

Lagos to Lomé: Reflections on Borders

Salawu Olajide
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1.

My first time outside of Nigeria was in 2017, when I walked across the Illela border to The Republic of Niger and returned on the back of a donkey. I was travelling across Nigeria by road with a group of artists, exploring Nigerianness and the different implications of borders. Dozens of encounters later—the woman in Nembe who spoke of her dead mother in present tense, eager to resume her walk to the cemetery; the man who lived by the Unwana Beach, telling everyone who would listen why Nigeria must break apart; the pre-teen boy in Ilorin certain his life's calling was to become a prophet—I began pondering what it means to belong to oneself, to a country, or a god.

I can't claim that I have been to Niger simply because I crossed some demarcation at the outskirts by a few metres. In the world we have made for ourselves, borders have their uses. They circumscribe the extent of our claims: what is in, out, unregistered. But borders are porous too and unsettled. They can shift and upend lives.

2.

In the real sense, my first time out of Nigeria was in April last year, when I went on a road trip from Lagos to Lomé with a group of filmmakers. Though for a shorter duration and with a hazier conceptual premise, this trip seemed to me a continuation of the last. I'd been out of a full-time job for over three months and decided the most reasonable thing to do with what was left of my savings

was to get on the road.

We were seven. I was a writer with an interest in images and film; they were photographers and filmmakers. So much to learn. About storytelling and how we are shaped by narrative we may not even be aware of, about the Nollywood industry in which my co-travellers are a part.

After suffering through the horrid road along Badagry and several police check-points, we stopped to pick up the person who would help us resolve the administrative conundrums that the Nigeria and Benin Republic borders would present. It was not enough to have the right documents and have nothing to smuggle. We needed someone familiar with the landscape, someone who knew who to speak to, what to say, over whose ego to sprinkle saccharine praise, in whose palms to squeeze some change. This man drove us across the Nigeria border to the Seme border of Benin Republic, collected our passports, and had them stamped by the officials. Then he asked for additional fees for you-have-no-idea-how-much-work-I-just-did.

I'd always imagined there was one demarcation, a structure of sorts, between Nigeria and Benin Republic. But I found that Nigeria had its border, a gate with security agents. We drove for a minute or two, and arrived at the Seme border, another passage with officials. I thought: what happens in the in-between? Who claims it?

3.

In her essay, "Dear Friend, From My Life I Write to You in Your Life," Yiyun Li writes about her first encounter with *before* and *after*. Her favourite column of a magazine featured celebrity makeovers—"hairstyle and hair colour, for instance—with no bubbles signifying before and after... I liked the definitiveness of that phrase, before and after, with nothing muddling in the in-between."

People often wait until they have moved past a difficult phase of their lives, and then tell the stories in hindsight. Writing about an abusive marriage or unemployment or the pain of unrealized dreams while in the middle of it requires a level of vulnerability most of us would rather not surrender to. Writing after the crossover is neater. *Look at me now, in this new country, in this great relationship, with this new job. Look at me.* It makes for a good story: a distinct *before* and *after*. One no longer bears the "what if" anxiety. What if the problem never ends? What if it drags on longer than imagined? "To write about a struggle amid the struggling," Li writes, "one must hope that this muddling will end someday."

But don't we all find ourselves, every now and then, at the border of our lives? A body waiting to heal. A person waiting to become their "true self" and be ushered into their best life. A country waiting, waiting to forget collective trauma. Waiting to cross to the other side to begin another wait. All our lives, a series of crossings. The parts of our existence we are often not proud to claim still make up the sum total of our lives.

4.

I was 12 or 13 when I started to associate the word "border" with violence. I'd just watched *Madam Dearest*, Tade Ogidan's 2005 film. A woman finds herself, out of goodwill for her husband's friend, illegally crossing from Nigeria to Benin Republic with a child that is not hers. The argument between two groups about some smuggled items devolves into a fight. A shoot-out ensues and the woman is hit. I remember sitting in our living room, watching this woman on the other side of the screen bleed to death. The child sits there, in the bush, his body aching in anguish. One may not always understand a child's reasons for crying—and children can really cry—but I understood his. I felt his pain and desperation. I saw him, saw us—both of us, children, settling into a certain fear that will

stay with us for a long time. "Border" was registered in my brain as a site of unholy riot.

