

From the 142 page collection

A HEART OF THEIR OWN and other stories

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PRESTIGE

IN THOSE FOUR hectic days, shortly before and immediately after the Independence Day anniversary celebration that was held in the Federal Capital Territory in the very core of the heartland of the newly emerging city of Abuja, I drove my ageing Peugeot 504 car, of a white colour, to and from the Esanohua Nicon Noga Sheraton hotel towers of high price, power and prestige. Strange, is it not, that to our personal knowledge as journalists, we knew that this new fortress Abuja came to be a political capital in such a great hurry all because a self-styled military president relocated so quickly from Dodan Barracks, Lagos, in order to dodge coup plots from junior Army officers mainly.

Here at Abuja, regardless, I drove my vehicle about as my look-alikes of a top editorial position anywhere around the Federal commercial capital of Lagos state and all over the world of learning would normally do, while returning very late at nightfall or nearer the midnight hour. Of course I do sleep inside my otherwise comfortless vehicle, as my travelling allowances could not be half the bills for a single night out there in, say, the Agura hotel, Abuja.

In itself, the Esanohua is impressive, but, although, and as it were, it cuts poor journalists like myself to size as would the six thousand a night Bellagio suite and the extra Entourage suit of a five hundred dollars a night of the Bellagio Villas and Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA; somewhat, the Esanohua is rather oppressive in its languorous contemplation on other less well endowed buildings all around and completely intimidating, while also reminding me of my remarkable poverty. True, in our country, only a fool-hardy person can be that millionaire of a guy who stays in such a suite in Abuja, or of the female look-alike, and in an administrative capital city of unaccountability in the deepest political expenditures, especially in military warfare, but it takes a really, really strong human being of a greater genius still or the commonsense of our forefathers, that was of a rarer kind yet, for that human being to be God's staunch follower with all due honesty in political office matters. Surely, the Esanohua Nicon hotel rings varieties of religious as well as school bells any day. Not only for being a five star glamour of a world-class kind but also for its isolation from the so-called third world poor in industrial matters of trade and industry, and some of such people who are from within the underbelly of the Federal Capital territory, as it were. Or rather,

those human beings who were otherwise known as Abujans. The same indigenes who were meant to be serve by the five star hotel, and this made through all sorts of highbrow media attractions and advertisement brand names and logos or whatever. This financial windfall, however, does not even apply to inhabitants residing at Suleja as it all but appears to the naked eyeballs, jokes aside. Yes, within Suleja, relationships soured. Marriages of some of the transferred civil servants from other states and who were lumped together without their other better halves or spouses and so have to endure living in a shared three bedroom flat or thereabouts, these marriages fell apart in months due to closeness of strangers, loneliness of spouses and the resultant illicit affairs, as it were.

The amazing and towering presence of the hotel premises catapulted the near-arid environment into a dreamland of perpetual suckling and other smaller fantasy worlds of the Esanohua world of magic playgrounds that were attached to the elitist Esan university or the other Orlando, Florida Disney worldview in the United States of America. And each other day, and while not reading the newspapers of the local branch of the New York-based New Age Witnesses of Jehovah God, a weekly newspaper that I usually enjoyed perusing at the breakfast table, and all for its quality articles on science and reports on American college professors' efforts on academic matters as well as me skimming through other journals on how journalists fair and their advancement in news gathering, and also, after trawling libraries, scouting for possible local newsagents at their offices and scouring the aforementioned government forsaken Suleja look-alike of Kibera in Kenya or east Bronx in New York, USA and this for street tangs and low-life gist, I do go out to watch television programmes from the Esan-based Onogie cable network aka OCN or rather the spiritually less attractive British Broadcasting Corporation network service and this I do up until the midnight hours, and this I always do when not on any urgent science news beat or whatever. As a result of these peculiarly disturbing, well, rather outrageously intriguing aspects of our secretive lifestyles behind closed doors, and aside from a previous D-notice conviction from the area commander of the Abuja police department, that was of the look-alike threats of a duck in the wages of my crusading or evangelistic fellow journalists, that I made mentioned of earlier on, I got further journalistic surprises now and then from the New Age Witnesses newspapers as to the depths and infinite possibilities of our own sciences, if tempered with religion. I could figure out that the American founder of the Esanohua hotels-affiliated New Age Witnesses or so is a former Catholic faithful. He is a fellow who usually welcomes all

sorts of people in their native perchance to relapse back to traditional spiritualism, away from Christian spirituality or other fetish warts and all else. And he is a man who himself remained in that way of all sinners, and all through his adult life of domestic upheavals he did so, and more in substance he abided in business ventures than in his actual preaching works. Such works that were restricted mainly to Europe and north American countries. And his successor, a rather local circuit area judge-looking personality who also destroyed the founder's work by drastically transforming the otherwise religious-looking establishment into his own lawyer's image so as to make his male followers to properly shave their bears and put on suits and ties as lawyers do, and all in order not to be constantly reminded of his predecessor's bushy face. Eventually, he also added his own legal position that turned out to be as that of a modern day circuit religious officer. This, among other non-religious but far more personalised changes.

Also, and as a fair as well as a balance reading attitude or news coverage skills went, I got more surprises after surprises from more indigenous but otherwise secular newspapers and these ones too I also enjoyed directly from amongst the *crème de la crème*, amongst foreign personalities, amongst diplomats, amongst corporate giants who were crossing and criss-crossing the marbled and terrazzo-coated Esanohua hotel floors. Thus, if I should decide to apply myself hard enough in other directions, away from my present anchorman look-alike work, I could become ever so easily the third most important man in the world or as the lord of spiritual Africa in sublime political matters. Not only for me to be wallowing constantly in a bath spa or Brent spa or in mud of a greater economic kind for that matter; surely, not ever so as to miss the footpath of everlasting life, not as the present day flowers of our political heritage were wont to engage in, not as in a war of crude or refined oil control and by businesspeople, in the supply chains, mostly by men calling themselves lord temporal, who are involved in money laundry, and men who could as well be a British government look-alike prime ministerial appointed bishop as a lord spiritual for all I cared to know. Not as the political elites of the United States would want us to believe that they alone could enforce a regime change in Iraq, and in the exact time of their private discretion or choosing and so as to introduce a so-called democratic principle of governance, reconstruction works that only their cronies got huge contracts for or a higher standard of life that was said to be accomplished by their religious hoodlums or businessmen-marauders and to be inculcated as an assured way of varied contemporary American lifestyles that beggars belief, for instance.

This, to the Kurdish people or other peoples or what have you.

Well, now, on the third day, that is, after the actual D day of one aspect of the whole events was scheduled to have occurred, as it were, and as I walked across the huge doors and right into the palatial reception centre on the first floor, that is, I spotted children of different races like a coalition of huge rainbow brush of an utterly incompatible colours in the Esanohua Nicon Noga Sheraton watchtower hotels. It reminded me of the majestic sight of the other Zuma Rock that is some fifty-five kilometres away from Abuja, and this if also a person got there from Wuse market via the use of a minivan to Suleja. These children were more like gleaners of our various cultures and not, as it were, the street cleaners of the world of dirt, sycophancies as well as of a divide and rule mentality of the adult world of hawks and doves: they were Sri Lankans, Jamaicans, Ecuadorians, Latvians, Samoans, Slovaks, British Virgin Islanders, Native Australian Aborigines, Peruvians, Koreans of the North and South divide, Iranians, Israelis, Ukrainians, Natives of Papua New Guinea, Lithuanians, Estonians, Russians, Afghans and the whole black race – all assembled around a huge kneel-high round table and that act was done apparently for a memorable event I guessed. It was newfangled to me. It also was astonishing to witness all sorts of children of different sizes, shapes and heights, offspring of members of the diplomatic corps whose parent regimes had not yet been decapitated, sort of, by the more advanced or rather aggressive military or politically-minded administrations; of both younger and older farmers who knew all about making lots and lots of cash; of tailors or seamstresses of both domestic as well as foreign expertise; of security guards who were otherwise retired Army colonels from an equally otherwise ragtag military regimes of a developing nation but who got such technology-enhanced security jobs in a place such as Britain; of all kinds of palm wine tapers of various degrees of skills and whose original talents or whatever were all but ignored by both foreign beer merchants as well as distilled spirits or wine-making tycoons and their distributors; of a lot of other variety of reformist academics who were mostly from abroad; of hard line religious clerics or mallams who were all from within our midst; of other liberal proselytisers as government-approved high-level preachers of their own politically-motivated speeches that were oftentimes irreligious in substance; of roadside labourers whose low wages beggars rational thought and difficult to accept; of owners of giant industrial and commercial ventures of a dubious world-class dominance; of domestic and industrial cleaners of a rather raw technical know-how; of varied types of educational, sexual and adventure tourists; and, of private and professional

citizens of a retirement age, all of whom were in a United Nation-like get-together party of the century or a more sophisticated coalition of the ultimate potentials of the overall willpower of the whole of humankind as well as the economic faithful, if not more. I was then heading for the larger television room, but, then, the aura of that scenic atmosphere of a football look-alike scenario arrested my imagination so completely, as it were, and so dragging me backwards and forward and towards them, forcing me, as it were, with an awe-inspiring countenance to watch history right there and before my naked eyeballs unfolding ever so gradually or rather properly instead. My notebook and a Bic biro were itching to jump out of my front pockets, as would a desperate human being determined to opt out of a sour relationship ultimately. Time was rather slow, you see. Different music played briskly, and each of them became my constant companion amidst an incident which was by itself a suffocating taste of a peculiar mannerism that was associated with the residents of the Government Reservation Area aka GRA in Benin city. An abode of supreme physical comfort that was equally reserved for the truly wealthy materially, as it were. And, well, a rather colourful mixture of the politically appointed top evil, well, yes, top devil, oh, no, top civil servants or the truly native, spiritually.

