

The Closing of the African Mind: a walk through the University of Ibadan, September 2004

I find myself lodged at the University of Ibadan for the night. 'UI', as it is commonly called, has a unique place in Nigerian intellectual life. The country's oldest university (it has recently celebrated its 50th birthday) has nurtured some of Nigeria's finest minds, from Nobel Prize winning writer Wole Soyinka and the Mbari writers collective in the 60's and 70's to the present day. Along with the University of Ife, now renamed as Obafemi Awolowo University, and Ahmed Bello University to the North, Ibadan was one of the three points of the intellectual compass in Nigeria for the second half of the twentieth century. UI's alumni are now scattered across the globe, forming a diasporic sub-network of learning, success and treasured collective memory. It's no accident that a few years ago, when one of the best Nollywood production houses, Mainframe, wanted to evoke the quintessential backdrop to 1970's African campus life, in the film *Olé Ku*, they chose UI. The film is a nostalgia piece for temps perdu: mini skirts in dutch wax, lilting juju music and afro hairstyles cut against concrete modernistic architecture.

I arrive on campus late in the afternoon with daylight draining from the sky. I dump my bags in the guesthouse. Even though I'm keen to explore and see what remains of the spirit of the 1970s on campus, hunger takes priority. Being vegan in the land of suya and bush meat, I go in search of veggy food. Two attempts at ordering chips just off campus result in scraps of meat on the food, reminding me of bad experiences in Italian restaurants in the past when ethical precepts come face to face with brute incomprehension. I eventually negotiate my way through Lagos-style traffic to a dry and expensive pizza on Awolowo Road outside the campus. It's night when I return. Despite the rainy season drizzle, I have the urge to explore.

With no map, no guide and no recommendations, I've little idea of where I am. My plan is to find the gate and follow human traffic inwards to get my bearings. Immediately opposite and set a level below is a church. Outside, a few people mill about. I can hear the sounds of a pastor and congregation reverberating inside. Suffused by a familiar feeling of revulsion after 9 months in the Christian fundamentalist south, I hesitate. The road to the gate is devoid of cars and people; the church is the only game in town. But getting involved with an evangelical church service is like walking into a theological crack

house, having to face the torments and joys of the pathologically deluded. In order not to be strangulated further by West Africa's Bible Belt, I carry on, banking on better action ahead.

The pavement has worn away in places. I step carefully over tree roots and broken concrete. Ahead, the road forks left to the gate, and to the right descends deeper into the campus. I take the right, sub-consciously sensing my body is still low on fuel. Ahead, the familiar brise soleil concrete shuttering I remember from the film shields a hall of residence. Perhaps there's a party going down somewhere? Close by, a large signpost warns against the perils of joining the Cults. UI has had severe problems with cult groups, with both students and staff being murdered in recent years. Quite why cult groups are such a menace, no one seems to know. As I walk away from the street lights, a subtle shiver of anxiety passes over. I sense my own vulnerability - a white skin shining in the light. Suddenly, a van careers up. On the roof, a loudspeaker spits out metallic arabic. It passes in a flash, disappearing before I realise it is a mobile muezzin, calling campus muslims to prayer. A few seconds later, a car turns right into a car park ahead. Through the trees to the right, I see silhouettes congregating inside a hall. A minor thrill erupts as I sense at last something approximating to student life. Perhaps this is the Students Union? I imagine political arguments, karate clubs and capoeira sessions (projecting back from my student days). I follow the car.

I'm in the midst of a disjointed quad of buildings. Through a doorway, I see a blackboard, with a scramble of mathematics chalked onto its surface. To the right, I see the hall where the silhouettes are. It somehow doesn't feel right to enter the building. I walk round the side and see a clutch of men by some industrial sized bins. Again, I anticipate the liminal - perhaps this is drugs or sex? But my expectations are blown as I then see perhaps a hundred men bent forward in prayer through glass windows ahead. Outside, tens of others crouch down, some washing their feet in preparation, others in small groups talking quietly. Even in the shadows of night, I feel the difference pressed onto the surface of my skin like a pale mud facemask. My skin tightens and I feel the need to retreat. Nothing is happening here except fervent prayer to Allah and I'm the lone infidel.