Sixteen years later, waiting in the car with my co-travellers at the Seme border, the fear from years ago returned. That we were taking the legal route offered little respite. I kept thinking something would go wrong—an argument that would not be contained, a gun, blood.

5.

On the other side of the border, in Benin Republic, we went into a store and our nairas became CFA francs. A thousand of the former for 1125 of the latter. We were fucked; big brother naira had become an àgbàyà.

We resumed our trip; the main roads were paved. My eyes caught yellow everywhere, adding more vibrancy to the day. Bike men in uniform and helmet, all obeying traffic rules. We would witness something similar in Lomé when, one evening, wandering the streets for suya, three bike men waited patiently as we dragged our feet across the road, reveling in the unfamiliar moment. No anxiety, no tautness from my body preparing to spring from expecting them to ram into me as they would have in Lagos.

Driving through Benin Republic, there was a sense of order that had become alien to me from all these years living in Lagos—a city that prides itself in its chaos, preserving it like an heirloom. Benin was quiet. Gravestones, old and new, lined the roadside, an unsettling reminder of our mortality and our hereafter—an *after* that I hope does not exist because oblivion is a more satisfying option. As someone raised Christian, I still struggle to see the appeal of the promise of eternal life. I don't want to fall into a deep sleep then wake up on the other side hallelujahing or gnashing my teeth. The only afterlife I hope for is that my work endures.

6.

Music accompanied us on the trip—Wizkid, Gyakie, Omah Lay, Tems etc. Mayorkun is a hard man to impress. A line from *Your Body* stayed with me: "Şé kí n k'ówó fún ẹ torí o y'òdí?"

Nigerian artists are ingenious in generating metaphors and euphemisms for sex and desire. And women with certain features in conventionally appealing proportions have inspired the wanton generosity of artistes. Mayorkun will have none of that. His question is equal parts audacious and hilarious. *Shall I give you money just because you have bumbum?* It amused me. Of course, Mayorkun, of course. You don't think that's a valid reason? I am compelled to support my sisters even if I do not belong to this demographic of beneficiaries. The body, too, is a place of comings and goings, where, like rebellion and reclamation, private revolutions and liberations, violence can be enacted. And it's terrifying how much the body remembers.

7.

We had a bigger challenge entering Togo. Arguments ensued among the officials and non-officials whose means of livelihood were somehow attached to the border. Barny, one of us, was the diplomatic one, explaining and placating, while carefully avoiding revealing their unreason. A skill he'd acquired from years of pacifying louts while on sets in Nigeria. A skill that would come to use two days later when we got into trouble with the soldiers stationed at the president's house.

We were finally sent on our way, arrived in Lomé, and checked into our AirBnB on Rue Djankasse—a quaint house with fine wooden furniture and poor WiFi. We bought a SIM card for the ridiculously priced data subscription. Buying a SIM card had become impossible in my country for several months, for no apparent reason. The borders were closed for months too. Then they were opened. It

happens like this sometimes, the government making and unmaking regulations unexpectedly, rashly, as if our lives are objects of gamble to them.

A Twitter user wondered if Fela's music is timeless because its concerns—disappearing civic space, extrajudicial killings, oppressive government—from decades ago remain valid till now. Another person replied that Fela's songs appear to be timeless because the country is static.

And so, we look for home outside the one that was passed down to us. Education migrants, work migrants, life migrants—through airplanes or desert. We are fleeing, teaching ourselves new ways to be. Maybe the cold is not so bad. Maybe the loneliness and detachment are not so bad. Maybe racism is not as bad as people say. Maybe walking into a grocery store, holding your breath because the bored white boy behind you can whip out a gun is not so bad. We share photographs of us, layered up in snow. *Look at me, I have crossed over!* There's a collective sigh of relief from this end. *You made it out! Congratulations!*

8.

