

Lekki Headmaster Chapter 7

RITUALIST

EPO joined Stardom Schools after a stint at Beesway Group of School, located on the Beesway management regarding an error he spotted in the school's name. As the senior English teacher, he had pointed out that the name ought to be Beesway Group of Schools', not 'Group of School'. He noted that the phrase, 'group of, implies there were more than one school; therefore, the singular noun was incorrect.

"Sir, it is like saying, 'a group of man' when we mean 'a group of men'," he explained to the director, Mr. Egi Meko. "Or like saying, 'a collection of bag' or 'a bevy of bird' instead of 'a collection of bags' and a bevy of birds'."

"Which one is bevy?" Meko asked, as if that was the only aspect of Bepo's argument that interested him.

"It means a large group of people or things, like 'a herd of cows' and not 'a herd of cow.'"

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The director thanked the 'learned linguist' - as he often called him - for the observation. Then he asked what exactly the senior English teacher wanted him to do. He knew where Bepo was headed but he feigned ignorance. In the recess of his mind, Mr. Meko actually laughed derisively because he could not contemplate changing his school's name in any way. Firstly, he reasoned, that was the name on all the school's facilities and documents. Secondly, it was the name registered at the Corporate Affairs Commission and the Ministry of Education.

The most important reason I cannot change the name of my school," Meko explained to Bepo, "is that the name was divinely inspired. If I would put it another way, I will say it has a spiritual undertone. I believe you understand, because you are not a kid. What has 'group of school' got to do with the quality education we impart here? Do you know how well my students have been performing in external exams, talk less of internal examinations? Group of school! Are students complaining? No.

Are parents complaining? No. Are the external examiners complaining? No. Is the government complaining? No. So, Mr. Bepo, the Englisher, let's leave the matter as it is. I know there is no word like Englisher. Just joking with you."

"Tronically, there is, sir," Bepo struggled to correct his boss, even if he had to overlook the error in 'talk less'. He knew what the director ought to have said was let alone.

"You don't mean't?" Meko exclaimed, ostentatiously, pronouncing 'mean it' in a way he believed was super British or American.

"I do. It is even in the dictionaries. It refers to a person who translates from a foreign language into English."

"Wao! That means I am almost an Englisher too," the director said and added, "considering that I even used the word off head."

Bepo skipped a breath as the erroneous phrase, 'off head', struck him. But he did not think the atmosphere was right to begin another round of correction. Besides, he felt the first grammatical blunder, which the director ought to have accepted most readily, was being downplayed.

Bepo thought: what was the big deal in changing 'Group of School' to 'Group of Schools'? Firstly, the management could start by effecting the change on the school's signboards on the premises, then move on to all files, books, etc. It could then proceed to the Corporate Affairs Commission, the Ministry, and other relevant bodies.

After the unsuccessful encounter, Bepo again raised the matter with the boss a couple of times because the grammatical palaver was happening in his subject territory. It was particularly insulting of his pedigree as the Senior English Language Teacher in the school. But something happened that finally made Bepo shut his mouth.

During a meeting of the school's Parent-Teacher Association, a parent raised the matter, backed by some others. As she spoke, the director fixed his eyes on Bepo, who was sat in the front row. The look was fierce and furious. The director appeared to be asking: "So, you have taken your madness to this level?"

Immediately the meeting was over, the director summoned Bepo to his office and accused him of plotting to destroy the school through his 'too-know ' mentality. Bepo explained that he never did what the director had in mind. That is: tell the parent about the error in the school's name.

"Elefo, o' o, ni ovo. O lefoo oun kii s' efo aatan. Ta ni ko mo'pe ara lo n fuu?" the director said, referencing a Yoruba proverb about guilt. It told the story of a hawker of vegetables plucked from a filthy dumpsite. A buyer simply calls out to her, having no intention to probe the source of the product. But burdened with guilt, and seeking to assure the buyer of feigned quality, the hawker retorts: "These vegetables are not from any dumpsite."

Bepo did all he could to convince the director that he never discussed the matter with any parent. He even swore, touching the crucifix that hung from his neck. It was Bepo's characteristic way of declaring, 'I am saying the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.' Whenever he desperately needed to make a point, he reached for the object. While that was enough to make some people believe him, the director remained unconvinced. "You can choose between working here or criticising the name of the school that pays your salary," he said with a tone of finality.