At first, I made a leering look into the fresh and colourful children; right there, and as I was standing, also, I should think that I was actually seeing our own children standing shoulder to shoulder with their counterparts in the world of magic display of both political as well as cultural know-how. My eyeballs, that were reflecting the inner bubbling joy of my whole being, and together with a deep and a further act of seething rejoicing, soon turned completely misty before I could react otherwise. Those were tears of the joy of self-independence, as translated in a personal notion but rational self-importance, as I eyed one of our children, who was dressed up in a tight pair of shorts with a hand-woven and expensive damask round the right shoulder. And for the life of me, that outfit is equally similar to that of the wear of the original senators in the old Roman empire or its modern day look-alike of the Ghanaian national attire, all of which caught my undivided attention. Oh yes! The only difference between the typical Ghanaian power dresser and our own domestic routine wear being that that style of a Ghanaian national costume made it possible to place their own clothe, or rather a hand woven cloth, on the left shoulder. That same difference occurs in the outfit of an average Tibetan monk. Yet, I am not now about to reactivate that modern western mentality of viewing a polished black pair of shoes cum a costly tie in a male as

evidence of a successful Abuja politician and who is as a look-alike of an investment banker in Lagos. After all, right now, I am too busy studying my own future offspring, and whose lifestyles I do not ever want to tell other people about; I am that busy and not to simply leave my rented household and family behind in order to attend anyhow government-sponsored seminars, workshops or conferences and this so as for me to retell fawning audiences about the twisted lifestyles of such government officials or even their own that I already knew about, as it were. Why not so if not that a father of my ilk preferred an offspring to rise from a purported treason to the height of a universal sense of truism in the ennobling career of a genuine man of letters whom we yearned for nowadays and this over and above a mere president with a businessman's predilection for greediness. Anyway, as I was saying, that child of our heritage was from my village of Idunwele in Ewu and within Edo state. That boy was for a certainty. And he walked majestically forward like an untiring monarch. He stopped so abruptly and, adjusting his clothe on the right hand shoulder, he bowed doubly again and again. His grinning flashed from ear to ear as an earphone user or radio owner could only attest to. Once again, he bowed slightly. Then he headed straight forward and towards the side of his worldwide fellow contestants of equals and merit, and who were already waiting.

I was still baffled I swear. Osenobula, Ose for short, our God almighty has directed His light of divine intervention on to my right foot especially so as not to miss out on such a transporting scenario that is opening up before my very eyeballs. But, then, what could be happening? After all, it is only the colourful dresses and the otherwise uniform type of other apparels that male workers at a high street pharmacy superstore or other supermarkets put on, that kind of clothes of our own homeboy look-alike colleagues as journalists were wearing, only that sort of attires for now I could observe so freely, as I hinted at before. And, for that matter of they not yet showing me their true colours, of that I should say and so clearly too. But, yet, I do not see through to the real personality behind the clothes and the clothes that covered the mere human flesh, as at yet. Moreover, and as I kpokpo myself, that is, in Esan usage, as I worried myself about by racking the brain to a boiling point, and kpokpoing my brain once again, as was before, and as I said before, it was only the memories of world wars as well as the unnecessarily prolonged brutalities, as well as the deadlocks or gridlocks or interlocks of conflicting ideas or whatever, of not only the traditional colonialism era but also of the harder to identify subtle aspects of the gripping neo-colonialism of a dreadlock tactics of divide and rule in our country that were perpetuated by the parents of the foreign siblings

right in front of my view that were unfolding as the same old personality cults or so.

But, yet, nevertheless, why are they all impressively dressed up in their individual national attires and standing right behind that huge mahogany centre-table for, and as if each one of them was like a man preparing for a national wedding of giants, eh? The way each person is carrying his or herself, as I could figure out, that way is not unlike the same manner of acting out one's ego trip when in a childhood type of relationship that is otherwise different from the same two people as childhood friends to later on in life get wedded legally. Besides, as childhood friendship oftentimes goes, a person does branch out in such a relationship now and then so as to engage in other far more much serious affairs of a sexual type on the side. But that illicit affair could be that salacious adventure that may not be easily be seen to be obtainable in a marriage atmosphere when such a matter is a marriage-wrecking taboo of a greater social consequence but that nonetheless is equally of a far more way of lying to one's self about one's true colour that is shrouded in huge political pretence, anyway.

Yet, that notwithstanding, and far from what I was initially expecting on my approach to the whore, oh, sorry, I meant the open hall of the hotel that I still held an unusually higher esteem for, in fact, my brain was yet crammed full with news beats of the five or so interviews about some technology transfer and capital development projects with five foreign career diplomats from the Vatican City, Finland, the republic of Northern Ireland, Nicaragua and Japan, as the lands least of all visited in history by black immigrants, who were zealots of political correctness in their adopted countries. So, therefore, I was not about becoming a nonentity who ran after so-called shallow-minded celebrities, like most musical pop stars, all for a so-called scoop or an exclusive news coverage or whatever. Nor was I ever ready, as it were, to be the par excellent caricature of the children of the working class who see us top journalists in this one light. As being those type of professionals whom the same workmen or women of those lads claimed that our successive governments had all, despite all our personal efforts, had all but made permanent eunuchs in variously styled in-depth political issues of the day as well as being ultimately rascally determined on further transforming most of my counterparts into major celibates in spiritual affairs of an everlasting life kind. That, according to our detractors, also, had turned us into petty peeping Tom, Dick and Harry, of the internet playboys of ancient and modern western worldviews; that issue, our detractors believed that we put to bear on the country's so-called western-oriented celebrities as military men and this whenever they chose to make war or love with the viewing Abuja public in

mind, anyway. This aspect of our journalists being mere errand boys to either a military ruler or a so-called civilian president, our otherwise socially respectable subscribers as fellow citizens, especially, do say to their children that we were more likely to be doing with our time. That we of top editorial ranks are always gossiping about such private matters of so-called celebrity military personnel or politicians as well, instead of us proposing original and fresher ideas on concrete developmental issues and on uplifting our rural readers especially on the virtues of stable political developments worldwide. We as mentally superior journalists, that we made ourselves to be to the world, and who were supposedly well-equipped as better professional equals of our objects of news gathering, so to speak. Besides, I have just fielded in a reappraisal of all sorts of people of our great nation and from other countries who were internally displaced people according to the local office of the United Nation here in the Federal Capital territory. And also I made an appropriate report on the squabbling carried out by government-approved local NGOs and other of such people who called themselves the world leaders in ecosystems matters. I did not fail to cover other quarrelling eco-groups at the Earth Summit that was recently held in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil; and, not to forget in a hurry about the other two feature-length stories on Suleja's abundant natural resources. I mean the government-neglected Ajegunle of our upstate Lagos style, that nonetheless teemed with human resources and this even as university graduates of the nation's topmost institutions realised too late that the quality of their science degrees were rather inferior or inadequate in the modern dispensation of globalisation and so I discovered five of such folks in an overcrowded one room apartment with no job for an upwards of eight years following the completion of their National Youth Service Corps services. And this duty of reporting on food sellers in the open spaces of Suleja at nightfall, also, I carried out through a telephone call as well as a hardcopy delivery by a facsimile transmission and onward to my assistant editor in the Lagos central office.

Then, and so quickly too, a hand-held microphone dropped out and down from above the tall oval-shaped rooftop of frescoes in the Esanohua hall and dangling. This occurred, as I was yet thinking aloud. It was suspended somehow like a butchered goat at the abattoir that I knew of in Suleja and that was a look-alike of that at the Agbo Malu area of Marine Beach in Lagos. And, immediately, a three-piece suited man held on to it. At once, also, my roving eyeballs of an equally ambassadorial kind spotted that male figure in a tersedo that we here would otherwise refer to as a dinner jacket or rather a suit that could as well be associated

with any of our ambassador extraordinary in political matters, especially on serious issues involving asylum seekers and not about our top envoys and their secret lives that were rumoured to include the more trivial aspects of their wives or daughters or office secretaries as lovers who kept on being disgraceful streakers both in the offices as well as at exclusive, high society cocktail parties where oil-money were squandered every night of the year. As rumoured too the men in government and in attendant at such parties always make themselves feel at home without qualms from threats from hired assassins or lowlife armed robbery gangs whatsoever.

