

AN ABRIDGED CHAPTER FROM ÀRỌBÁ

Olùkọ

Ojo, Aderemi



OLÙKỌ

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This is an abridged chapter from Àrọbá - a book by the author in July 2021

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Dedication

The reader.

Guide to reading the book.

The book is a personal history of the author who has roamed his country of birth, especially the western part of it, since childhood. Constructed within the context of culture and the social-politics of Nigeria, the book demystifies the maligned view of young Nigerians. Replete with funny stories that reminds every Nigerian of youthful age and of their childhood years, in part, it is a personal history, but could be taken to be the Nigerian version of a public and private manifesto.

Any reader would be forced to look up some news about Nigeria.

Finally, any reader might like to use the Yorùbá alphabetical system below:

a b d e ẹ f g gb h i j k l m n o ọ p r s ₣ t u w y

e as in bell

ẹ as in /a/ in ale

gb as in gb... well?

o as in /o/ in dole

ọ as in /o/ in gore

s as in /s/ in size

₣ as in /sh/ in she

To pronounce the Yoruba names requires the use of three distinct sound pattern: [V-]

\ as in dò

- as in rē [or re]

/ as in mí

The same way they sound on musical instruments.

Olùkọ

On the itinerary scale, I had been a teacher for a few years. Given the widespread less-than-average living standard among teachers and educators, professing my perky admiration for the profession will instantly elicit strong reactions from ordinary Nigerians. An average teacher earns less than a hundred dollars in a month. The profession is famous, but unpopular.

You get the advantage of understanding the younger generation and people of different origins and orientation. I taught a girl whose father is a Woodabe Fulani Muslim from Mali and whose mother is an Efik Christian from Nigeria's deep South. She knew nothing about her culture, nor was she interested in learning. Her *fulanoid*¹ origin would never have been noticeable from her appearance. I thought she is Igbo. I had to force her to read the history of Mali by adding it to her assignment when we treated Nationalism.

Another was a Hausa girl from Kaduna, the daughter of a prominent family. She insisted on attending Nasarawa State University. I couldn't persuade her to choose Bayero, Zaria or a Western university; Lagos, Ife, Ibadan. And why? Her father knew someone - the Nigerian disease. Immediately after the SASA crisis in Ibadan, she bade us farewell and left with her family.

Then there were the deep South ones and the foreigners. One of them conferred on me the rank of 'Professor' - because I taught much of the topics without using a prompt - and shortened my name to 'Adé'. She is from Ivory Coast -country reputed for its political stability and absence of conflict, until Professor Laurent Gbagbo. A bunch of them had been flown down to Nigeria to take the JAMB²

¹ Of the Fulani race.

² Joint Admission and Matriculation Board

examination. Apparently, the examination is recognized in many West African countries and many people still see Nigeria differently from the outside. The girl has a photographic memory. Despite understanding limited English, she could guess forty-seven out of fifty Government questions correctly. I mean literally. She did it. But as the teacher, I acted like I was not impressed.

"You were guessing the answers?" I was frowning.

"Yes now."

"I have told you to avoid using *now*. It is not proper." I was still frowning. "And you need to know the correct answers to the questions."

I squinted harder to prevent any appearance of blush.

"Professor Ade does not want to laugh." I was betrayed by a burst of laughter.

Her limited English forced me to concentrate on her guessing capabilities by spending more time on past questions. Hopefully, she's able to secure enough points to gain admission into a Nigerian university. I had persuaded her to stay in Nigeria and attend a university here.

"Afterall", I said "Ivorian universities are worse than the worst-rated universities in Nigeria.

A brilliant girl, she reminded me that despite having so many great universities, Nigeria is ridiculously underdeveloped and those bad people she would see on the television are our leaders. I skipped the discussion and moved on to the next topic.

One of her classmates had passed the JAMB examinations and was waiting for Obafemi Awolowo University to call him up for Post-UTME screening. He wanted to study International Relations. The problem however, was that he did not know what it meant neither did he understand what he was going to the university to do. In contrast to a 17-year-old Israeli boy I once engaged in a high level discussion

about foreign relations, I concede that education is not education in Nigeria. I forced him to read about all Foreign Affairs Ministers in Nigeria since 1960.

There were two Ghanians I taught. One had become *Nigerianized*³, completely. The other subtly conceded that Nigeria was still better for education than her country. She lost her father in Ghana a few days before her examinations.

I taunted the Yoruba students from Kwara and Kogi as Northerners. A reality they soon started growing accustomed with. When the food blockade began, I entered the class and began the history of state creation in Nigeria using the 'food war in Nigeria' as an introduction. Then I pointed at the 'Northerners'; see them. The class erupted in laughter.

