Notes on Kampf

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One of the numerous reasons the German word, Kampf, has remained popular is its usage by the failed Austrian artist and dictator, Adolf Hitler. The word itself, 'kampf', from old High German, is borrowed from Latin, Campus; more familiar to us in its modern English form, 'camp'.

Camp—not a mode of sensibility as in Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp* (1964)—has different meanings to Nigerians. The IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps and the religious crusade camps are recent Nigerian meanings of the word, but the most prevalent would be the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), a mandatory one-year service scheme for university graduates. After deployment to different states across the nation, corps members are first assembled in their service states to spend three weeks within a secluded location—a camp. 'Camp,' now, is both that space of assembly and the experience that accompanies it.

But camp as a word is insufficient to define what that space and those three weeks spent there mean. This is why, for my purpose, I have approached that experience with what I believe to be a more flexible word. Kampf, the suffix to Adolf Hitler's infamous autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, has ten recorded meanings. One of them is 'struggle,' as in, *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*), but beyond that meaning, the word also represents battle, combat, fight, conflict, engagement, tussle, campaign, strife, contest. These words reflect experiences at the NYSC camp which the word 'camp' cannot grasp.

'Camp' as a word won't suffice because the one thing it means to Nigerians is a gathering, whether of displacement (IDP), religion (Crusade Camps), or National Service (NYSC); but Kampf, an alien

word, will be examined, and with each meaning discovered, a specific Nigerian essence can be considered.

These Notes are for the victims of the 1966 pogroms and all the casualties—from both sides—of the '67-'70 civil war.

1. Many have made great cases for NYSC—and by extension, Kampf—and many have opposed those cases; all the reasons from both parties, although sensible, are problematic. In no other place does Nigeria reveal itself as clearly as it does in Kampf. But it reveals itself selectively, only to the attentive; those who have come prepared to see. And rarely does anyone ever go to Kampf to 'see'.

2. Those against Kampf cite its failure at its primary objective, which is to foster peace and unity. In a country rank with tribalism, a general distrust of the ruling class, unsafe roads, and constant insecurity, the prospect of newly graduated youths, the fertile future of the country, traveling via roads enshrouding kidnappers and terrorists to regions of potential civil unrest is unpalatable. So corps members and their relatives object to service. Those with the means bribe officials to influence their service states to familiar regions and a select few simply refuse to honour the service call. But all of us, privileged or otherwise, dogged or malleable, are united by the coming discomfort and dissolution of individuality, we are all suddening towards the certainty of Kampf.

"There are levels of despair from which, it rightly seems, the human spirit should not recover." — Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died*

3. There are two sensibilities with which one approaches Kampf: resistance and resignation. The former is for those posted to desired regions, usually resulting from political influence. A young woman wants to serve in Abuja, and by her financial or political clout, gets Abuja. She will still be separated from comfort for three weeks, even though it is at a desired location. It's like Pablo Escobar who picked a site, built his own prison, furnished it, had his thugs guarding him, but stood atop it and looked longingly to the open freedom of the Medellin hills then declared, 'a prison is still a prison'… As for resignation: Take a young man born in Southwestern Nigeria, Ibadan, and has never travelled beyond Lagos State. He attends the University of Ibadan, so close to home—to family and friends, but, upon service, finds he has been posted to Niger State in the North or, for our purpose, Rivers State in the farthest southern region. Service is mandatory, and he pulls as much weight as he can to influence his posting yet he fails. Rivers State beckons ominously, a strange land with strange people and strange language. Although he is still within his country, he is an alien at home. Choiceless, he goes to Rivers State. The man and the woman end up in Kampf. Both their sensibilities—resignation and resistance—become useless in the face of Kampf. And that helplessness they feel accompanies everyone into the doors of Kampf. We arrive anew with that hopelessness, the sense of sharing it with others, and enduring it for three weeks. Amongst other things, most obvious of all, Kampf is a prison. No one ever truly recovers from that.

