

Let there be no death

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Ganaja sits at the mouth of the river. As some arrived on one boat, other people prepared to begin their journey across the river on another. A few unoccupied boats sat side by side at the river bank. It was on a Friday afternoon. The place bustled like a typical motor park in any part of Nigeria. Hands traded money as people hurried for the journey ahead. I arrived on a tricycle. My bag on my back. I asked how I was going to get to Bassa where I was headed and one of the men directing the boats pointed me to a boat that was halfway in the water. It was the next in line to go.

This was my third time moving so close to a large body of water. When I was younger, I avoided coming close to a river, staring at it or passing by it. I dreaded any large body of water. In those days, there was a river close to my church, All Saints Anglican Church at Idi Ayunre, Ibadan, close to the Cocoa Research Institute of Nigeria. The river is called Odo-Ona Nla. Whenever I needed to pass over the river, I would walk hastily across the bridge to avoid looking at the water. It was as if the water would draw me to itself if I slowed down and looked at it for a second. The story got worse when it was reported that a woman whose son was my friend had jumped into the river for no reason. They did not see her body until days after.

'Waters are unpredictable. You think you're in a safe space and they turn on you, leaving you cold and empty. Or they draw you in and refuse to give you back to yourself,' Kemi Falodun writes in her essay, "In Search of Wonder in Iseyin." In my mind on the boat, I dreaded the thought of the water drawing us in. I was going on a boat without a life jacket, without knowing how to swim. I have never swum before. On one hand, I was amused at the mass of water that surrounded me. On the other, I dreaded its revolt. What would happen if the boat overturned? Frightening thoughts ran over my mind. My lips froze in mid-wonder as the river stared blankly at me.

I looked away from the river and my mind wandered to the other passengers on the boat. They were unperturbed and they spoke so heartily in their language. They were used to frequently moving on

the boat since it was their means of transportation. One of the persons in charge of our boat was even a small boy. He was in charge of revving up the engine that powered the boat.

A baby was crying. The mother spoke at it in a rush in her indecipherable language. When the child did not stop crying, she brought out her breast and pushed it into the mouth of the child. The baby stopped crying. My mind returned to the water. I thought of my mother for a moment. I did not tell her I would be travelling on water. If I did, she would have screamed and probably called everyone she knew to beg me to change my mind. I had only told her I would be going to Kogi to observe the election – even for this, she only let me go because I was adamant. I mustered the courage to say a quick prayer. I asked for protection and also forgiveness from sins I might have committed knowingly or unknowingly, just in case...

Bassa is a Local Government Area located in Kogi east senatorial district. It has Oguma as its headquarters. Bassa is also the name of two tribes living in Bassa land in Kogi — Bassa Kwomu and Bassa Nge. To get to Bassa, there are two ways. There is a long route by road which takes longer hours because of the poor state of the road and there is transport by boat from Ganaja village. Before I left for Kogi, I had researched the location. I opted to travel by road despite how far it would be because I feared going on the water. But when I got to Lokoja, I had a change of mind. Everyone I asked said I must travel on water because that was *really* the only way.

‘You will get a boat at Ganaja. That’s the easiest and fastest way to get to Bassa,’ a receptionist at a hotel where I and other observers had lodged in Lokoja said.

The road was terrible. I am reminded of the opening of Ben Okri’s novel, *The Famished Road*: ‘In the beginning, there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry.’ In Nigeria, the road is sometimes hungry, famished even. The pot-holes open their mouths wide and gulp whichever rickety bus or car they so wish. So it is not uncommon to hear prayers in Nigerian-speak such as ‘heavenly father, let there be no death’ or ‘may you not travel when the road is hungry,’ my mother always says this in the Yoruba language when I set out for a road trip. You may also hear it when you begin the journey on a bus to any part of the country, especially when there is an older woman on the bus. The old women usually start the prayers. As if in perpetual fear of what the road ahead would bring, it has become the ritual to redeem/shower/cover the road with the blood of Jesus and quench its hunger.

The headquarters of Bassa Local Government is in Oguma. Oguma was a silent town. Maybe because the election was near, but the street was quiet by the time I got there. No one would have known it had just survived a series of inter-communal clashes, save for the vestiges of war that litter parts of the town – houses burnt and deserted. There had been a long-existing inter-communal clash between the people of Ebira and the people of Bassa over the issue of land ownership. The clash, Sunday who drove me about the area on a bike told me, was triggered when an Ebira man shot a masquerade who flogged him. Masquerades are still held dear among many in some parts of the country. To beat a masquerade is to beat an ancestor.