Now also, in an impeccably sweet-flowing voice that man spoke aloud. At first, he struck me as a man from Martinique, that is, that Island of flowers; well, it was all for the fact that he tucked a rose flower in his hair. But, once that fell off, he came across to me as more like a nationalised Senegalese, a true public relations man to the core and who knew both worlds of the oppressed lower class who used old-fashioned cameras to capture their lives of woes in still motion and the oppressor upper class category whose digital cameras recorded family memories that government stolen money made possible in our currently unshakeable business climate of graft, unashamed mien and mystification and this as our nation's capital affairs had, furthermore, turned out as a gargantuan business contract between themselves and offspring of top government officials as unmistakeable inheritors. It was a rather frosty reception I had of this other man at first and this at the Esanohua at Ogidigan Drive, off Maitama District, Aguiyi Ironsi road.

Mmhh! Uhum! I can now understand. I am beginning to grasp the message that was drummed around me all along and so I am able to unravel the mystery. A day before the Independence Day anniversary itself, the contest of goodwill, ambassadorial and cross-cultural exchanges of ideas between a family of nations had begun, I gathered; and, selection was then being made thereafter. Two contestants from over 202 independent countries of the living world entered for the competition, and, at the end, eighteen nations emerged from all over the world, including Eromo Enegbenedion and Haruna M Balat. Also, the semi-finalist stage finally brought together seven of the finest, refined and cultivated children. Again, Eromo and Haruna successfully sailed through, including Hutchinson Heinemann representing Europe, Chung-yang Zhou for Asia, Dave Kennedy for North America, Ofisa Olomu of the Pacific Islands, Bob Nevis from the Caribbean Islands and Jolley Anderson for Australia, the last person, who was not yet named, being an added contestant, and which

increased the numbers by one or two or so, but as a kind of ex officio member, regardless. Not more than one of such added contestants was allowed and amongst them was a spectacularly gorgeous girl, who came up tops from the Antarctic regions, including fringe Islands, as her other counterparts either dropped out or else were eliminated at the preliminary stages of the grand contest. Or such contestants easily identified with their former colonial mentors. That was two days before. The same day, as I said, that I was out visiting areas within the three hundred metres space in the Addis Ababa crescent area, off Herbert Macaulay Way and that holds the largest assembly of restaurants, this was west of the other Abuja Sheraton hotel and towers that was situated at Ladi Kwali Way and complete with its own swimming pool, tennis court an atrium and that could easily cost a guest in a standard double room a hundred and forty US dollars plus a deposit of an addition two hundred and ten US dollars, also. Today, however, was the real grand finale and everybody was somehow set. What I am seeing before me at the Esanohua are samples of the finest cuisines, of foodstuffs in the whole wild world that are ably prepared by special cooks and chefs from each contesting country. Now, the master of ceremonies, a Parisian to the core, as the chairman of the occasion, a woman who was neither entirely black nor white nor yellow nor brown, the same powerful professor of home economics and wife of the host country's president, who stood in for her husband, has announced. He, the master of ceremony, finished up the short and beautifully well rendered speech of introducing himself. He repeated the rules of the game. He smiled and bowed with dignity and then went to take up his stand so as to watch and select a possible first class winner of the day or so I assumed.

Music resumed again. This kind of music was not the same as the ones that entertained me both at the Elephant Bar and the Boathouse at Blinkers that was near Addis Ababa crescent, a patch of land renown for local artistes, bands and best also for listening in to their kind of music and this especially as locals, construction workers and visitors alike do meet here. An Addis Ababa crescent that has, therefore, become a national truism as in: if you intend going to Addis Ababa, then, as an escort, check out Gladys a barber by trade and daughter of baba Ogidigan. Anyway, here at Esanohua, life was breathed back into the roomy hall of the hotel as each instrument let out shrills, booming sounds or metallic imitations and all then blended together like a well mixed akara ball and akamu or pap in the month of a native here. Yes, there was supreme harmony of all other musical instruments, also. From the more obviously classical to the extremely delightful and lively as well as exquisite folk songs

of the Bini people all over the world; from Beethoven, Mozart, Enrico Caruso on to the juju brand of king Sunny Ade and through to sir Victor Uwaifo and on and on to chief Osadebey's highlife music and to that of the muscle-flexing and exciting atilogwu dance steps; from the Brazilian samba music it was straight on to the soulful, nostalgia-loaded Indian chanting songs as well as those of the chant-like Yoruba apala music and then the Esan danceable music of chief Umobuarie Egberaise, asono and kokoma musical brand of a dancehall type. All lips moved. And all the heads wagged about the hall and all the hands of different skin colours further twirled and swayed above the heads as commanded by the master of ceremony and a fellow who made them to make a noise and with hats or without hats and headties. National costumes fed our eyeballs to our individual satisfaction. School uniform-like attires of Barbados, the wide sunny hats of the citizens of Bermuda and their thick shorts, to the hand woven cloth from Kiribati worn around the waist, with ropes made from plant branches and tied on both hands, to the pipers and pipe blowers of Scotland and their thick red, striped skirts, to the lava-oozing, glacier-forming Icelanders - all graced our eyeballs as they streamed passed in a slow motion. After some twenty-eight minutes or thereabouts, at which time we all wished the display should remain frozen in canvas or photographic stillness or in our own prescribed time forever, the able and charming master of ceremony stepped out into the open and forward again. His black pair of shoes glittered.

"The first stage, please, ladies and gentlemen and our capable contestants," he spoke so softly but clearly, clapping so softly as well. The whole assembled children, admirers, judges and cultural attaches also clapped very warmly, a feat reflecting the unique stature of the wonderful hotel. The restraint was evident in its gentler and fading-off series of noises, as each contestant with the best of attires, marched across the floor. This was brisk as there was silence all most immediately and this coupled with the master of ceremony's superb manner of announcing the second stage of theatrical display of flesh and flags of some kind.

"Name, please?" his strident voice quipped at once, as he was nodding at a hand-held fan-blowing contestant who, following the custom, bowed.

"Chung-yang Zhou."

"Country?"

"China."

"We adults in the West know that asking a person from a developing economy or a third world fellow like a Chinese banker to choose between a college professor of physics

and a Nobel prize winner in physics is like asking a Nigerian child to pick between a 50 kobo coin and a 500,000 naira banknote. So, let your address of the country you hail from be in full. The full names please. Do make it brief. And say it loud.”

The male child shook his head; his moon-shaped face reflected the militia type of drills that he must have had back at home during the Cultural Revolution era. Now, he was serious yet elegant to behold. “The People’s Democratic Republic of China.”

“Superb. Ingenious. No sham. That tone of yours still reminded me of the sound of a newly minted set of coins in the hands of a European heir to his or her parents’ throne. Or the voice of a working class lover in a seriously passionate courtship of an equally total self-surrender of a kind. Or the look-alike wads of crisped banknotes of a monarch’s ward. That is very good of you, I say. As, also, that voice of yours, that could easily be ascribed to holders of coins as an unconscious indication of who they were in social strata, is oftentimes heard in the enclosed bedroom world of boys and girls in their early twenties, also, and when such a young lover could be matching her admirers’ family names for purely economic considerations, especially; and, the male lover who also violently attached a willing female lover’s first name on to his surname as a way of boosting his own private political ego, and all before his fellow female workers or whatever. See, my dear contestant, and not ever being ingenuous, or rather disingenuous, as it were, and, as I should say now, details count alright my dear one?”

As with the still photograph of a certain Miss Micere Makgabo-Mungo from the Masai people of east Africa or so and full of some wicked smile as displayed in that postcard quality picture that was dangling constantly on his left hand, the child contestant beamed with a smile.

“As well as what you have just done my dear one, I should add also that a person, when growing up, looked up to some other folk and this so as to accomplish a better result in life that was more than that of his parents’ own and to which he earlier on subscribed to, such as being a powerful Secretary-General of the communist party bureau, or imitate the values of an uncle whose way of life commanded an enormous amount of respect to youngsters such as yourself or an outsider who was not only also a total stranger to the private lives of ordinary people but a superb pop star idol as well. So my contestant, who are you in these three relationship of friendship in individual goals?”

“As a pillar of emulation is concern, sir, it is the first one.” The child bowed.

“Exactly what you are doing with your life, as a student right now, I guess.” The child bowed respectfully again, without him answering back; and, like someone forced by urine to walk faster, so too he was leaving the stage in a hurry.