Bepo's experience at Beesway was quite tumultuous but it was not on account of wanting to correct the 'Group of School' blunder that he left. He walked away voluntarily because of a matter he considered godly. he was not a ret churchgoer. Al the sure, he bellere he go the roch on When his wife was ty Nigeria, she used to lure or coerce him to go te church on Sundays, He often hat her behind at the auditorium as he had a habit or dishped and a ten as the service ended Seri was a member of the groups inichechel and often attended post servie meetings Repo was originally a Catholic, but the woman convinced him to join her Pentecostal Truth Tellers Mission. As soon as she relocated to the UK, however, he

returned to his Catholic faith, where he felt at home.

It was 230am. The almost pin-drop silence in Oyikutu showed nature maintains a disciplined order, no matter the place or time. Here was a Lagos suburb, ever busy during the day and through the night. Now, it was calm, quiet; save for an occasional whistle by some security guards.

Bepo lay on his bed in his room at the Beesway Staff Quarters. He had forced himself to bed at 12:00am. But sleep just wouldn't kiss his eyes. He had slept lavishly in the afternoon, being a Sunday. Whenever he spent long hours in bed during the day, he was sure the night would find him miserable, searching elusively for a nap.

He wondered what he must do to fall asleep. He thought about sedatives. Sadly, he had none in the room. He was aware doctors rarely encouraged their use. The drugs could, among other risks, lead to addiction. But at nights when the goddess of sleep became too miserly with her drowsy bosom, Bepo cared less what any doctor thought. He would toss a capsule or two down his throat. Moments afterwards, he would snore.

He rose from the bed and headed for the refrigerator in a corner of the room. He needed a cup of cold water. Perhaps, that might do the trick, he thought. He had switched off the light in the room. He barely needed it as rays from the floodlights positioned at different corners of the premises lit the room faintly. He peered through the window, his dry eyes viewing much of the large space that included the assembly ground. He moved closer and drew the blinds sideways. Suddenly, the floodlights went off. Every light at the length and breadth of the school premises was off. What happened? Yet, Bepo noticed that, two hundred meters or more away from the school, lights were still on.

As the puzzle lingered, Bepo thought he saw something move in the dark. It looked human. Then he saw another, and another, and yet another! What could they be? He studied the shapes intently. As the movements continued, it became clearer what the mystery was. Of course, they were not ghosts. They were humans. But who could they be? He stared harder through the darkness. His eyes were not betraying his mind. A torch flashed through the void. Bepo's confusion thickened. It was 2.51am. No student was expected to be out at such an unholy hour. No teacher either or resident.

As his eyes attuned to the darkness, Bepo picked out five men. He also made out a large whitish thing moving alongside the men. It was a cow. Apparently, one of the

men was holding the leash. Bepo, glued to the spot, watched in amazement. The men stopped. Five minutes later, two other men appeared. It seemed, initially that they had literally walked out from Mother Earth. Not so. The duo had actually climbed out of a pit. There was a brief moment of inactivity.

What could they be doing? What could they be discussing? Two of the men moved to the rear of the whitish thing. No sooner had they positioned themselves than the beast began to inch towards the pit. What is going on, Bepo thought, mystified! They certainly are not about to bury a cow, he thought, bewildered.

He turned swiftly from the window. He grabbed his crucifix, hung it on his neck.

A T-shirt lay beside his pillow. He put it on; complementing the night trousers he wore. Bepo shoved his hand under the bed, retrieved a broad-headed double-edged machete and was soon descending the stairs.

"Who are you?" a voice out of the darkness questioned, as Bepo walked with resolve, yet cautiously towards the figures. If his ears did not play any pranks on him, he was sure the voice was familiar.

"To ask: who are you?" the voice repeated.

"Director!" Bepo exclaimed, astonished. "Director, are you burying the cow alive?"

"What! Who is this?" one of the men barked. The indignation in the voice was

unmistakable. "Will you keep your mouth shut!" another man ordered,

simultaneously. "And get away from here, immediately, before we make you regret!" a third voice roared.