I walk up a bank and realise that ahead of me beyond an empty car park is the church I avoided a few minutes before. Like Jerusalem, mosque and church are a stone throw away from each other, making me wonder if ever the stone was thrown. Not wanting my journey to be completely empty of any human encounter, I make for the church. On the grass nearby, a couple face each other, holding hands at the waist. I take them to be lovers, until something in the man's tone alerts me to something besides love in action. He steers her hands above her head and frowns out a series of consoling yet stern words while the woman closes her eyes and murmurs in response. I guess he's a 'pastor'. Her passive supplications are faintly irritating and depressing, suggesting a questionable power relationship and an equally questionable authority. I carry on towards the church.

A young woman at the door ushers me in, 'please have a seat' she smiles. I shrink back and remain standing at the door, telling her no thanks. I ask her what's going on. She tells me it is fellowship. As I've heard this phrase a lot in Nigeria and never really understood what it means, I peer inside. In front of the altar, a group of students are acting out a scene. Watching *in media res*, it's difficult to work out what the story is. A young man dances about, pretending to plead with his *oga* (boss), and eventually the congregation applaud. I feel like I'm in a strange land watching strange things. To my right a few feet away, a boy and a girl sit counting the congregation money – clumps of 20 and 50 naira notes dumped in orange plastic collection buckets. These are students giving away what little scraps of money they have. Up front, the mini-play has finished and people clap and chatter excitedly. A woman takes the mike and asks the gathering if they want more. To a resounding yes, she invites the choir to come and sing. I decide to stay and listen. Mistakenly, my mind drifts to expectations of a Ladysmith Black Mambazo or Sweet Honey in the Rock wall of spiritual sound. Instead, my ears are greeted with a straggle of voices weak on melody and harmony. I leave.

It has stopped raining. Even though I'm ready for sleep, instead of heading to my room, I turn in the direction of the main gate again. Something in me refuses to be beaten by evangelical religious fraud. I am wondering where, if any, the liminal spaces of the campus are to be found: the intense dialogues through the night, mind altering substances and sexual experimentation to be found elsewhere in the world as the next generation takes issue with the present. Instead, I pass by another group of students

spilling out of another church. Evening mass has just finished. A few minutes further on, I hear more singing and the amplified intonations of another pastor. Giving up on anything other than organised religion as my evening's distraction, I make towards the sound. Inside, the hall is packed and noisy. Young women dressed in black with berets fuss around the entrance. On stage, a pastor spills out his words, as technicians behind a tall bank of PA equipment help elevate his voice to a crisp and dominating boom. This church has money and oodles of it. To the left, a gaggle of women in full native and architectural head-wrap swing slowly to the rhythms of the speaker. A man peels off from the congregation and comes close by, greeting a friend with energetic enthusiasm then breaking off to dance and laugh. He is in his element, dipping low like a reed in the breeze.

I cannot intuit his joy, let alone share it. I might as well be watching the mating rituals of frogs up close. The same feeling of revulsion erupts, this time mixed with a sense of the uncanny. Although I know that this is Christian worship, something other in what I see gives me a sense of repetition and difference – the trademark of the uncanny. Yes, this is Christian worship African style, but no, I can't acknowledge it as Christianity. I ask myself why I fail to recognise it and draw a blank. By this time, a man in a suit has been called up on stage. I follow his speech as closely as I can. He speaks in bold fragments:

say hallelujah to the lord, Jesus is here tonight, in Jesus' name we thank you o Lord. All your dreams will come true if you are prayerful..

There are at most forty or fifty words in his oratorical vocabulary. He makes no reference to the Bible or any of its stories. Worse still, his speech makes no coherent sense, the fragments of Christian cliché refusing to coalesce into a structured narrative. In the face of the mystifyingly exuberant swaying rapture of the audience, I fall into despair and a sense of double alienation: alienation from the alienated. I turn from the hall. Outside, tables have been set up, with tapes and VCDs of the pastor for sale.

At this low point of vulgar commercialism, an epiphany of insight hits me. I finally understand why evangelical, Christianity has captured the young minds of the University of Ibadan (at least the Christian portion). Here, instead of Marxism, feminism,