“Next? And you name please,” he made a drawling sound.

“Master Dave Kennedy,” his strong voice boomed through the loudspeakers and over our heads as if to dominate us. His fingers were rolled into a boxing position. His mood belied his aggression. He gripped his lower jaw so firmly, partly with the aid of the teeth.

“Good. So smart of you.”

The boy, of a school-going age, and who preferred his designer label on his school uniform to be displayed to the world of advertising in a music television station look-alike manner, swaggered ever so majestically. He peeped at his cultural attaché.

The man asked: “How many continents have we in the world today my dear little boy? Do you know them all master Dave Kennedy who had intimated us as to ask not what our country had done for us but what we have done for our country in morality? What? How many continents? Such an old trick.”

“America.”

“Uh, how many you say? Say it again, please.”

“The United States of America, sir. All and sundry the world over call our country America. And, I am an American. What the German Adolf Hitler tried unsuccessfully to achieve in war, we of America did in politics and commerce, sir.”

“Wonderful! Such a crisp reply? Well, and yet, fellow look-alike, I should intimate you, as I usually do on this occasion, that I oftentimes only had the time to peruse works of arts of a western European origin, as being only better than that of other cultures if you could permit me to say. The aim being to make me a much more robust human being in finer cuisines, for instance. And as a cultural enthusiast myself. So my fellow look-alike, I do not view, as I should say, Hollywood-made movies that distort western world view at all. Nonetheless, congratulations for your effort at answering me in a rather, well, not so appropriate manner, as it were. For, back home in western Europe, I usually consumed such authors of grander ideas in art history and who were seen as real authorities to those of us who failed to live up to such loftier heights of individual knowledge so as to create art works of greater originality as well. Not in north America, however, where money talks, and where such authors could be regarded as mere playboy celebrities right in front of cameras, the

television cameras especially. And this act that is carried out by equally failed artists themselves and who turned to photography or professors of montage within the circle of performing arts departments, especially those that concerned the older authority in filmmaking, Sergei Eisenstein who died in 1948 or thereabouts or television presenters of historic African works in a rather condescending way or the marketers who exploited Asian master craftsmen and craftswomen as cheap labour or so.”

Those around the roundtable conference look-alike as well as the general public all heaved and stirred. The women held their breasts and breath. The men sighed. The other children broke wind. In the audience, eyeballs lit up as more adults farted. A couple of people became wet in the face with laughter; the eyebrows dimmed and blurred. The master of ceremony, whilst still unruffled, asked the next contestant, an Iraqi national the next available question and so, he, therefore, cleverly ignored the roaring outburst that later erupted from the other giggling children and a few amongst the audience who were yet applauding the restless and hormone-surgingly American bull as they also half-ignored the calm but militarily castrated Iraqi ox of a boy, who was nonetheless a chink of light in that momentary darkness of political vision.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. The fact that the house cat is of the same feline family of the lion does not make the said pussycat to aspire for any sort of superiority over and above the station of the tiger or whatever. Boy, the Americas is not the same as the United State of America any day, mind you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you all the same. Now, to you my dear young master, how old are you?”

“I am a 10-year-old.”

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” He signalled for the next male child to come forward and stand next to him.

“Your name, please.”

“Haruna, sir.”

“Rankadede, and which means to say that I salute you, alhaji. Is that not okay?”

“Yes, sir. That is cool by me.”

“Anyway, as you would rather prefer your dagger of truth in political matters to be hidden within your traditional attire, as being where it ought to belong, and that was unlike the last male contestant from the Americas, I should say that all is well. Every situation is under control. “ He reflected for a little while longer before finally putting the question

across. “ Now, alhaji, answer me this question, please. Now, apart from formal schooling, and at your leisure time, what else do you most like doing without a second thought? Give the very best my dear alhaji. And take your time and weigh the alternatives my very able alhaji.”

“Chasing cattle. All sizes of cows, including goats and rams, as our parents chase after more wives as enshrined in our religion,” he cried out with such a complete innocence. Roars of rippling laughter further rented the perfumed air and the impact hung for quite some minutes, while dreamy and watery eyeballs focused on him, actually looking out for a goat or guinea fowls, instead of vowing no longer to be chasing slipstream after male and female championship, long distance runners from, say, Kenya or Ethiopia or elsewhere.

“You live with your parents, the ones you alluded to as chasing other oil-rich ethnic minorities about as cows, I supposed? For that is extremely ingenious of you. Expertly well articulated. It is remarkable and unpretentious, your faults aside. I do like your guts. Now, speak more about your family. Alhaji, do you still live with them – the two, father and mother I mean?”

“No, sir,” he said so embarrassingly. “Father lives on Victoria Island in Lagos and while mother stays at FESTAC Town of the same state, at the other side of the city, reserved for the working class, and in a one bedroom apartment, and close to the market-place. There is where she lives in.”

“Now, my boy, talking of the actual working class folks in that Ajegunle area, yet again, and this vis-à-vis that 10,000 dollar a night presidential suite at the Mandalay Bay hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA look-alike in taste that you said that your father lives in on Victoria Island in Lagos, now, is it true of the saying in the more popular Lagos Yoruba language version that Gambari kpa Fulani ko se jo, or as translated roughly to mean a Gambari man kills a Fulani fellow, there is no case to answer, yes?”

“Sir, in marital affairs, and according to my mother, yes. It is true.”

“That is alright, That is all then. That is all. Well done all the same my straight-talking alhaji of a future great heir and not necessarily airs of Abuja.”

He bowed as were his look-alike contestants before him. He tapped on the raised elbow as if he was actually greeting some eminent personality.

“Rankadede I salute you again, I say. Thank you. Thank you alhaji. Thank you. Now, next and your name, please?”

“Jolley,” the contestant said with a rolled-up upper lip. The face, that was dotted with

red spots, was slightly frowning.

“That is Australia or Guernsey or Canada. Definitely not Canadian French that I know all too well. Am I lying my dear?”

“Australia, yes. My father was Canadian, but he migrated to Queensland in Australia. I am thus an Australian.”

“That is it. It sounds like Australopithecus Africanus. Molesters of men and ravishers of women of the Australian Aborigines. Yes, an Australopithecus Africanus. Africanus, eh? But, hang on, what a combination of names?” he joked over and over again. “Do you know that aspect of our lives my young damsel?”

“No, sir.” The contestant swayed the head sideways. She was a free spirit, not after the manner that she looked down on the French man.

“Never mind. Never mind my damsel. Never mind. Next question, please.” He too shook the head. “Never mind. I say never mind my angel. Never mind. Now, age, please?”

“Eleven years of age,” the girl almost said to herself. She was fingering on her buttons while yet thinking of the impact of the long word, Australopithecus, her flower embroidered brown skirt was held rather too high up her knees, the blouse was sleeveless, exposing too much of the chest to the delight of adult child molesters in the hall, so said a child support officer, the Gambian woman next to me and who whispered this yet again to my hearing. A British tourist, while clapping just then, loved it all and rocked the legs and sang her praises.

“School: your exact class, please my dear.”

“Senior High School 11. Your equivalent here of the Senior Secondary School 11 as I was told by a male porter in my hotel room yesterday.”

“That is impression. Hugely impressive and perfect by global standards. You, an immigrant to Australia? A growing body of stateless citizens of the world? Yes, my Miss Beautiful Australia.”

“Thank you, uncle. I say, Yes to your other question of immigration headaches.”

“One more question. What exactly is your best...well...favourite cuisine of all time? Well, the food that you loved demolishing even when your favourite television programme or programmes were being aired and you would have had to miss that or those programmes. What food daughter of ours?”

“Fried rice. Turkey meat and fried plantain.”

Laughter from the audience held up the somewhat already bored contestant.

“Alright. That is alright. It is alright. Ladies and gentlemen, our contestant only said that that is – that is what she likes best. That is to eat a whole country. Ala Turkey. Well, well, well. You all, do not forget that. We all have our peculiar culinary surprises, different from the national taste of our respective countries. Details count all the same. Why do I say so? The reason was that economic circumstances do make a clear disparity between demand and want, money and desire, turkey the meat and Turkey the country, with all due respect to that country. And so not the rather confusing economic factors of supply, as I was saying, like I do get as feedbacks from some of you already murmuring again to my hearing. Demand and want I meant. Food for your digestion. At school, your teachers, forget, would tell you better, okay? You the children. You all watch out. Now, yes. Next person please. You and your name, please?”

“Eromo, sir.”

“Nigerian, that is.”

“Esanland. Nigeria, yes sir. Esanland.”

“That is impressive, as you seem to be self-assured. Well, on a reflective note, I had thought that you were from the Gold Coast, sorry, what I actually meant was the present day Ghana, not Gold of a larger or better quality that they no longer have in that their coast and in an enviable abundance, and whose modern outlook bore no resemblance to the old Ghana empire, anyhow. Yes, the gold digging zones. And the gold diggers in political circles. Yes, now, are you related my dear sir?”