It became obvious that unconventional tactics were required to upgrade the capacity of assimilation. Personal experiences also mattered in shaping the teaching pattern. Digging into the past, a useful manual developed.

My father decorated our rooms with maps. In other words, maps were our wallpapers. This afforded me an advanced knowledge of the world in a rare sense. The location of obscure countries was not alien to me. I could picture them once the teacher mentioned their names. On my first day with the ordinary level students, I made maps a compulsory tender for my classes. For the A level students, I stuffed them full with documentaries. Then I added comic reliefs and allowed them to laugh at the end of every round of *fire*. It worked.

³ To make someone Nigerian in character.

Primarily a self-taught tutor, never undertaking a course in education, I learned through practice and from my own experiences with my former teachers. The memories come differently. Some bitter, some I relish, while some still disgust me. A combination of the three gave me the kind of teacher I wish I had. And that I was to the students I taught.

First, the use of *pankéré*⁴ was forbidden. I did not learn much from teachers who relied on flogging to control their students. Aunty 'B' almost flogged the love of school out of me. Mr 'B' beat the hatred of mathematics into me. Some teachers flogged me for crying. Some flogged me for not crying. It drove me away from having relationships with them.

A few applied creativity to the beatings - mostly for personal amusement: 'touch your toes', it meant you should literally bend over forward. Most of them preferred the common posture: 'holding the desk'. Many others want you to lie down on a surface, then *taa! Taa! Taa!*

The floggings drew a variety of reactions to the excruciating pain. Cries, screams, sobs, runnings. Post-flogging braggadocious was peculiar to pupils accustomed to the pain. A teacher once flogged me on the feet more than twenty times creating embarrassing scars. The offence? I refused to be flogged for defaulting in 'lesson' fees. {Lesson is the word for extramural tutorials in Nigeria.}

It was rare to find pupils discussing personal problems that needed urgent attention with my teachers. I vowed it would be different.

A student once told me how complicated her family was. I saw the bruises that attested to it. Another told me about her plans to run. One, seventeen, told me

⁴ Cane.

she secretly plans to marry a *pentuagenerian*⁵ to raise her fees for tertiary education. There was one that told me she could not not comprehend well and that she needed private classes. She closed the discussion when I mentioned the monetary cost. But I factored her kind in and extended the classes by half an hour.

There were the impossibly unserious ones. Then, I made sure to tune up to taste. One of such was consistently reluctant to participate actively during q-and-a sessions, preferring to join in the playtime. I pretended to ignore his weakness and put responsibilities on him.

Secondary school pupils have become weaker in grammar. I ended every class with piles of assignments. Each student was to supply two new simple English words at the beginning of every class and a request for another two sets of words at the end of every class. Some dusted their abandoned dictionaries. Others used their androids. I permitted androids for those special purposes. With that kind of freedom comes the tendency to misuse opportunities. I pretended to not notice. Otherwise, I would have to ban the device, to the detriment of the intended advantage. Afterall, sixty percent of the time, they used it for the wrong purpose.

"To keep sir". One gave the excuse. I sniggered and ignored.

A girl dared me to the edge; she kept talking to her friends while I stood there at the front. Another girl warned me never to call her an '*olódo*'⁶. She added that even her mother did not call her that. I repeated it and told her to tell her mother I called her that. Another flipped her hair and insisted she was not carrying out any instructions. All of those I dismissed as the real examples of adolescent manifestations. Young people trying to find their place. Defying a power in the presence of others their age boosts their ego. Now, I know such occurrences

⁵ Being between the age of 50 and 59

⁶ A dullard

would have been mishandled by a volatile teacher. The *taa-taa-taa* routine would have featured. Or in its place, a slap, a hard spank on the back of the neck, physical punishment. So it was better I handled it the best way I thought. In the meantime, I left their colleagues to do the bashing. All offenders, with the exception of none, took turns to apologize. Each of them apologized more than twice.

There were the nasty ones. The teenagers who *knew too much*. I particularly viewed them as younger siblings. Some were adults. Two had a child each, although unmarried. They called me *uncle*. That, I rejected.

"You can call my attention by simply saying Sir or better still Mr Adérèmí. I am not your uncle, please". The attempted correction was the biggest failure. I remained *uncle*⁷ for the vast majority of the time, almost permanently. Their nastiness notwithstanding, I remained open.

"*Uncle* is a fine boy", a girl said in one of the classes. It was repeated several times. Each time, I pretended not to hear.

Then *February 14*⁸ arrived. "*Uncle*, do you have a girlfriend? Who are you taking out?"