"You again...Mr. Bepo? What business brings you out at this hour? Is this the students' hostel you are supposed to be minding?" the boss asked. As the director spoke, the men quickly turned their attention away from the intruder. Resolutely, they hastened to finish the grim task, pushing, and pulling harder.

"No! Director, you can't! This is cruel! This is animalistic! Ungodly! You shouldn't bury that thing alive!" Bepo affirmed.

"Get lost! How is that your problem? Are we burying a human being?" the director fumed.

"Even if it is not human, it is living. Director, this is wickedness! Inhumanity!" A man, who all the while, had lurked in the dark, unseen, approached Bepo from behind, club in hand. He raised the weapon and brought it down hard on Bepo's right wrist. The machete fell to the ground as a sharp pain coursed through Bepo's limb. Two other men rushed towards him. There was a brief struggle. And soon, Bepo was on his back. Even in the darkness, he could make out the shape of the machete positioned menacingly above his head.

"Handle him gently! Gently!" the director ordered. "Oga, no, sir. I said no, sir!" one of the men replied defiantly, then added: "If he wants to go down with the cow, why should we stop him?"

Bepo recognised the voice. It was the man that had threatened: "Get away from here immediately before we make you regret!"

He knew it was time he disappeared from the scene. The director pacified the angry accomplices and helped the Senior English Teacher back on his feet. He led Bepo back to the room from where, earlier, he had stormed out like a Crusader -then returned to finish up the dark assignment.

A million thoughts danced crazily in Bepo's head. The remaining hours before daybreak were unusually longer than he ever imagined. The live burial of a cow... the threat against his life... everything seemed like fiction. Did that really happen on the school ground? Was that actually the director he thought he had always known?

What was the reason for the bizarre action? Why did they have to bury a cow alive?

What did they hope to achieve?

He had heard tales of cerie rituals carried out by some school owners and patrons of other businesses. Shortly after he concluded the National Youth Service Corps scheme, he and a colleague set up a neighbourhood school. The colleague was a teacher in a public school. Since Bepo had yet to find an employment, they decided to start out small in the education sector. They rented a two-bedroom flat, and Fruitful Future School was born. The dream unfolded slowly but enrolment began to grow at the third session. They ensured fees were lower than what obtained in the area. They also tried to up their game, using marker boards at a time most of their competitors were hooked on chalkboards.

Bepo also introduced a business trick he learnt at the school in Warri, Delta State, where he observed his National Youths Service. Pupils were encouraged to teach their parents a topic when they returned home. The topic, of course, was among the ones they must have learnt during the school day. Parents particularly found it a novel idea. It reassured them that quality teaching was taking place at Fruitful Future.

Thereafter, good news about the school spread. And before the end of the third session, the number of pupils had grown to over 70. The fees stayed minimal. Some parents defaulted, but Bepo and his colleague saw a great future for the school.

Mr Ogo, a parent, visited him in his office one Monday morning. The father had recently paid the third and final instalment of his boy's fees. The school permitted such mode of payment. As Mr Ogo walked in, Bepo, who was the HM (Headmaster), felt the man had something important to share with the management.

"I know you are trying hard. Many people are saying good things about your place," Mr Ogo said, as he muttered prayers for the HM and the school.

"Thank you," Bepo responded

"Yes. But there is something else you need to do."

"Thanks. Like adverts?"

But Mr. Ogo was not thinking about adverts. Bepo could not believe the crux of the meeting: the parent had come, offering to perform a rite that would superaturally flood the school with pupils in no time. What was the magic? He would sprinkle a few grains of com at corners of the school, following which unprecedented enrolment would follow

"And what would happen to the grains afterward?" Bepo asked, not because he was keen about any ritual. He was simply inquisitive. "Nothing much. You need not mad them sudents wil be reing i e the ra i do enhandan.

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The parent cum magician added that the money needed for the rite was not much. just N35,000.