“Yes sir. They are like us. Same history, sir.”

“History?” He peered at his shoulders.

“Yes sir. Our teacher said so in class, sir. The language connection, sir. The kwa sub-groups of speakers of our languages and dialects sir. What you are looking at on my shoulder blades, sir, is therefore a part of our national attire. Theirs, like ours, is knotted but thrown across on the left hand shoulder, which represents the woman and ours is on the right, which is meant for real men of genius. Sir, even the best poets from the nation of Eritrea do throw their own hand woven cloth across their left shoulder as do Ghanaians as well. Like yam tubers common in our state sir: cooked yam and pounded yam as being an allusion of inequality, sir. The left is for fish and chips eaters also. May be some other lesser foodstuffs, sir.”

“And you look at that. You two! A whole two contestants from the same country of a

hitherto wasted manpower and or resources, and in the finalist stage? Well, well, well. I just cannot think otherwise. Now, I know why you people do win prizes during costume display in the Olympics games or so. Your folk songs included, that is. I really do. It speaks volumes really of the cultural development and, well, much more. Your attire, just as I hinted earlier on, did remind me, I must repeat again and again or should I now say, confess; well, yes, it did remind me of the whole Ghanaian national outfit, until I looked closely, at barely a heartbeat away, on that shoulder of colourful plumes again and again. Only there is no girl by your side, a wife, to complete the pictorial outfit, the kente stuff that I had in mind. Got my slip of tongue, sir?"

"We have also got the buba and iro for our women and the batik sir."

"Fine – fine. I sure do appreciate what you are telling me. Like I said earlier on, your dress, that is what gave me the initial clue; now, how do I say it? Yes. Right on track. It gave me the impression of Ghanaians being like yourself. Rather like your people. Elmina castle and the fort at Badagry in Lagos and the fort that is the bishop Ajayi Crowder story. Now, tell me more. Please confide in me. Do all Nigerians often wear this, apart from the buba and iro amongst other types that you made mentioned of to me? " He looked at the white babariga outfit of the other boy, master Haruna Makarfi Balaf who stirred just then.

"Yes, sir," he replied in the manner a primary school pupil would do to a disciplinarian of a semi-illiterate yet a classroom appointed teacher.

"Where exactly is that, if I may again ask?"

"South of the Niger. Midwestern state. Bendel state. Edo state as it is now called today and so known by. Yes, south-south of our nation. And, as it should remain, sir, today, that is, and in the near future and ever shall be forever and ever if only the politics of divide and rule, sir, does not mess up our lives once more. And, by the grace of God also, that is, sir, if I may quickly add that I shall see to it that I effectively use the power that is bestow on my person, sir, a power or more that is by our sovereign lord Jehovah God to transform our leaders' grandchildren of nowadays, and who are our classmates, so as for me to be sure that such classmates in future political or military offices do not return to the past and to automatically abstain from further resorting to the crude tactics of planning other military coup de tats of any sort that disrupt our normal lives."

"A bit of history, that one. True to almighty God Jehovah who made us. That is hugely interesting: up until now, that is, I have only been seeing suits, kaftans, dashiki, abada

wear, agbada and babariga – not the imbecile of a certain nonentity of a Babangida’s swastika - such attires, that included asoke, buba and iro, I see right across the audience as you too can bear witness to. Oh dear! I can spot your kind, now. What an education from you. It makes me to think that some of your future generation of students may not, after all, see education as an ultimate source of a meal ticket. Not the crops of your present fathers whom I left behind, and way back in the city of Paris in France as master’s degree holders who refused to come back to their villages so as to develop their all but abandoned homeland to that rare touch of economic efficiency, liberty, law and order that is the common advanced level of living in those foreign lands that your grandfathers before them had all but refused to leave, despite all the humiliations melted out on immigrants. Over there, in Europe, such university graduates are street sweepers who do not come up to scratch as the meaning of a decent college education implies to us natives. To us over there, a college certificate means first and foremost to make a name for one’s self as I am doing right now. The necessary follow-up is either to establish a product of an original invention such as a computer or a camcorder or disprove of older ideas of arcane importance so as to pave the way for better ideas in our contemporary setting. So, my dear, I may seem a little bit of a weirdo in your youthful eyeballs, but, not to worry, that does not take away the fact that you are, for sure, unique in the hearts of our steely-minded television viewers. Our audience scenting with brilliantine on a sunny day; but without the red-hot Ajaokuta steel that refused to produce wealth. Yes, it does remind me actually, yes, it was on my way to this place, that an announcer did in fact call your radio station as being Radio Bendel or Edo Broadcasting Services or so. You are therefore right there,” he pronounced each word with lightening speed. “And, I looked across the crowd yesterday and you know what I said to myself? Oh dear me they are right there, your type of apparel-wearing folks. Nonetheless, thank you for the enlightenment today. Indeed, I have got to keep an eye on that aspect of our lives from now onwards. Now, next person and the nameeeeeee, pleasssseeeee?”

“Jolley from Australia.”

“Australia? Australopithecus? Australia, hustlers and Africanus?” For a while, he thought jokingly about it all. “Two identical names in the same contest like you heard me tell your mate a while ago? Let me have more of such surprises that is Brazil and as a place where nowadays the man with the most DNA or, well, sperm count in a baby’s body automatically becomes the father in legal contests after contests between would-be fathers

over a single child. Do please feed me with such surprises.”

“Yes, uncle. That is right. I am James Jolley. She is Janet Jolley, my sister. The two of us are one, although we sometimes use Anderson for our surname, our grandfather’s name. Quite a surprise, really.”

“Ah-ha! That is it. J J! Junior Jesus as a male or what have you. Junior Jupiter as a female or whatever. It is definitely a tie with – with let us see now; a tie with Nigeria like I hinted before, a place where minorities like the Aborigines to the scoundrels in power and flushed out of the toilets of British history are the look-alike minorities who are oppressed by the three major tribes in Nigeria. Yes, a tie with Nigeria. This could spring the greatest surprise yet, I assure you all. Anyway, what is your best rhymed song ever produced? Do, please, speak a little bit louder.”

“Beast of England, Beast of Ireland, Beast from everywhere,” he said, now very generous with the English language and the pronunciation pattern.

“Ah-ha! England my England. Well, England their England. Ever so cunning that woman called England as a Queen look-alike any day. United today, disunited tomorrow. Now, you Englander. You view it this way at least for once. A Queen of England as a pillar of hope as the lord Okonofua of Ewu whom I understand remained her eternal benefactor in sacred matters of everlasting life and this as he stood erect in the air and face to face with the Queen or any of her future successors if at all, yes! The Duke of Edinburgh and why not if imperialism was not the ballad for the entertainment of the bards over there, eh? A randy prince of Wales, yes, only to keep wailing into ears and calling for his own time to rule over an anointed church elder. You listen to that. Yet, why not a baron of northern Ireland as we see offices of American oil dukes in the Kaduna oil refineries, yes? Dare you, you English grammar school boy? Or rather those royals in secured private colleges? Pay a visit to Edinburgh, yes of course. Travel alone to, say, the heartland of Dublin on a private sightseeing or on a working holiday trip on that exclusive royal train and alight, then, start shaking hands with the Dubliners without a mask on or a glove on or the spiritual lord Okonofua guiding you or advised by that your little prime minister before hand? Give the Irish folk a helping hand, as it were, by carrying out that once in a lifetime gesture of a ceremony of ignorance, yes your supremely esteemed royal majesty and your physical bodily manifestation of a celebrity’s status and not the spiritual presence of lord Okonofua of Idunwele and your royal majesty will all but walk straightaway and alone into the lion’s

benevolent teeth of a metaphor of a permanent extinction of the soft bums of previous look-alikes of your ilk in France. Yet, now, again, today, and as I am speaking right now those people call themselves, well, such as in the Falklands war, they called themselves Great Britain. Tomorrow, for immigration purposes, it is United Kingdom. The next day, once it is the World cup, it is Wales, England, Scotland and Ireland included. England my long forgotten younger brother, well, sister. What a choice? What a song really? Now boy, you know the name of the singer? The writer, yeah? Ever seen his picture?"

"Yes. He is George Orwell."

"Good old George Orwell, that one. That is even more fantastic; hugely spectacular, my very young contestant who could not add that Orwell was also a one-time BBC journalist or a passionate war reporter or both. You do know your alphabets, regardless."

"I am please to hear that sir."

"So do I. Now, by the way, how old are you?"

"7-year-old, uncle."

"Seven? " he bellowed, watching out for the boy's reaction as he was then also quickly staring at his wristwatch." All the same, thank you very, very much and much more. The beat goes on, so we say up there in France. " He smiled very patronisingly.