In his 1954 novel, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, Amos Tutuola writes fantastical tales about a boy who flees slave traders and finds himself in the bush where spirits live, a place dangerous for mere mortals. In one of the tales in the book, there is a plank over a deep valley on which travellers cross to the other side. But this plank is so thin that they have to remove their clothes, shed themselves of their belongings, to be able to cross. On the other side, they wear the clothes of travellers going in the opposite direction. You may leave behind expensive clothes at one end and find rags at the other, and vice versa. There's no balance or fairness. Hence the name: "Lost and Gain valley."

What is lost in movement?

9.

Walking through the streets of Lomé and not one of us could speak French. Google Translate sometimes came to use. This wasn't my first time in a city surrounded by people whose primary language of communication was neither English nor Yorùbá (my mother tongue), but this was a different foreignness, the kind that made little effort to let me in.

At Musée National, we learnt about culture and religion and the remnants of colonial history. Inside the museum, I stood in front of a framed painting of small huts and trees. Two clay sculptures of bodies with their heads positioned in opposite directions lay at the bottom. The museum guide told us that in a village in Togo, how they bury their dead is determined by their deeds in life. If you were a good person, your head is placed toward the East; if you were a thief or a witch, your head is turned toward the West.

"How can they tell someone is a witch?" I asked. The museum management had called this man, who could have a decent conversation in English, to attend to the Nigerians. "They will...know," he started to say, then stuttered, then smiled as if he'd finally caught in on my "joke": I'm Nigerian—African—surely, I must know what it means for someone to be a witch. I wasn't joking, but I didn't want to push it.

In another part of the museum, I saw a statue of a man sitting, his right hand was a balled fist on his forehead; the other beside him, his eyebrows creased in unbearable despair. "It represents those who were enslaved," said the guide. I imagined our ancestors, centuries ago, hurled into ships as they began the long journey across the Atlantic Ocean. Perhaps some sat in trepidation, others in defiance, in disgust, fatigue, resignation.

10.

In *Diamond Ring*, a 1998 Tade Ogidan film, a ghost won't stay in the *hereafter* because of an abominable heist. Some boys in university had excavated her body and made off with her precious ring, after which they began to die one after the other. The last boy is at the doors of death, but his grandmother is a medium. From the dead woman, she finds out why her grandchild is sick and that he will die unless he returns their loot.

Neither the dead nor the living can claim this woman. By being cheated, stolen from, she exists in an unmarked place, navigating it with rage. This is how she exerts control. In some folklore that most of us have heard, a ghost-woman such as this would be called a witch for "terrorizing" the living. Yes, an invaluable item had been snatched from her, but why would she not choose silence?

11.

Lomé was fascinating for its doors and gates. They were blue, yellow, curved, orange, straight, pink, white, squared—all sorts. I saw gates with doorknobs, gates enclosed in thick flowers that were so dazzling my heart leapt with childlike joy. I spent one long morning walk with my co-travellers, Emmanuel and Barney, taking photographs. Above one cream door was a bold inscription in black paint: **ORPHEO NEGRO BAR**. It was shut and I couldn't get a glimpse of the inside. For the rest of the day, I pondered the inscribed words, these spaces of otherness.

12.

Once a German colony, Togo has a few buildings reminiscent of the neo-Gothic style, high with pointed arches. Thankful for photography, we clicked away. One evening, we took a long walk to the seafront lined with palm trees. Opposite it was a decaying white building with three square pool-like structures filled with spirogyra-green water and covered with leaves. Further ahead was another large white building. We were at the beach playing and video-vixening. Nora and Petah prepared to fly their drones over the blue waters and palm fronds when two soldiers appeared.

I was a few feet away and took a picture of the soldiers talking to them. They spoke French. One of them had some English. Why were we taking pictures of the white buildings? Who were we? Our inability to speak French signalled us as outsiders and they became defensive. What were the drones for? Who sent us? They started checking our phone gallery for photographs of the buildings. By now, I was close to the group, and it wasn't until one of them had collected my phone that I remembered I'd taken their photograph. He saw it and informed his partner. Their faces morphed into a scowl. Everything was aggravated now. They threatened to lock us up and call their superior. He arrived. We were relieved he could hold a conversation in English. I told them I'd absentmindedly taken the photograph of the soldiers and I was going to delete it now. We explained that we were only here because of the beach, no idea what the white buildings represented. They told us it was where their president lived. Were we spies? Who sent us? Why were we thinking of flying drones in the vicinity?