environmentalism or any other form of progressive and critical political discourse, one encounters the drugged silence of non-thought, of non-being. And this deafening tranquility is the shocking sign of the most severe form of institutional decay. As elsewhere in Nigeria, the world refuses hope inside the campus gates. The children of the rich are already abroad, with access to libraries, committed teaching and broadband Internet and a cushy job in Daddy's firm on return. Everyone else's kids sweat as hard as they can to reach a place like UI. But the years of struggle that brought them here are met with the complete absence of reward or affirmation. The female students face massive widespread sexual abuse from the male lecturers, who have some easy persuasion tactics at hand. If the female student doesn't 'deliver the goods', the exam paper may mysteriously end up lost, meaning the student will have to retake the year. Again, students suffer from months of strikes (a lucrative option for the teaching staff, who get paid from the University yet have time on their hands to make money in other ways). This can stretch a three-year degree course into four, five, six or more years of toil. In class, students are regularly infantilised (one random example: a student is disciplined for chewing gum in class by having to push the gum into her hair). Finally, in terms of teaching methods, the standards simply could not stoop any lower: the lecturer often simply writes out notes from an out-of-date course book, while the students have to write down the notes, then repeat them verbatim to pass the exam (anyone mistakenly trying to *think* in class or the exam is punished with execration and failure – the gifted and bright are rejected by a system which celebrates sheer mediocrity and non-critical mimesis).

On reflection, I can understand the dynamic that leads to such widespread abuse of power by the male teaching faculty. When one has been stripped of power and status, as lecturers were year on year by the past decades of dictatorship, the abused (those who did not or could not migrate) often become the abusers, especially when the abused are fallen big men in a patriarchal land. Sexual abuse is the skewed effect of the institutional breakdown of intellectual life in Nigeria. It can never be excused, but perhaps it can be understood.

And so I also begin to understand why the students of UI have turned en masse to evangelical Christianity. The immediate gratification of the quick-sell church is the only way they can shape meaning into their lives, in the context of a world which has rejected

their desire to design the future. Where the next generation should be bright, disciplined in mind and spirit, with some years of experimentation behind them, full of hope and energy for the more serious tasks of life ahead, they are broken before they have started. Sexually and emotionally abused, under-nourished, the students of Nigeria are destroyed of all hope at the outset of their lives. Marx was one hundred percent right: religion *is* an opiate for the masses – especially when religion is born out of degraded circumstance. Fundamentalist Christianity, just as intolerant in its approach to difference as the Wahabi Islam that flows in Bin Laden’s veins, injects a tranquillising certainty and hope into the minds of young people who may never have experienced it before. Being ‘born again’ is to effect a spiritual lobotomy: the malaise of facing a world full of dirt and corruption head on is replaced with the candy floss dreamtime of a world without edges, with Jesus shimmering on a cloud of ectoplasm, offering salvation on a sliding scale (the more you pay, the more you’re saved). When all sense of internal action and external transformation of the world has been worn away, the only thing left, bar suicide, is to outsource to God. The legions of fake pastors offering glossy offerings of spiritual 419 are there to take away the pain (for a tithe).

And so, as I witnessed with profound sadness the lid closing on the Nigerian mind walking across UI campus this September, I realised that the biggest threat to any constructive and progressive future for Nigeria is more metaphysical than physical. For sure, Nigeria needs a stable electricity supply, a banking system that builds local business, an economy that is not utterly dependent on extraction, a police force that guarantees safety to get from a to b, and above all an enabling government that turns its back on the rampant corruption that has characterised post-independence Nigeria. And of course, Nigeria needs more of the fiscal and human capital abroad to start flowing back home. But all of this work will come only *after* the Nigerian mind opens itself up from the ideological heat-death of evangelical Christianity. Throwing computers and ‘capacity building’ at the problem will change little.

This is a country where the majority of people believe that evil spirits can be transmitted via a mobile phone, where many Christians believe the world is around 5,000 years old. It is a world where most young people have little sense of what is going elsewhere on the continent, let alone the world beyond African shores. And the Christianity that is preached here is as fraudulent as in the 2,000 year history of the Church. Just like

Rome in the years before Martin Luther, money is viewed as a form of salvation and crass materialism is praised as a sign of godliness. Pre-scientific, self-reflexive, horribly corrupt, in denial of local tradition and history, the evangelist Christianity of Nigeria strikes the outsider as a form of spiritual plague that has put the people to sleep.

In such a decayed world, it is difficult to know where to start on the path to transformation. Challenging evangelical orthodoxy head on is a futile pursuit – like tunnelling underground armed only with a chisel. Exposing the pastors (some of whom have criminal pasts, some of whom are still criminals) is dangerous – these men have the power of gangland criminals. Asking for help from the government is a joke, when the president himself is as evangelical as the rest. Pumping money into the universities is fraught with peril, as academics have long become black-belts in diverting capacity building funds into personal accounts. Perhaps all that can be done at present is for the world outside to know that if they are serious about changing Africa and the lives of Africans, they had better start with the closing of the African mind.