"Big thanks to you, uncle for the opportunity."

"And may God bless you too, so longer as you see other people, immigrants alike, as opportunities and not as threats of potential job-snatching. Yes, well, all of mankind need one of such blessings, at least once in a life time. We need the thanks after the survival, true."

The bemused contestant watched the man as he stepped backwards and shortly after that he was soon standing beside yet another properly and well-briefed contestant.

"Next is you; your name, please."

"Master John Hutchinson."

"Representing Europe I believe."

"That is right," he replied crisply, as though sucking an overripe orange that was bought at the supermarket or else he was simply chewing the tongue so as to forestall a shock or something.

"Now, welcome on board, my friend." He grinned. He was closed to betraying his fondness for the frail-looking child who equally smiled benignly.

"Now, let us see. Yes, what do we have here? Good, let me asks you a very simple

question all the same. You are ready for that, I should think, yes? Would that be okay if I asked a question right now?"

"Go ahead: I am all ears as our elders would say, Mr Francois Le Pen."

"A point of correction my dear friend. Mr Bardot, please."

"Go ahead then Mr Francois Bardot, the great grandson of the famous French male movie star – Julian Bardot. Speak on."

"Right, as you said. Now, listen. Illiteracy ordinarily meant not being capable of reading or understanding so accurately a set of formula or alphabets, writing or speaking a particular type of language, that is, not having those required language skills, if we were to go beyond the superficial dictionary meaning. What I meant is, I am applying the skills of a much more wider and better known interpretation within the family set-up and as found in the children's working encyclopaedia to soothe you for example. Now, good. Now, listen, apart from your own native language, the English language, would you say for instant that other speakers of other languages, say, Swahili, Amharic, Fijian, Gujarati, Chinese language should be regarded as, eh...?" He was automatically cut short and forced to listen with a slight.

"Illiterates. Period."

"Thank you. Thank you mate. Thank you young bloke. Thank you so much for coming to my aid at the right moment." He swallowed. He seemed to be further slightly disturbed but he made as though he actually envisaged such a comment from a contestant whose cultural attaché had, a week previously, written an apologia on the sanctity of the British spoke English over and above that of the American type, but surely not the Indian variant which he abhorred with no justifiable reason whatsoever.

"Okay."

He tried again. "Now, listen. I shall make myself even clearer. Now, agreed that I am a Frenchman," he continued with a masterful composure. "I speak both French and English. Both do sound great to me. They are of interest to me too, as you can attest to right now. Follow?"

"Yes. Quite alright."

"You agreed therefore that both are okay with me as I am comfortable with them. Right?"

"Pretty well so. Yes."

"Now, hear we go. Let us roll. Now, can you, like myself, speak English and, let us

say, Portuguese, the first and proper and more racially integrated country of both black and whites, Muslim and Christians alike in Europe? Or let us say French or Albanian or Spanish equally well?"

"Surely not."

"Uh, yes! Well, that is better." Displaying his clipped lips, he nodded mannerly. "May I know why, my dear friend?"

"Why? Of course, I am not literate in the Spanish language. Put the other way round, I am not expected to know, actually; but for the Spaniard to know the English language, yes of course. Especially the Polish commoners: they have had a chequered history already, and earlier in the last century, they have been subjugated by the Germans, then the Russian power as easy as the subordinate clause is to the parent noun clause. So, confused as to what to speak, as to what to use in day to day activities, whether Polish or Germany or Russian languages, most of them in my country opted for the English language. We have got them in surplus back home: English for Foreign language speakers at Summer Tutorial Colleges. The GCSE for those in some kind of formal education. Surely, a must for them. English ought to be a rule to them. Think about trading. Commerce. Things as complicated as that. Our computers need the English language settings to function properly, too."

"So, in other words, and based on your assumption, it is right to draw a logical conclusion that you are, should we say, also illiterate. Yes? You being unable to relate to me in the Spanish language."

"Me, what? Illiterate? Beg your pardon!"

"Your words, do not forget my friend. And, yes, remember the juicy taste of the Irish black ale?"

The boy's face was blushing, not consoled, and at each moment he was making to trundle away from him. More than once, and in-between, he was saying, "That is rubbish. Totally unacceptable. Utterly so."

"You must not forget so easily boy as you leave this Esanohua edifice, you must not fail to remember what I am about telling you. Listen again."

The boy's head turned to listen; he was held back more by a cross section of the white community present and the whistle blowers who sought after hard facts from the Frenchman who himself was then being alleged to be the first to attack an innocent boy of good parentage. Invisible hands made him to linger on.

“Good, my boy. Now listen again. A roadside Moldovan, Albanian, Esan, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo tailor, like a back street Brazilian footballer, a boy, follow? Those folks might not be able to write or be able to speak the English language of lawyers who draft treaties to steal other peoples’ lands or accountants to tug on business adventurers, your ideal of the perfect English establishment. Yet, each of them can speak the language of football or tap football to the imperial heights of a towering genius of Pele so to speak. And the tailor in Edo state could make a grinding noise of an expert’s delight with needle and thread so as to manufacture your supermarket type of clothing. Like the Marion & Spartan look-alike supermarket in your country that got supplies of sewn clothing from India. Same is our Odamenegbegbe fabric or other materials that were of a more higher quality clothes of the kind that you are putting on.”

The boy seemed like a morose as he joined the rest of the children on queue. The master of ceremony beamed a smile and turned to face the inquisitive audience. They clapped and jeered. There were lots of side talks and jokes and all kept whistling words of comfort somehow. Somebody turned up the volume of the microphone by mistake. The master of ceremony said afterwards:

“Right away, folks, let us again roll and move ahead. We have got to move on as the Americans would love to suggest. And so we must go on regardless. And now we have come to the grand finale.” He watched the hilarious audience a little bit longer.

More thunderous hand clapping hit my earlobes. They forced me to use both hands to block them off. The shrill or thrill aside, I feared loosing out on any bit of information. So dog-eared, I listened with eyeballs that were completely wide open.

“To preserve the integrity of the noble game that was not of savages but of a beautiful sporting glory my dear friends,” the master of ceremony said aloud, “each contestant will have to pick a piece of white paper right here. Right beside me on the table.” He pointed at a small box of chocolate colour; a worldwide snack whose cocoa beans were mostly produced by Ghanaian farmers who hardly knew what chocolate bars looked like.

Looking around, I could notice the hugely expensive dishes that were being rolled in by chefs. My mouth watered instantly, considering the enormity of the aroma. Self-control, coupled with the decency of my job – brown envelope jokes aside, prevented me from either looking so foolish or appearing too greedy. Instead, I secretly swallowed each lump of spittle one after another, blinking when it was really misty or terribly itching me, or when it was

hard to suppress the urge in me to eat and so which could have tended towards the calamitous and so make me jump on to that church platform look-alike of a public symbol of an absolute monarch's palace and grab hold of the assorted meals all to myself.

Chung-yang Zhou, the first contestant, marched silently forward like an unwilling footballer billed to take a penalty shot and waited. He chested out. He breathed in and out. His eyeballs were wide open. I tightened my chest too, on seeing him, clutching my sweating palms, as though smelling of danger ahead. He was unruffled, as he stood by the small box and, making a quick pick, he walked straight towards the elegant master of ceremony.

"Yes!" He cleared his throat. Silence fell on the gaping audience. Mild tension gripped me even though the centralised air-conditioner system was sending in flake-like air into the hall. I sweated profusely. I shrugged so as to fight off the growing tension, fear and nostalgia, and wondering why this should be happening to me at such an opportune time, while all about me innocent faces lit up, and jubilantly too at the whole baffling incident. Gradually, I mastered my emotions, as a man in a shotgun wedding soon oftentimes realised. I mellowed down, becoming in the process more livelier due in part to Hayden's symphony number 102 in B flat of the chamber orchestra of Europe, conducted by Nikolous Harnon court. Then the voice of the master of ceremonies announced: "Pounded yam and ogbolor soup. A West African delicacy wherever whenever."

The rapturous audience cackled, jeered, sniggered and clapped and cheered a little bit longer.

I clapped, laughed and cheered along also without wanting to. How come, I asked myself, how come that no one in the whole hotel entrance hall never ever told the master of ceremony or whoever he thought he was where exactly that exclusive meal came from? Such nutrient-laden food, introduced with such a few words, sterile words really, with all the arts for arts sake techniques, such outdated canons of western yearning, all devoid of our own ceremonies? I abused him under my breath, biting my lips to the bargain. I spat. I tightened my fists.

"Here, here, here," the master of ceremonies commanded. "Table three, please. Step up please. As the Swedish rail track system is right on time, so too you ought to be right on time."

The contestant ambled slowly forward and stopped at the sight of the meal. His whole wrinkled face captured by the background music said it all. Photographers snapped away.