I'd later find that the other old building we walked past, The Palais de Lomé, was the German and then French governors' residence until 1960 when Togo became independent. It also served as the residence for the Togolese government until political unrest in the 1990s caused it to be abandoned. But it's still closely guarded till date.

Finally, the soldiers seemed to believe we were travellers. They watched us, one after the other, scroll through pictures on our phones, telling us to delete this and that.

"Why would you delete my pictures?" Nora countered. "But we didn't do anything wrong." In the moment, her reaction was counterintuitive and it further annoyed one of the soldiers, but I found

myself secretly admiring her stubbornness.

The encounter ended with them taking a picture of the information page of my passport as “evidence.” They finally let us go. We were relieved, and strangely aware that it could have been worse in our country where there was the real possibility of spending the night in a cell, of our phones getting smashed. Violence is often the first response by different levels of authority, especially the government. This is apparent in our history, old and recent. Ask us about October 2020.

We walked into the night, tired, with everyone jokingly calling me an ex-convict. Most bars were still closed due to Covid-19 restrictions. We walked and walked, past a market that was closed for the night; past a building inscribed with PROCLAMATION DE L'INDÉPENDANCE DU TOGO where we posed for a picture; past Hôtel 2 Février, and wound up in a restaurant that had been sitting in silence, like a quiet lake, waiting for us. There was fatigue. There was also music—loud music. There was chattering and drinking and dancing and the night belonged to only us. Tofunmi's infectious laughter caught on. So was Petah's catchphrase: *o por yeah yeah*. The most extroverted of the group, his free, playful outward self was harmonious with the self that quickly, easily reached for solitude.

13.

At the Illela border years ago, there weren't two gates. A border official pointed to an imaginary line on the ground separating both countries. After my co-travellers and I had crossed back from the Republic of Niger to Nigeria, one of us, a filmmaker, had an idea for a short, experimental film. We stood a few feet from the demarcation, with the official standing some distance away, watching. The filmmaker asked us to walk in a line. The result was a loop such that before the last person disappeared from the frame, the first person appeared. All of us, like wanderers, forever caught in motion; our lives entwined. What separates people from each other without physical walls? Travelling with people is giving permission for your private borders to be probed.

From past journeys, I have been seen crying. I have watched others cry. Quiet tears, with shoulders heaving. Some landscapes fill you with nostalgia; others make you ache with longing for your un-lived lives. An encounter with someone who has the idiosyncrasies of your long-dead loved one sends you looking around for a quiet place to relieve yourself. Turn to the left, there's a human. Turn to the right, there's another human. The tears won't wait for you. Sometimes, too, your body is wracked with fatigue, leaving you cranky. You annoy others and they annoy you. The road opens you up. You cannot escape being seen.

14.

There was a heavy police presence in Lomé. During our visit to the art market, reminiscent of the Lekki Art and Craft market, we had another episode that ended with our phones getting seized. It was exhausting now. But now as I record this, looking back, I realise this must be the way they see us too, with discomfort, watching our wonderment at their banality, as we disrupt their daily lives.

At the market, there were uniformed men around buildings, in cars. I saw a few trucks with soldiers driving through the market, as though on a mission to plunder smaller communities. How did the military invasion of Africa set the style for policing on the continent? There is often defensiveness when language is a barrier. And that's only one barrier. In Nigeria, every movement of ideas by one group is countered by another, while another group just gloats about everything. And that's only one country. What is the fate of Pan-Africanism?

Africans live with echoes of colonialism and oppressive systems upheld by other Africans. Our problems in Nigeria have endured, stretched back and forward. We are led by the same president from over thirty-six years ago, battling the same issues.

Eight months after October 2020, Nigerians were on the streets again, protesting indefinite Twitter suspension by the government. How dare the people flex their digital power over the president's obviously harmful tweets, leading to Twitter deleting them? We bypassed the ban with VPN. Germany, Portugal, America, Australia—like spirits, we go to places our bodies have never been, places we are saving up to escape to someday.