4. Kampf could be about gratefulness. But Nigeria, a country lacking in political heroes and forgiving of its villains, has failed to highlight the importance of Kampf beyond the ironical motto, 'peace and unity'. There are no mentions of the civil war to the corps members by any official before, during, or after Kampf. No mentions of the coups and pogrom that led to secession, no mentions of singled out heroes or villains from that ignominious affair. There are "no victor no vanquished" only because that war had such moral ambiguities, because there appears to be the ignorance that it be, if possible, expunged from national memory. (Insistent

on not forgetting its actions in WWII, Germany now endorses student exchange from all over the world, built memorials to the murdered Jews of Europe and, among other conciliations, has now redefined the purpose of its famous Neue Wache statue. Rwanda too had a Post-Genocidal Reconciliation.) Nigeria fails to assess its relationship with its history and questions the true nature of its political heroes.

5. And this means a great opportunity is missed to align the youth with patriotism—a highly contestable word in Nigerian parley. Kampf should be the climax to years of preparing the youth for the deliberate purpose of the nation. To have them shed the remnants of tribal or narrow-minded ideals they held prior to their arrival and send them forth with refreshed understandings of national pride and values of this country. While Kampf is about uniting the future of the nation, it fails because the present is yet to be secured.

6. What are the values of this country?

7. We return to that young man from Ibadan who has been posted to Rivers State. What are his thoughts as his vehicle leaves Ibadan—drives through Ondo, Benin, Delta until he reaches Port Harcourt? He will think of metropolises as he sees them, and each's claim to individuality. The values of 'hustle' and survival—the only Nigerian values today—in Lagos, are essentially the same at Delta or Port Harcourt; intensity alone differs. He will look out the window and see rivers and lush vegetation, he will hear languages and he will become completely certain of the unfamiliar. But he will recognize the hustle in hawkers chasing vehicles in traffic jams with wares. Members of this country aren't bound by any single positive sense beyond life and financial survival. This partly explains the regression in our art and philosophy; nothing is considered important beyond financial utility (hustle and survive). Our films are good only when they smash box office records; talent is worthy only if it can feed you; university courses are chosen for their financial returns, and since the country has increasingly become inutile, the Nigerian dream has become to leave Nigeria.

8. The young man considers what it would feel like for the vehicle not to stop at Rivers State but keep driving on, past this city he thinks is pretentious—as most metropolises are—, past all the states in the East, past all the countries in the world; straight into infinity. It is not death he is considering; what he wants is limbo—for life to simply cease until the cup of Kampf has passed him.

9. Few survive the first night at Kampf. Corps members numbering as many as hundred—more in some notorious Kampfs—share a single room, a handful of toilets, bunk beds, all subject to the mercy of poor ventilation. They will go to the toilet and find shit on the floor and will leave the toilet smelling like piss, no matter how briefly they stayed there. The young man—let us name him Samsa—will wake in the middle of his first night and, for a fleeting moment, he will not recognize where he is.

10. And with the first dawn at Kampf arrives the horrors of its soldiers. Everyone wakes with military precision by 4:30. Kampf is run by soldiers, offspring of dictators; it is, after all, a military invention. In a country that's seen the military dispense some of the worst human atrocities on its civilians, it is wise to fear soldiers. The soldiers at Kampf know this so they harness that fear early. It is on the first dawn they show their hands.

11. In the coming days, Samsa will go about with a half-life. By day it will feel as though his soul has hibernated but his body is alive; he will march in the parade, exercise, frown, eat, and subsist without conviction. At night, his body would lay half-dead and it would be his soul alive, kicking but trapped. He will wake every midnight, burning with sweat in his tiny bed, dazed by the heat and certain that he has missed something important he shall never recover. Then he will sleep and wake at dawn with his soul exhausted from all the midnight fight.

12. In the Book of Genesis, when God would separate the assembled at the Tower of Babel, he cursed them with a multitude of tongues. A gathering of people with a common goal who could not build outside language. It takes time, but the pestilence of tribalism, something just beneath the Nigerian surface, like water in a frozen lake, eventually erupts at Kampf. As is done in prison, tribal gangs form in Kampf. They walk in groups, visit the opportunist Mami market, and inevitably, begin to form allegiances. But before anyone has the time to know anyone else, particularly after the first week, a greater tragedy befalls Kampf.