Flashlights were everywhere. It was such an amazing sight as to how such a male child, lucky not to have been a female who could have been abandoned in the streets to rot due to a one-child syndrome of his country, how could he delay at such a unique, steaming meal, when his mother did not delay at childbirth, eh?

“Start right away,” the master of ceremony ordered, thus flagging off with the left hand of law and order.

So swiftly, and ignoring the sight of the Igbo okazi soup, Calabar’s afia efere or ofensala or white soup, Ijebu gbegiri soup, Idunwele ikhiabor soup, ikpeikpei soup, omikpedin or banga soup, okhiele soup, groundnut stroke vegetable mixture soup and all the iru flavour or a locust beans smell of delight or the other Esan omi-ikpesin or pepper soup, he grabbed hold of the fork sticks on the first table; he opened the plate and started off immediately to eat, using the whole fork sticks.

Rage filled my burning stomach and heart region. How could such a child be taught to discredit our culture so early in life, eh? This, when other construction workers at the other Abuja eatery would abhor, and this, not with the hungry eyeballs of those I met at the eatery around the Wuse market shops, outside the bus station by Julius Berger junction to the north west of Abuja or the supermarkets that served European and American meals at the same place that is off Shehu Shagari Way, north and close to the European Community house, as it were. So, now, how could this child, with the ceremony of innocence, ignore the wrath of our ancestors? Yes, not even the other eatery centres at Sackcloth hotels, ala Ajegunle type, and that were the cheaper ones. The Lebanese Mc-Dowal’s where a person could get a kebab for as little as one hundred and sixty naira or a two hundred and fifty naira for a plate of salad. And what about the Shagalinka that I saw with my eyes and a Muslim outfit where quality jollof rice meals were served but, yes, no alcohol or smoking was allowed. So, how, for goodness sake? How, when even the Talk of the Town, as it were, is said to be the best yet most costly restaurant that served Indian cuisines as their specialities and located off Shehu Shagari Way north. How? I yelled out curses from the back side with nobody actually paying me any slight attention whatsoever.

And then a deafening uproar. The audience shifted. They stood up in block. Some sat down immediately. Other people sat back afterwards, repeating the actions in intervals. These swinging movements, that were reminiscence of the swinging sixties of Great Britain of free love, together with the music and the constantly falling away of the pounded yam from the

chop-sticks or fork sticks amused me a lot instead of actually irritating me. Yet, my mouth watered ever so badly as I helplessly bore witness as to how a people's culture could be so taken for granted by a foreign invading force, and this, with chop sticks? Minutes passed. All attempts at destroying the soul of a people, as he kept on slipping one lump after yet another into his gaping mouth were abortive. I tiptoed. My eyeballs glared on the richly prepared white ema and the thick, meat-heavy draw-soup and it confirmed on my mind at once the old saying back home that a bowl of quality okhiele or draw-soup is the ultimate outcome of real cash and qualified Esan cooks, as it were. The pounded yam and ogbolor soup were hugely and superbly made. Wonderful, I murmured. To think that this same people's neighbour, Japan – a follower of giants, first it was Germany for military dominance and second it was America on economic dominance – to think Japan, an early loser, manufactured the poundo machine that was used in preparing the cooked yam? The instrument that had made it look flake-like, unlike the original starch-retaining, mortar-pounding type in which case our tradition would have at least assisted him in passing his all-time test. But could it be then that this people do not enjoy the very essence of life? Or they rejoice in horse laugh alone? Did they know of the secret of family happiness, of self-fulfilment, of existence? Do they merely manufacture these mechanical gadgets, just as Europe took the Bible and rewrote the principles of commerce out of it, only to dump on us? Or was the male child rather shy, and he was merely therefore pretending because of the crowd? What about his cultural attaché, was he informed of what to do and not do in the present circumstances? Who would help me answer these questions, please?

Poor me! The child has failed his vital examination at the university of life and very woefully too. Thirty whole minutes passed and no single lump entered inside his mouth – even as a struggling artiste could be without a female paying him a visit at home. The nearest it got was up his chest-level. Exactly that range, the draw soup being the only deterrent. Then in a dramatic move he dropped the fork sticks, chop sticks or woods or whatever and, bowing thrice, then he left and to the complete shock of those watching, a thoroughly dry smile lingering on his tilapia-like lips.

The audience clapped, cheering all the same. The master of ceremony was motionless as he received the piece of paper from the next child, Haruna. He stared at the paper and made a leering look at the table. The eyeballs of the audience also followed his.

Suddenly, fear gripped me again as would anybody of my look-alike temperament

and in my exact position. The actual failure of the first child has not lessened my built-up tension. Weird images of affluence that I observed at the Sheraton, the Nicon, the post office at Wuse, the Ewu arts gallery and the EMS parcel services at the shopping centre, the NITEL office at Fashari street in the Garki district, the Nigerian Airways office at the UTC shopping complex, all these aspects of our life crossed my mind. Now, could it be this moment that I have dreaded all along, I had had a feeling of defeat for? May our fathers not allow that to happen, I said to myself.

Smiles, melting off Haruna's face, both intrigued as to provoke me, whilst making love, to mistake the famous Getty museum in the USA of my personal knowledge to be a spaghetti-induced buxom in a lady and then frightened me to death, and no more. That Haruna's mien was not like that of a person who will be content to stay the night at, say, at the seven hundred naira a room per a night Abuja Eddie-Vic hotel or eat at the hotel that is off Mohammadu Buhari Way. No. His facial gestures mirrored those of our politicians who preferred Esanohua or the Nicon Noga Hilton or the other Agura hotel at Festival Way and that also charged eight thousand naira, less than Nicon and Sheraton, but rendered the same quality of services, say, in meals as well. Yes, such politicians look-alike of Haruna who will go only for the one way ticket price of between five thousand, nine hundred and fifty naira to ten thousand naira Virgin Atlantic, Ewu Airline, ADC Airline, Okada Airline, or the recently disbanded Nigerian Airways and this from Lagos or Kano to Abuja itself. Not Haruna to board a CN Okoli or a Chisco awarawara transport that was close by the Julius Berger Junction and this for a thousand and two hundred naira per head or what is also called luxurious buses from Lagos to Abuja and in an overnight journey not to talk of using my own type of a jalopy in an over twelve hours journey and as a look-alike of that famous eight hundred naira per a person bush taxi journey at the New Karu motor park, ten kilometres west of Abuja proper and on the Jos road, you see. Now, like me, the audience waited with tears on their eyelashes.

"Table one, please."

Now, by table one, Haruna opened up and unwrapped the food very fast. He removed the white table napkins. Bread! Sausages rolls! Salads! Cheese! Butter and oh me – tea, I bellowed. A strongly brewed dark brown coffee, especially imported from Kenya and Sweden, and not our type that was sold to us from abroad; a teabag after teabag that looks like a sick child's urine with the same amount of teabags? These Swedish brands of teabags

were unlike the type mallams carried about streets. The curse! My heart flew into my mouth and this to copy the use of language by one of the children. More teabags? Why did he have to pick on this one? But why so? Was it fate or something else bigger? I waited. I watched every of his moves, desperately wishing that I could be his ear so as to direct his eyeballs on to serious matters – with simplicity to boot.

Before I could wink, he had swallowed very greedily so that I felt pains hammering on my head. Perhaps there could be a remedy yet. Who knows? But it was not to be. Haruna ignored all table manners as though he was truly chasing after some dashing ram afraid of death and the soup pot; some cow struggling to survive yet another Christmas festivity; of goats and chickens and guinea fowls who were pleading for life itself so as to enable them to mate a little while longer for another Easter year or more perhaps.

I shifted positions, directly facing him, blinking and using the hands to steer him towards my direction. Even as I fought hard not to be doctrinaire, he could not hear me, nor see me, not to speak of looking up fully at my person. Rooted on the spot, I bore up the whole national humiliation like an abandoned universal soldier. I held my breath. Then, opening the eyelids again, and whoa, the audience, particularly the adults, were jeering at him the way that I see cowmen do to blocked-headed herd. He rolled those fat eyeballs, mistaking them for the ultimate adulation of the millennium to die for.

“Stop, stop, stop,” the audience screamed with absolute excitement soon afterwards, as one after another, he downed every cupful of the hot steaming tea that was handed over to him.

Then the audience began the ultimate mother of all countdowns: 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45 50. The master of ceremony counted his own with the best of intentions and glee to boot, motioning the standby cooks to bring in yet another jar full of the superbly brewed tea and the coffee and as Haruna stood there as an alternative symbol of our brand of government in waiting.

I felt ashamed, yes oh, and thoroughly fagged out too and sickened. My stomach convulsed so badly: the audience wished Haruna did indeed suffocate. They wished that he fell down and died of heart attack that moment as they do wish all celebrities.