15.

Every day, before 6am, sun rays filtered through the curtains of the bedroom. I stood by the window, watching the bright light of the day. By 5pm, it started to get dark. Time, like maps, is arbitrary.

On our fourth day, we awoke with the sun and began a long drive to Kpalimé Waterfall. At the gate, I met a man called Joe. Upon hearing we were Nigerians, a big smile spread on his face as though seeing us was all that mattered to him that day. He started to tell me how much he enjoyed Nollywood films. Especially the Igbo ones, he said, his eyes gleaming. Interestingly, there was a conversation in the Nollywood community on Twitter, the crux being that there should be more films with varying style, depth and nuance. Aren't all of us, everywhere, shaped by stories? Aren't storytellers visionaries? Aren't artists rudders of societies, shifting and changing existences, shattering and rebuilding boundaries? Why keep repeating the same stories, embellished with garish aesthetics, as swallowable morsels for the audience? The conversation went on for days and ended.

Led by a native tour guide, Barth, who had such kind eyes and spoke in English, we started hiking toward the waterfall. By now, I had gathered that there were more people in Lomé who had a basic understanding of the English language than Nigerians with basic knowledge of French, even though we're surrounded by French-speaking countries.

Up, up the hill, I saw small houses, sparse communities. A voice in my head went: "How do people live here? How do they get their material needs?" I caught myself in my thoughts and did a quick introspection: was this curiosity or condescension? My answer was a blend of both but it leaned towards the latter. I felt exposed. There are people who will spend a few days in Lagos, this place I call a city and, having experienced the bad roads and lack of electricity and life-snuffing traffic and slow internet connection—these people will leave wondering, "how do people live here?"

The world is incredibly big and there are many lives different from mine and my lack of understanding of that difference doesn't invalidate those other lives. This is a truth that I have always tried to live by. As someone who grew up in a quiet town, I'm aware of the secret contempt city people have for people living in small towns. Of the quick dismissal of your place in the world and your right to lay claim to certain knowledge—pop culture, travel, geography, worldliness, freedom. I'm also aware that stories transport us from *here* and arm us with the audacity to dream.

The walk to the waterfall was long and exhausting. Close to it, there was the final obstacle—a rock. So steep, so slippery. We regarded it with trepidation for a moment. Barth climbed with such ease that relayed the price and delight of mastery. Finally, one of us, Mayowa, kicked off her shoes and started climbing, carefully. Followed by another person. And another. I thought, surely, I can climb it too. I approached the rock, raised my leg, one after the other. With the help of Barth and Emmanuel, who were cheering me on as though this was one of the most important moments of my life, I crossed over.

What I'm saying is: fear dies a quick death when you're surrounded by courage.

I can say I embarked on this road trip because I wanted to interrogate the ideas of movement and borders: private and public. In truth, I went because I was bored. Freelancing was slow. I wanted a steady source of income, to work in a team again. There's only so much one can do in isolation. How do you know what you don't know if no one tells you? I thought, what new experience would another space offer?

Later, we would leave the waterfall to a keg of palmwine organised by Barth. The following day, on our way to Nigeria, we would have a quick stop off at the Aného Beach and the Temple des Pythons. We would call the border-man again to help us cross because laptops were considered contrabands. There would be a dozen police check-points along Benin Republic and Nigeria borders, all asking for *something*, and my fear for borders would be replaced by disgust. But before all that, at Kpalimé, we climbed the slippery rock. Another careful walk later, we were under the waterfall. The waters slapped our bodies with joyful intensity. We screamed and laughed, the fear and *what ifs* from a moment ago had disappeared.

In a photograph I often return to, our hands are in the air, surrounded by white waters, forever frozen in a moment of freedom.

Kemi Falodun is a writer and journalist whose work explores mental health, culture, social justice and the intersections between private and public memory. Her writing has been published in *Catapult*, *Al Jazeera*, *The Guardian UK*, *The Republic* and elsewhere. "A Life in Transit," her essay chapbook from the Invisible Borders Trans-African Road Trip (Borders Within II), was published in 2019. She's a 2021 One World Media fellow.

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