13. By the third night, the first set of naked men will bathe in the open because the bathrooms are congested. Samsa will stare. What is it about nudity that enraptures us so, that made the painter, Degas, choose nude subjects, and all those gloriously disrobed renaissance sculptures by Michelangelo and co. What is it that arouses us in the unclothed? These men Samsa will watch bathing in the open, discuss politics later, one would declare his hatred for Nigeria for what it's done to his people, another would pray for a civil war, one would insist the North needs to go govern itself, but they will all look the same naked. The men will bathe until midnight and Samsa will stare and think of them in Sulaimon Adonnia's words, "when someone is nude, their history, background and surroundings all become secondary." Nobody belongs to a tribe when they are bathing naked, just a mass of flesh redeeming itself from grime. Samsa will decide that the problem with the human race is clothes. We should all go about naked. Of course Samsa is wrong.

14. The tragedy is that corps members begin to disappear mysteriously in Kampf from the second week. Perfectly healthy men and women would suddenly succumb to fatal illnesses, from chronic ulcer to severe epilepsy, and be allowed exit from Kampf. Some don't make it to the second week. Some corps members cough blood, others have hepatitis, and let's not forget that most rampant plague of Kampf's diseases, chronic asthma. Never mind that none of these corps members had any of these illnesses upon their entry into Kampf. The ailments start and end with Kampf. Suspiciously, no-one dies. But they all leave Kampf, latest by the middle of the second week. A real tragedy.

15. Kampf is hallowed ground for quick fucks.

16. Items that represent Kampf:

White or Green-&-White socks

Water bottle with anything but water in it

Ugly white shirts

Ugly white shorts

Ugly white rubber shoes

Ugly waist pouch

The shrill of the bugle like the civil war bombs

And, occasionally, *The infamous khaki uniform*

"Walk down the street and everyone you see is you. You could be that person, you could be that monster." — Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness*

17. To Samsa, the platoon officers represent the blight of the civil service. Emboldened by national

responsibility in a repressive space, they have no patience for ignorance, which, frankly, is to be expected of corps members. They are dismissive and supercilious. The problem with the civil service, underpaid and underappreciated, is that it feels it is doing a thankless job. (How else can you explain the rude nurses at General Hospitals? It is why the secretary wields so much corrupt power over oga's schedule: See Mildred Okwo's film, *The Meeting*, as reference.) The Nigerian character towards taking responsibility is lacking. Duties are delegated to subordinates until they are shirked. The platoon officers, dirtied by the system—which is the Nigerian individual—think they are doing the corps members a favour, and not their job.

18. Nobody in Kampf completely knows what Kampf is. The NYSC anthem doesn't know what Kampf is. The wave of speakers during the three weeks don't know what Kampf is. The platoon officers don't know what Kampf is. The government doesn't know what Kampf is, or more importantly, what Kampf could be. But there are echoes abound, particularly amongst corps members who have mischievously redefined Kampf. NYSC: Now Your Suffering Continues.

19. By the end of the second week, the days are longer and hotter for Samsa. The skin above his ankles chafe from prolonged bondage by socks. Everyone at Kampf has become conditioned to routine. They revolt half-heartedly so it never lasts. While they march, photos are taken by a designated cameraman. The cameraman comes to Samsa for the umpteenth time. He reminds the platoon members that they need to pay if they want to have their photos taken during the parade. "You need to capture the memories from here." Samsa declines. Memory is a meal for later and he wants no aftertaste of Kampf.

20. Kampf is about rhythm. (Wake-parade-eat-march-sleep-wake-march-etc.) Kampf is a place of speeches. (All bland and mechanical.) Kampf is a place of pretense. (People become new people here.) Kampf is the unwelcome shrill of the bugle. (Like survivors of war bombardments.) Kampf is the flag at half-mast. (Too many died for Kampf to be.) Kampf is a place of abandonment. Kampf *is* abandonment. (How many calls and messages from loved ones are missed at Kampf? How many strangers pretend to know each other? How much unknowing must one undergo after Kampf? How many strangers from Kampf pollute one's WhatsApp statuses?)