A quick Google search reveals that this specific incident was far back in 2016. But the conflict continued up until 2019. In January 2019, no fewer than 10 were feared dead in the renewed clash between the two tribes. Despite the recent history of violence, the people in Bassa were eager about the election. It had been almost a year or more since they last saw electricity, Sunday told me. To charge my phone, I had to go to a public place where I paid a token.

It is easy to visualise this kind of situation if you’ve once lived or been to a remote part of Nigeria.

Even the cities have their share of irregular power supply and generators from neighbours often compete to be the loudest. It's horrible to stay that long without electricity, especially if work depended on it. This reminds me of my own university experience. In Oye-Ekiti, the town where I studied for my undergraduate degree, there was hardly any electricity supply. Two months before I went to Bassa in 2019, when I was still in my final year, students from my University protested the lack of electricity in the town. We had protested four months before that time over the same issue but when there was no significant change, students took to the streets again. This time, it was deadly. Students and members of the security operatives clashed. The security operatives fired live rounds and two students died from gunshot wounds. Several others were injured and the school was shut down for two months. One of the students who died was my neighbour, a bright young man who wanted to be a comedian, the viral ones that make one laugh on Instagram but more than that, a voice for the people. He was cut short, like a flower in the middle of blooming, suddenly uprooted and discarded by an angry gardener. This memory leaves an indelible scar.

On October 20 2020, a similar thing happened, scores of peaceful protesters who were protesting against police brutality were shot at the Lekki Toll Gate by the military. Till today, no one has admitted guilt and no one has been prosecuted for this heinous offence.

The people I stayed with during the period of election observation in Kogi wanted power to change hands for understandable reasons - delay in payment of salaries et cetera. At the end of the election, power did not change hands; the incumbent was re-elected.

Between September 2018 and November 2019, I observed three state elections in Nigeria. That of Ekiti, Osun and Kogi. I observe these elections with both courage and fear. The courage that I was contributing in one way to the development of my country by being a witness - *an observer* - to a historic moment. Every election is a chance to shape/create/alter history. And fear because when people go to vote in Nigeria, there is often violence lurking somewhere. One has to be wary especially if you are an outsider in the community.

A year before I went to Bassa, I was in Iye Ekiti, Ilejemeje Local Government Area observing the Ekiti State election in the town. I was headed to a polling unit nearby when suddenly we heard sporadic gunshots. I ran into the car that I hired for the day while my teammate scampered into the safety of a nearby house. The thugs vandalised the election materials before they zoomed off.

In Kogi, there was violence too. At least 10 people died as a result of different cases of electoral violence while some officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission were kidnapped according to reports. One sordid case was that of Salome Abuh (60), the Peoples Democratic Party women leader who was burnt alive in her apartment two days after the election in what some said was a reprisal attack for the killing of a supporter of the All Progressive Congress.

The tension in anticipation of this sort of experience is why I was in fear ahead of my trip to Bassa; anything could happen. Like when I was on the water, I stepped out on election day too with a prayer asking that there be no death.

But this prayer has now become too common. In Nigeria, everything is fast becoming a deathmonger, from the road, to even the police officers that are supposed to safeguard the lives and property of the people. Violence is fast becoming the norm. Bandits and terrorists are on the rampage. A few months back, social media was awash with news that terrorists attacked and opened fire at a church in Owo. Not less than 40 people died in this attack. I could never bear to watch the videos. I am still saddened by the death of my neighbour during the protest back in 2019 and the several deaths at the #EndSARS protest in 2020.

With the 2023 elections just three months away, incidents of violence have again begun to rise. A women leader of the Labour Party, Victoria Chintex, was killed recently in Kaduna. The electoral commission's offices have also seen attacks across the country.

As Helon Habila puts it in his book *The Chibok Girls*, when violence is endemic, it only signifies one thing – the failure of a society and its government. Leaving violence to fester is also deliberate. It is an attempt by those in power to keep people in check. But having to pray against death, injury, kidnap or mishap every time one steps out of the house is not a way to live. The fear that something bad could happen the next second brings untold emotional turmoil.

Elections are symbolic. Apart from the fact that they are the thin threads that hold the fabric of every modern democracy together, they are also powerful statements. That's when the people's voices are heard the loudest by the political class. As we head into the polls in 2023, we should remember the fears and the undue emotional turmoil we have had to endure these past years. We should remember #EndSARS, the lives lost in Owo, and several others unaccounted for, lost to bandits, to unknown gunmen, lost because they dared to go about their daily business, they dared to travel by rail, to use public transport... We should remember it is no longer about the nation as an abstraction but our lives and livelihoods, those of our friends and neighbours, that we are voting to safeguard.

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