Bepo and his colleague refused to buy in, even though the man persisted. Shortly afterwards, Mr. Ogo withdrew his child from the school. Repo believed Fruitful Future would become great without ritualistic short cuts. He believed the same success would apply to many other good schools in the country. With experienced teachers who are well paid, an environment conducive to learning, and an inspiring curriculum, coupled with good school-parent relationship, any school would grow and prosper. He knew schools that were so committed; they even had Saturday lessons for students who cared to attend. He knew schools that engaged specialists to team up with their own teachers whenever WAEC and NECO examinations drew near. He knew schools that motivated their teachers so well with inspiring health, housing and retirement packages. There was even the well-reported case of Heroes Haven, which offered a two-bedroom apartment to any teacher that spent up to 15 years in the school! So, why should he and his colleague delve into any ritual to build up Fruitful Future?

Sadly, the school did not last as anticipated as no sooner access roads in the area collapsed. Apart from prolonged neglect by state and local governments, a giant water pipe ruptured, making a mess of the environment. As time went on, frustrated residents began to move away, leaving the place to only the helpless who could not afford Fruitful Future's tuition, as low as the fees were. Even more unfortunately, the headmaster and his colleague could not raise any substantial fund to relocate from the area. The lofty dream thus ended as they were forced to close down the facility, while Bepo resumed at another school for his first professional teaching experience.

Ten years later, however, Bepo sat one evening watching the news, when the anchorman reported of a Mr Ogo who murdered a civil servant: a woman who had consulted him over her infertility. Having been married for seven years without a child, the woman approached Ogo for a spiritual solution. Over the course of a year's

'treatment, the spiritual doctor received N9 million as fee from the woman, promising the charms he gave would make her pregnant. However, nothing happened.

Disappointed, the woman insisted on a refund. When the children manufacturer was not forthcoming, she threatened to have him arrested. As the narrative went, the spiritualist, one afternoon, invited the her to his house, on the pretext that he was ready to make a part payment in cash. At this point, the news anchor man warned that some viewers might find the upcoming images disturbing.

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The camera turned to the scene of the murder. It was a lush garden at the spiritual doctor's backyard. He drugged the client and then ushered her unto a chair, which, unknown to the woman, was deviously placed atop a grave-sized pit. No sooner had she fallen in that two club-wielding accomplices appeared from their hideout and pounded her. She was still breathing when they sealed the pit.

Bepo thought the face of the suspect on TV struck a chord. Yes! He had seen that face before. But where? Just then, the cameraman zoomed point-blank on the alleged culprit. And there, flanked by armed policemen, with hands cuffed, looking like a fowl drenched in a rainstorm, was Mr. Ogo!

Bepo was depressed, confused. He contemplated reporting the Beesway director to the police. But was he ready to face the impending battle? Firstly, he wondered if he could muster enough resources to mobilise the police and probably some other law enforcement agencies. Did he have the money to 'push' the case all the way? He knew he could be asked to pay for the sheet of paper on which he would write his statement at the police station. He knew he might be asked to fuel the police vehicle with which officers would go and arrest the suspects. Did he have enough financial strength to withstand the director in protracted court cases?

It occurred to him that he could contact relevant agencies or non- governmental organisations, like those involved in animal rights. But did they exist in Nigeria? He was not sure. What about the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education? Yea, that could be it. After all, the director was endangering the health of the pupils, Bepo thought.

But was he ready to launch into the river? Was that the prime thing he wanted to do with his life? What if the big man became desperate and began to fight him in strange ways? By the way, what was the motive behind burying a cow alive in a school? Did he, Bepo, know? Was he sure?

He was still reviewing these thoughts when his phone rang at 9:07am. He had neither taken his bath nor performed any chore, let alone resume work. The phone rang twice again: it was the director. "Good morning, Mr. Bepo. You have not resumed at the office today. I asked the

secretary to call you. Can you see me in the office, now?" The call compounded Bepo's dilemma. He never said he would come to see him.

He didn't say he would not either. But what could he do? He knew it was time to leave Beesway. Thus, before he showed up at the director's office, about two hours later, Bepo had moved his belongings, both in his room and at the staff room.

The director apologised for the assault Bepo suffered and explained that what the senior English teacher stumbled upon was nothing dangerous.

occultic. He said it was actually part of a special prayer for his late father, who had given him the land on which the school was built. Bepo did not answer him a word.

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