21. The scene is set in Kampf. This scene I am to describe happens unfailingly in every Kampf, every year.

INT. KAMPF—DAY

A near-empty hostel. The weather is inconsequential. Young men gather into a whispering bunch like prayer warriors because they are afraid the soldiers might hear them. They discuss Nigeria. None of them is thirty yet. None of them was born in a functional Nigeria. All they have of the country is idealistic. Always, this bunch has at least one Yoruba man, one Easterner, and one Northerner. The easterner, from Enugu, says he won't wear his uniform on his journey back home because his people will kill him. "They will ask, 'Why you dey serve country wey no dey favour us?'" He speaks of the absence of an International Airport in Anambra, a non-functional international airport in Enugu, closed seaports across the East, and why he doesn't identify with Nigeria. But there has always been conflict between the Nigerian individual and State. The dictator is Nigerian, so is the soldier who murders civilians at the dictator's behest; so is the policeman who demands bribes—and when you bribe someone to get something, you don't see it as a bad thing, but you have prevented someone who can't bribe from getting that thing—and so is the unprofessional civil servant; so is that young woman who's bribed her way into serving in Abuja; all Nigerians, but none of them wishes to recognize with the vices of the others. We cannot see ourselves in this great monster we have all created. We are like Oppenheimer disbelieving: *I am become death*, the man said, long after he

created death itself.

Fade to Black.

22. The most transient thing about Kampf is Mami market, an ecosystem of opportunism. Traders who, to corps members, are the harbinger of capitalism, might be victims of Kampf themselves. The traders at Mami double the price of everything, yet the quality of goods and services either remain the same or are substandard. The foods, especially when they aren't local dishes, taste like unkempt shoes. These traders pay authorities for access to Kampf, and to recoup that fee and make profit in three weeks, they have no choice but to double the price of their goods and services. At the end of Kampf, they leave to return for the next Kampf, their lives in a certain loop. No one in Nigeria sees Nigeria come and go in various people like those traders. While we visitors claim Kampf is hell, they live their lives for it. Their children grow through the constancy of changing strange faces, knowing the only thing certain about Kampf is impermanence.

23. Mami is a place of convergence which, by its very existence, is about money: how much can be made from corps members and how much can be spent by the corps members. When the male peacock wishes to attract the female peacock, he opens his glorious plumes. So it is done at Mami market, but here the plumes are wallets. The more you spend, the easier it is to attract women. Here everything climaxes: the alcohol, the parties, the music, the sizzling sexual tension. The nights are short but loud. The light from the cheap bulbs is hot and harsh. The bawdiness rents the air and saunders the night. Drunk, everyone speaks his mother tongue—The Tower of Babel returns. It is an exercise in futility because no one is truly listening. Not the traders, not their children, not the soldiers, neither the suitors nor the courted, and certainly not the night itself.

24. In the hostels, the men will talk about the women of Kampf; love and post-Kampf sex rendezvous. They talk about how feminism has become weaponized, tainted. They conclude that Nigerian feminism, with its convenient selectiveness, represents the Twitter generation woman's discomfort in her hard-earned emancipation. They discuss the women's wantonness and covetousness. "They won't talk to you if you don't have a recent iPhone." 'Love is dead', they say. 'Love is money', they insist.

25. Those who have survived Kampf say you enjoy the final week at Kampf. Samsa reasons that if he hated and suffered in the first two weeks and the conditions which enabled the suffering are still present, why should he let the third week feel any better? This final week's "enjoyment" stems from a defeated exhaustion from routine, and to enjoy that third week, Samsa feels, would be an admittance of breakage; because it is the idea of freedom, freedom-to-come, freedom-annulled, that the corps members are urged to enjoy, not freedom itself.

26. Seven Corps Members Kidnapped at Zamfara. Auto Crash at Anambra: Two corps Members Dead. Four Corps Members Killed on Journey to Kampf. Bomb Blast in Damaturu: One Corps Member Among Deceased.