I was shocked to the bones. Yes we secretly did our valentine as teenagers but we never asked our teachers out on a date. What guts?

"Well, yes I have a girlfriend. Thank you."

"*Uncle* is lying."

"Okay."

"Will you take me out?"

⁷ *In loco parentis* obtains most schools in Nigeria.

⁸ Valentine's Day

"Yes, I am fixing a class. You meet us here at 2 o'clock immediately after church service. That will be *Valentine's Day* for all of you. I am not joking at all. Sunday! Two *pee-em*! We shall be treating constitutional history."

"Is *uncle* serious?"

"Yes I am. Have a great day!"

One always gave a funny look. One was always walking. I pretended not to notice.

In the meantime, I prepared a long diatribe about how ready some male teachers were to take advantage of young girls with a long reference to the scandals that went on in the tertiary institutions. A detailed diatribe that sent the pupils reeling with laughter, anger and confusion.

"Just so you know before offering yourselves to the toxic prurient patriarchy." It was the summary of what I implied.

Once, a man showed up to give a gift - a small bowl of ice-cream - to one of my female students. Once the girl rejected the gift, I asked both the gifter and the gifted follow me to the administrative office. The man looked suspicious and insisted on forcing the gift on her. It was obvious one should ask him to leave. On doing that, he threatened to beat me - mercilessly. His jugular vein was throbbing as he spoke. It was his oesophagus that needed aiming. I thought and calculated the needed velocity. No. He could die accidentally. Who knows? The police would be a better option. I dialed 615 and was directed to the nearest police station. On getting there, although wide open, the station was empty, completely. Except for the dust. The officers had been mobilized to act on a riot going on at the city

centre. Alternatively, I used the service of *Operation Àmòtékùn*⁹. He was picked up and taken in for 'due process'.

The so-called myth of gender gap in schools seemed to have shown a sign of validity in the demography of the classes I taught. It looks to me like boys have stopped getting education in all the classes, the girls doubled the number of boys, at least. One of the classes had ninety percent female registration on an average. It didn't reduce the difficulty in dealing with energetic teenagers.

During a class, a girl referred to herself as a lady. I interrupted and informed them I would not call them ladies, because most of them were just about eighteen or less. A chagrin fell on me and it took minutes to control the class when one of them replied.

"And those without beards, we call boys."

The teacher is a counsellor. Or supposedly. After all, secondary schools these days do not have proper counseling units. Almost no one counsels young people about career choices anymore. A decade ago, it had become brutally rare. Counsellors sat in offices, gossiping and acting in the capacity of a disciplinary staff. At times, they double as the custodians of abusive language - a centre of creativity for an incompetent, uninformed and, overall, unmotivated but paid staff. Nigeria is disorganized beyond the words of a counsellor, so what's the point? *Aspiring to become, to inspire* - a common idiom amongst motivational speakers in Anglophone countries of West Africa is an almost demystified rendition. A counsellor, whose entire life revolves around the Nigerian civil service - with its backward third-world, analogue design - has little understanding of the modern

⁹ A security outfit established by Governors of States in Western Nigeria to check insecurity in general, and threats from armed Fulani militias specifically. Originally the Western Nigeria Security Network, it was codenamed to recall the character of the leopard. Its skin was a part of the *amour propre* of the quintessential combat fatigue of the Ààṛẹ Ọnà Kankanfò, commander of the very defunct Yorùbá Imperial Army.

world, and consequently little information about its nature or how to handle its complexities.

I did not fail to acknowledge the Nigerian question. Yet, I informed the students about the unfair facts of life. You can not miss out on this opportunity to be educated to maximum stretch and blame Nigeria for it. It is a legitimate claim that Nigeria is limiting. I taught them about skills, the hard life (or hard work) and endurance. Nigeria or not, I impressed on them that their best is what matters. After each had told me his or her intended profession, I tried recollecting who is best suited for the role of a model. The intending thespian got Denzel Washington, the intending politician got Awólwò. Some others got Maathai Wangari, Yousoufzai Malala etcetera etcetera. They made presentations on each personality to the entire class.

My personal experiences with both campus politics and mainstream politics featured in class discussions. A motivated, well-oriented and almost thoroughly informed force is what I use my teaching to create.

Teaching drains and it is more difficult when trying to give your best - for little. But then, it is all about the satisfaction of service.

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About the author

Ojo, Aderemi an editor, researcher and staff writer with media organisations and has spoken at conferences on democracy, internet governance and community leadership. He is the Convener of the Àwa'rawa Movement - a campaign group for developmental politics, youth participation, local government autonomy and the restructuring of Nigeria; Co-Convener of the Global Leadership Summit and former President of the Students Union, University of Ibadan.

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