to course through his body. As one of the men drew a sword and made to strike a feeble old slave, Bepo stood to his feet and cried out: "Nooooo!" Silence dropped on the entire audience. The performance stopped abruptly. All eyes turned towards the principal. Then, Bepo came to himself. He had been thinking deeply, very deeply, and had slipped into a dreamy state. The auditorium looked in amazement, wondering what had suddenly come upon the principal. It was Bepo's turn to improvise-and quickly too. He surveyed the many baffled eyes, and then smiled: "I meant no school could have done the Canoe dance better. None! None at all!" he said, as the audience applauded. The drummers revived. The dancers picked up their imaginary oars and paddled on, in sync with the pulsation of the djembe.

In her remarks, Mrs. Ibidun Gloss expressed deep appreciation to Bepo for contributing what she called an "unrivalled quota" to the growth of Stardom.

According to her, Bepo was so impactful: if she had her way, she would not let him leave.

"But we know that, in life, we meet to part and part to meet. We can only wish Mr Bepo success in his new place, his new country." She stopped and turned in his direction. "Mr Adewale Adebepo, would you kindly step forward," she asked.

As the principal rose from his chair, the entire hall—parents, staff, students, guests, ALL—stood on their feet in ovation. Mr Bepo raised both arms high and waved at them in appreciation. He felt humbled. He walked steadily to the podium and stood at an arm's length from the MD, who had also joined in the applause.

"Thank you very much..thank you...thank you.." the MD said, as the cheers and whistling quietened gradually. Then she continued: "Perhaps, I need to state this. I am not the one who employed Mr Bepo. My late father, Chief David Aje, did. He was the one Bepo met 24 years ago, when he first came to this school. Unlike many others who faced our interview panels, Bepo only had an encounter with Dad—that first day. He had submitted his application letter to my father. They had a chat after Dad had looked through his Curriculum Vitae and certificates.

"Dad became stuck with him. It was a day in early September of the year. The arrangement they had was that he would resume on September 14, as the school returned from its long, end-of-session vacation. There was a vacancy for English. So, we expected that Bepo would resume the first day of the session. But he never did, neither the day after nor the third day -till the end of the week. We were worried and suggested inviting others who had applied or had been interviewed. Although Dad was quite concerned that Bepo's assigned class SSS 1-3 would miss out on precious study hours, he insisted we wait a little longer. Now that was quite unlike Dad, who would take no nonsense from any member of the staff let alone leave any class unmanned. But there stood father making a case for a bloody absentee employee.

There is an essential teacher in the guy; Dad kept telling us. To cut a long, sery shot, Bepo arrived aid that he behind schedule. Dad registered his displeas at nurse. But he was glad that hepo turned up Now, I must stres, Bep has, fren day one, justified the confidence and faith my dad reposed in him. He has never betrayed that impression of an all-round great teacher, which he gave Dad Teaching flourishes on the pillars of competence, outspokenness, passion, empathy, and morality. Bepo is an embodiment of all of these and other qualities

that a teacher may require to build great students. When he joined us, Stardom was still struggling to establish a name, prove itself and break even. He, over the years, contributed his shining quota towards the realisation of the dream. The golden dream! The Stardom dreams! Together, we have taken this school to the mountaintop Teachers have come, teachers have gone; principals have come, principals have gone, but Bepo's input is unique in the history of our school. He has a genuine passion for students. He connects well with parents. He understands and does everything to promote the vision of the school. He has, indeed, been a blessing to our business, and that is why I urge every other member of staff to emulate him.

"Mr. Bepo, it is a pity Stardom and, indeed, Nigeria is losing you to Britain. We hope you will still find a way to always reach out to your darling students. As you and I discussed during our meeting on Tuesday, please, find a way to get your school in London to collaborate with us. We will cherish it, and value the bond and mutual gains.

"At this point (she turned to the principal), I like to present to you this little token from Stardom. We will not gift you a car or some electronic gadget because you are no longer in Nigeria to use such. Where you are going is the heaven and haven of good things... hoping this will not propel some other people to want to run away," the MD added purposely, prompting laughter.

"Here is an envelope for you...

Mr. Bepo moved closer to receive it. As he did, she held out her right hand and clasped his in a solid shake. The duo froze for the historic moment as the school's photographer went click! Click! Click! Click! Click! Click! Click! Dozens of smartphone cameras joined the race to capture the hour, the minute, and the second when it became clearly clear that Mr Adewale Adebepo would be seen no longer on the premises.

"The gift is from the management," Mrs Gloss continued, "from the depth of our souls. I may not have to declare how much...

"How much? How much?" several voices across the hall asked lightheartedly. Amid the din, one voice specifically yelled: "Ten billion!" Not a few people thought it

sounded Audu-ish.

The MD laughed off the inquiry and continued: "But I can assure you that you don't need to go to any bank or Mallam to change the money. It is not in naira..."

"How much! Tell us how much!" questioning voices persisted. "Well, I should admit that it is also not less than \$10,000 - the highest Stardom has ever presented to any disengaging member of staff."

The audience greeted the disclosure with another ovation. "Thank you.thank you..." the MD said, as she stilled the hall.

"But, meanwhile, it is a cheque o; a domiciliary cheque. Not cash. Not raw dollars, as you can see how flat the envelope is," she explained as she stepped aside and offered the podium to Mr Bepo. It was time for the celebrator to speak.

The hall again erupted in applause. The principal took hold of the microphone.

He readjusted it from Mrs Gloss' four feet, nine inches position and brought it to par with his six feet, two inches world. "Thank you...thank you, everybody..." he said, as he waited for the roar to subside. "At moments like this, words fail to express sincere depths of appreciation. On behalf of my family and my..my.my.."

The principal pushed aside the microphone and buried his head on the podium.

He had begun sobbing, audibly too. Not many were surprised. Twenty-four years after he first walked into the school premises - what had become home to him - only few people really expected a tear-free parting.

"Let's give a round of applause to Mr Adewale," the MD intervened. "Our beloved principal is overcome with emotion. We quite understand that, " she added.

It was the moment of truth. From pockets and handbags, handkerchiefs of all shades-white, blue, green, red, yellow, brown... appeared as members of the Stardom family dabbed their eyes.