27. On the day of their release from Kampf, there is a parade to honour the results of Kampf's rhythm. Samsa thinks of how this whole exercise has merely been to show one the value of nostalgia, for this alone keeps one going in Kampf; the positive certainty that things have been better at one point in the past and, in spite of how they are now, the future will align fortuitously. Bertrand Russell wrote that "There is in the world much too much readiness, not only for action without adequate previous reflection, but also for some sort of action on occasions on which wisdom would counsel inaction." Samsa looks around. What exactly is the point of Kampf? He sees it in their eyes, their mien. No single person who has been drafted to

serve this country believes in this country. But who will do as Disraeli famously said, “Educate our masters”?

28. Upon release from Kampf, the prisoner returned into society finds it difficult to reintegrate. In contrast, there is far too much disorderliness in the world. In Port-Harcourt, Rivers State’s capital, Samsa reads sign posts: Eligbolo, Obio-Akpor, and the self-contradictory East-West Road. Somewhere in Eleme, a middle-aged driver with yellowed teeth and a faded blue polo pushes the top half of his body outside his car window and screams at Samsa, “Corper Wee!” (For Samsa is in his NYSC Khaki uniform.) Upfront, a boy, not more than seven, naked stomach-down, salutes Samsa, “Kopashun!”. At Rumuokoro, Samsa sees a dead body: A young man with a pool of blood congealed around his head, his face fattened by death, and his body barricaded to the side of the road like a thing of shame. The road leading up to his body is dirtied by scattered garbage. Samsa considers Caravaggio’s painting, “Juliet Beheading Holofernes”. The young man’s face looked dazed, his mouth agape as if, like Holofernes from the mythos, he knew death had arrived but he never expected to die in this manner. A few seconds later, Samsa’s suspicion that the man was surprised by death is confirmed; there is a gaping hole behind the dead man’s head where he had been shot, from where all his life had seeped out from. The dead man failed at Nigerian values, hustle and survive. “These people are troublemakers,” Samsa’s driver says in Yoruba, meandering through a gullet of traffic-jam as he switches between radio channels. Samsa wishes he would stop talking, Samsa wishes the driver would be naked, that the dead man was naked, both driver and corpse deprived of tribe, so this driver can see the wasted tragedy of a young man dead by the roadside like a dog.
29. The moment is dawn. It is the only time that true quiet reigns in Kampf. Not the enforced quiet of the night—even then other corps members in the hostel do not sleep, they discuss women, politics, sex, and complain about stolen buckets. After the corps members have been assembled into their platoons on the parade ground, and the Kampf commandant has spoken himself into tedium, at exactly Six AM, everyone falls silent as the Nigerian flag is raised and the country wakes. The shadow of the sun is spread over the dark clouds with brushstrokes of light. It is the quiet Samsa covets; silence falls on the parade ground and on Samsa like dew, and pervades his mind: Or not the quiet; the mixture of quiet and idyll, for one without the other has no effect on him—at Six PM when Nigeria sleeps, everywhere is never completely silent and when everywhere pretends silence, the light takes away the effect of idyll. But at dawn, all his restraints against Kampf, against life, all his logic and stoicism, the skeletons of his habits, fall away so he can listen to the numerous voices of dawn. Every morning, for three weeks, Samsa does this. And it is in one such moment that Samsa’s soul breaks because he has come upon a most final irrevocable realization that he loves Nigeria. What quivers his body in seizures of grief is the spring-crystal knowledge that no matter how hard he fights, how many unions he galvanizes, how many protests he joins, he would not be able to fix the country in his lifetime. At best, he would only lay a foundation. It is the weight of timeless futility that breaks Samsa’s soul. Dawn passes, light returns, the country is awake and the cacophonous languages of Kampf, and Babel, their voices, reign. Samsa may go the rest of his life fighting for a cause he is unsure will yield, unsure whether, even if he succeeds with others at laying a foundation, it will be built upon correctly. He sees the powder keg and idyll side by side, the understanding that if his generation fails, the possibility of recovery is almost impossible; that for the rest of his life, he will see the dawn and he will only think of Kampf and the failure of a country.
30. Samsa isn’t even thirty yet.

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