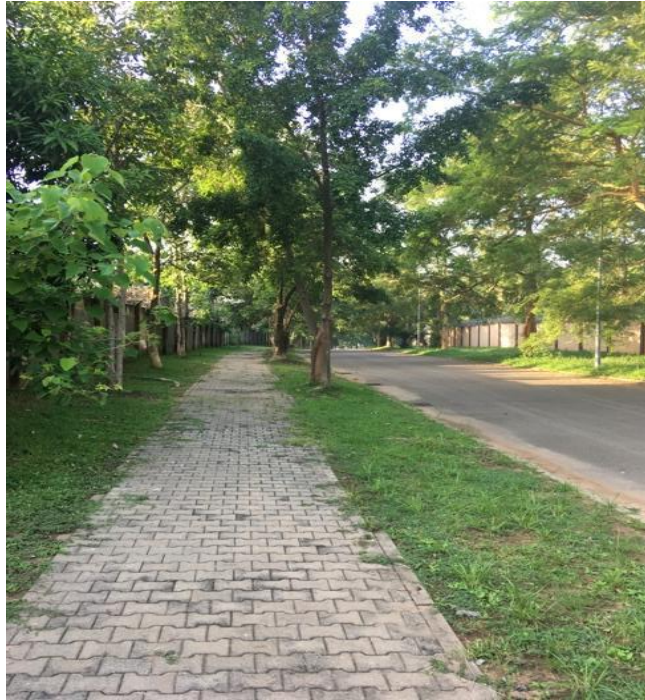


What Hospitality is Not

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Iya Abuukar Street¹

Before you know what hospitality is
You must travel the lonely road to lands far away
Before you know what hospitality is
You will sit in a room full of strangers
You will come to understand that being the only Black dot on
A white paper is not so bad. It could be worse

Before you know what it means to be a stranger
You will stomach the gaping eyes of strangers
Dissecting you, chewing you up and spitting you
OUT
The blow
Will let you know you are
A stranger

Before you know what hospitality is
 You will watch your father stroll away
 After
 He proudly drops you off at the reception
 In a school, in a strange land
 Wishing you well, you will watch as he
 Evaporates into a thick fog
 Taking with him everything you know and
 Hold dear
 Before you know what hospitality is
 You will be asked
 “which country is Africa in again?”
 Schooling in a strange school
 Always you will sit Apart
 Endure the solitude
 Persist in your loneliness

Before you know how the foreigner feels
 You will endure the deprivation of common
 Sights and
 Smells of familiar foods
 You will lose your senses

Before you know what hospitality is, you will become “overeducated”
 Still, you will look for jobs
 Five hundred applications sent
 Still, you will receive a handful of emails
 Advising you
 “I regret to inform you that you have not been shortlisted on THIS occasion.”

Before you know what hospitality is,
 You will watch your hopes dissipate like a useless
 PROMISE
 Alone, dejected
 You will replay the rejection like a sad love song
 Only then will you realise what hospitality is

Then you will learn to ignore the gaping eyes
 In the streets telling you, “go back to your country, Ni**er”
 I’ve seen it, I’ve heard it

No doubt you will hear the contempt in their voices too
The whispers, the sneers, as they mutter into each Other's ears, loud enough for me to hear
“Crows, they don’t even pay taxes, they have come to suck our welfare system dry and
Steal our jobs”

Only then will you begin to reinvent yourself
Be reborn
Reawakened
Only then will you
Rediscover new tastes
New ways of seeing things and
Being with the world

Before you know what hospitality is NOT
You will familiarise yourself with
New beats, new rhythms
Singing, dancing
Reminiscing
Gazing into the clear skies
Repressing the memories of the
Ancient homeland

* * *

Endnote:

¹ During a visit to Nigeria in June 2019, I took this photo as I went for an early walk at 6 am on a quiet road on Iya Abuukar Street in Jabi, Abuja. This image is the property of the poet, Hembadoon Iyortyer Oguanobi.