To our surprise, he stopped and with both hands immediately raised up high like an Abuja politician so as to quickly declare himself the de facto winner. I could not help but grin at myself for being so ever unfortunate to be standing there. Jokes aside. My heart and that of

the audience became as one and so as to rescue him if need be.

He did not even bow this time around. Common courtesy, lacking in political victors of our senators in Abuja, he forgot to carry out.

I literally followed him outside. But this was co-incidental, nonetheless, as the BBC television programme at that hour forced me there. However, I braced up and sped off to the adjacent room, as my recent fondness for the American CNN International television alternative had convinced me of a better propaganda journalism yet. On my way, I decided to pass water. Inside the male toilet, I suddenly realised that I ought also to evacuate my bowel content completely. Grumbling with myself, I unfortunately wasted far more time there than usual. A lot of other people were right at the toilet area and discussing about the contestants, each of them making up his mind and hailing, in a subtle abstention, his favourite contestant or contestants. On getting out, I dashed straight to the left hand side and where louder ovations rent the still air, the contest was still on after all. Then, and so suddenly, midway in my walk, I rushed backwards, remembering why I had left the contest scene earlier on. I hurriedly got to the near-empty, chill-inviting BBC television ante room as the other door to the cable news network room was locked up for renovation work. The programme was midway. I could not understand the head of the television programme on agricultural development in so-called third world countries to its toes or tail as the abrasive newscaster spoke with her nose somewhat. Another louder ovation saw me scurrying back to embrace the scene of warm action-spinning contestants.

By the time I got there, I barely heard the master of ceremony announcing the last of the contestants so far, the one that I heard him call as a la carte or so.

“Only, as the master of ceremony rightly pointed out,” the male voice by my right hand side intoned, “that boy did not heed his fellow-countryman’s sapience that the business of us as readers, and in this case, as spectators, is not to reduce masterpieces, in our case superb performances, to discourse, or to shouting bouts in our case, also. Our business, the author said, is to read them or watch and appreciate in this particular instance. Therefore, that boy is too democratic for my liking, eating cooked yam for instance as if munching mere hamburgers.”

“I totally agree with you. True I do,” the wife of the man, I figured, said much more louder. “His is rather too overbearing...overconfident for my cup of tea. All his actions were acts of a cowboy clumper of a sort or rather he is cowboyish in mien and this to the

expectations of an average Edo man, yes, so showy and propaganda-conscious you bet. I do not like his face at all. It is just like the mirror of his society. Television specialists. I do not also understand him at all.”

I racked my brain further, figuring out who that child was who could so early in life possess such a vast amount of knowledge, that is both anti-knowledge and anti-intellectual, about the world so as to provoke such a heated discourse on culinary innuendo. Who else but....

“Table number six,” the master of ceremony disrupted my analogy, so to speak, and thereby throwing up an unusually big apple at the contestant who was walking away as well. As the master of ceremony called the names of Saul Bellow as a kind of affirmative choice and reminder, the boy was equally swaggering ahead and unmindful. Nonetheless, the big apple, that seemed to have been set upon by rot, made a surprise clunk on the floor and rolled into the handbag of an unsuspecting, short, bald-headed male onlooker who was also carried away by the beauty of a female Ghanaian diplomat walking near by.

As the next contestant opened up the plate, I could faintly see the dishes. Face to face is amala, lafun and the prestigiously hot eba of red and white colours. Side by side were assorted egusi soup with dried up and smoked fish, bitter leaf soup with cow-meat and the other equally prestigious ewedu soup with roasted chicken.

Picking with confidence, as I understand the other previous contestant who was about then to escape our memory did, he too took the amala, with a frowned inquisitive face, while observing the pitch black substances that were carefully wrapped in white and now frozen-like cellophane.

Ignoring the bowl of water, he got ready to attack and eat all at once. He was in a completely combative mood that was of the likes of the United States Pentagon spy-plane hovering only above oil-rich nations.

Making a dash at the table, one of the standby chefs approached, and ably stopping him from self-inflicted bodily harm or suicidal bravado. He wanted the boy to relax. He motioned on to him to see reason and the chair in front of him. He instructed the contestant on the strands of differences between a man who was laid-back and a woman who relaxed her body so as to enjoy her husband’s conjugal obligations. Then, afterwards, and pushing the plate of ewedu soup nearer him, the chef said: “Not complete yet. Take it easy, boy.”

“Uh, yes. Oh-yes. Thank you. Thanks a lot. Thank you,” he said in that tilting

highland Scottish twisting of the tongue, while nodding the head like a tired agama lizard. His face lighted up, seeing the rich green okra mixed draw soup, at the same time that he was tasting it with a fork and a knife in a sepia erotica of the delight of foreign paparazzi who were all about the hall.

For a moment, he seemed a master of colonial empire, drawing up to himself a chair knee-high. He sat comfortably on it, and ready to continue eating.

“The napkin...the nappy...the napkin, please.” The cook rushed to his aid yet again.

“That is right. Thanks. That is alright now. Thanks a lot.” He quickly tied the napkin round his neck like some rope on a goat’s neck.

The first sight was horrible, as the mixed draw soup smeared the whole length of the right hand of manual work and the backside and this as the soup, like all freedom fighters, resisted, but agreeing instead to drip downwards and towards the elbow, as deathbed to the earth invited.

He retreated, and watched the curious substance yet again. He placed and removed the left hand from his jaw. He shook the head. After that he started caressing the amala in a lavishly ceremonial fashion like he was a church of England devotee, who was lost in the middle of a feast organised by the clergy for toddlers.

The audience roared, and were almost rushing at him. He felt frightened but easily calmed his nerves. He bellowed, while quickly folding up his costly long sleeve shirt that he thought he could twirl round his head when successful.

The same fatherly-looking chef approached once more, seeing the page boys were becoming ever more restless. “Behave boy. Remember, it is a highly prestigious meal. Respect it; take it less as a competition. Or treat it like a piece of fine art, that is, if you too believe in arts for arts sake evolution of high culture, as your country men say whenever holidaying here at this hotel, with a cheap travel book, or airport look-alike book or some romance novel always tucked inside their pocket on the left hand of pleasure.”

“But it is a snack, is it not?”

“Pardon me? What did you just say again?”

“Snacks! Salad. The cappuccino stuff which my Gold Coast or what have you, yes, that companion of mine took earlier on, “ he queried, partially alarmed at the supposedly serious embarrassment that the patient chef had caused him. Not waiting for a reply, he dived headlong into eating once more.

I could not help this time but join with other spectators in laughing too, witnessing as it were how so badly a male child could have so battered a cherished meal. Six lumps and he was already wincing as though swallowing a solid quinine tablet of old; he hurriedly gulped nine cupful of ice-cold water. His whole right hand, the front shirt pocket and ebony table were messed up with the oily ewedu soup and as to appear like the aftermath of a war-ravaged city. His small rounded mouth was opening up and closing like a cod fish out from the sea water. He relapsed into a singsong: “ Hish ash, hish ash, hish ash. “ His eyeballs were bloody red like the sand of my hometown, and were constantly searching out for more cold water of comfort. Unlike our military men and politicians who could not defeat investors in swindling our economy, the hot pepper did to that boy and as it ate steadily into his veins still.

In that uproar, the master of ceremony in a surprised twist of event cried out, saying that, after all, that the whole event has been a game to commemorate the country’s Independence anniversary celebrations. Soon, he left the centre stage and the other groups were now divided, as they were walking away towards different directions and talking louder in their debating.

I was disappointed as I reviewed Abuja with her wide boulevards and not as the centre of our cultural attention or life expectations in political matters any more. My mind was initially geared towards a specific goal – laurels and the centre stage and the liminality of the losers in that children’s game held at the Esanohua Nicon Noga Sheraton hotel watchtowers that is the look-alike in taste with the seventeen thousand US dollars a night suite of the Hilton hotel in Las Vegas, USA, and in that eerie feeling of desolation that occurred for three hours during each environmental sanitation day exercise in Abuja and that was carried out at the end of each month. Now, I walked alone, turning back to my first love, the BBC television programmes, well, radio programme on Meridian books; and I remained alone, making over each activity of the day on my mind. And, right now, I knew that I could not even afford the seven hundred to one thousand naira a night stay at the Sonny Guest Inn at 41, Areal street, off Benue crescent and behind the old Garki motor park; or the Sharon International hotel at 220, Fortlammy street, off Bissau street and that charges similar amount; or the Tamara Guest Inn at 2059 on Abidjan street and with a price tag of one thousand and two hundred and fifty naira, with a further six hundred naira deposit; and surely, not the two thousand naira per a night at the Savannah Suites at Garki district, and off

the JS Tarki street and wedged in-between the Union bank and the Allied bank buildings or so I thought. With that pressure of relative poverty behind my back, I thought of leaving for Lagos almost immediately. And, now, as sleep was about overtaking me, I jerked up. I left for my beloved car.