THE POWER OF PURPOSE

An Autobiography

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Chapter One

THE ROOTS

I was six years old when my family joined many other people of Ikorodu to embrace the promise of a better life in Lagos, which was then largely known as Eko. Extolled as one of the most populous and industrialized cities in Nigeria and Africa at large from as far back as the 1950s, Lagos was a land of opportunities and different resources. It pulled in people from all nooks of the country, giving families like mine a new status and home.

The opportunities created in Lagos were different from those created in the village we came from. My village was a rustic community which had unexposed farmers and destitute people trying to make ends meet. Consequently, my family joined in the exodus for greener pastures in Lagos. My father was particularly keen on the move to *Èkó* because he saw it as a place where his children could attain formal education. Back in Ikorodu, he had expressed an admiration for education and learned folks. So, it was a no brainer that Lagos would be the place for him to actualize his academic dreams for us. Being the last child of my father, I was barely done with my nursery school at the time. But my father was determined to change our status quo for the better and his dream moved us all to Lagos.

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My father found Lagos satisfying and superior, because things were different. Literacy was palpable, success was within reach, and he wanted some of that. He did not practice farming in Lagos. He picked up a new skill, tailoring,

which he learnt well enough to thrive in the city. At some point, my elder brother ran a business along the same line, to the satisfaction of my father. I can say that my father had a mixed sense of attainment and ambition here in Lagos, but he never forgot home. His farm in Ikorodu was still being cultivated, and he checked it every time he visited home from Lagos.

There were a lot of business opportunities available in Lagos. It was usual to find people importing different kinds of goods on a large scale and selling them in Lagos. Some of the imported goods included thread, yarn, books, clothes, etc. The truth is that my family, just like many others in Ikorodu, was not previously oblivious to the abundance in Lagos. The absence of a good road network was the prime limitation. But that was not going to stop anyone as those who nursed a strong desire continued to flood the vibrant city. Most were enchanted by the relative beauty of the city. It was nothing compared to Ikorodu. There were gleaming street lights that mirrored the tarred roads in some parts, energetic and buzzing environments filled with entertainment, and all sorts of buoyancy that elevated a city that was just waking up to modernity.

In no time, Ikorodu people formed community clusters in different parts of Lagos. Places like King's Palace, Reclamation Street, Ebute-Ero, Idumota, Dosunmu Street, Okoya, Agarawa, and so many others became hubs for them. They harnessed the opportunities that Lagos had to offer and made a better life for themselves. On two special occasions, it was customary for most of them to return home to Ikorodu. The first was during either of the two celebrations of the Islamic holidays: the *Eid al-Fitr*, which is the feast of breaking the fast, and *Eid al-Adha*, which is the feast of the sacrifice. For some reason, despite the traditional disposition of the Ikorodu people, they still identified with

Islam. They even went as far as marking the Eid celebrations by killing rams for their feasts. The rams were slaughtered and cooked in the atmosphere of celebration. It was always a memorable time for the whole family; a season of festivity and unity. To be candid, the practice might have emanated from the desire to do what other 'Lagosians' were doing. But it worked out well in the end, and the children were always satisfied.

The second call to Ikorodu was for another annual festivity. This time, it was a proper traditional celebration referred to as the Agemo Festival. The festival is practised in several Yoruba communities across Nigeria. The Ijebu people of Ogun State are widely known for their commitment to the festival. For them, the celebration is a means to honour Agemo, one of the gods of the land. There was a cult group in Ikorodu that operated in the same line. It was called the Agemo cult. They enforced restriction of movements during certain times as the festival occurred. It held in August every year.

Essentially, the Agemo Festival is the same as the New Yam Festival celebrated across different parts of Nigeria, especially in the Southeast and Southsouth. The difference here is that in Ikorodu, it is not called the New Yam Festival. Yet, similarities between the two abound. For example, the Agemo Festival is the time when the newly harvested yam is brought to the table and symbolic cooking methods are used to prepare the yam. The yam could be pounded into a soft solid form called *Iyan*. It could also be sliced and boiled without peeling off the outer layer. These styles of cooking were symbolic and significant to the people of Ikorodu. When it was time to boil the yam, they added red oil, salt, and a local soft-drink called _____. Finally, incantations were said over the boiling yam. These activities were not without spiritual connotations.

For many of the people, it was a means of fellowshipping with their god. They saw the process as an intercessory one that connected them to divinity. It was common to see some of them distribute the yam to the corners of their homes. Others scattered it across their ritual grounds. It was real to them, and reinforced the beliefs they had in the gods and the connection they established through the Agemo Festival.

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The construction of the Lagos-Ikorodu road caused a massive influx of the people of Ikorodu into Lagos. It was in a bid to avoid the Ibese River, which had witnessed two mishaps, that the idea of constructing a road alternative was conceived, thus birthing the Lagos-Ikorodu road project. History has it that the first mishap happened in the early 1940s in Ipakodo, which was en route to Ebute Ero, Lagos. The boat capsized and a large number of the Ikorodu people lost their lives. Exactly a decade later in 1952, the year I was born, another boat accident happened. It was a deja'vu experience, and the people were completely devastated.

Many Ikorodu people at the time were traditionalists and given to superstitions; so, it did not take long for the deaths to be linked to the river gods. They concluded that the gods of the river had been mad and had cursed them. I think that might be the theory that informed the phobia of many Ikorodu people for water, even though their communities are situated in a coastal area.

People from Ijebu-Ode, Idowa and a few other neighbouring communities soon converged and mobilized themselves through town meetings, one of which was held at Glover Hall, Lagos. They contributed money and other resources, which summed up to three thousand pounds. That was how the Lagos-Ikorodu road project started. After pursuing the project for a while, it was taken over by the colonial

government and was finally completed in the early 1950s. The completion of the road brought succour and hope to the people and created opportunities for migration to Lagos.

Once the road construction was completed, there were two major things that happened which presented a lot of opportunities to the Ikorodu people. First there was an exodus of Ikorodu inhabitants who relocated to several parts of Lagos. And then, most transport businesses on water, moved to land. The road served as a link between the rural, unsophisticated Ikorodu villages and the bright promising city of Lagos. For the providers of boat transport services, which were mostly natives of Ikorodu, this was an opportunity for them to move away from the water entirely. They ventured into land transport and pioneered some of the early road transport services. Amongst these businesses were Benson Transport Service and Osinowo Transport Service. They came into direct competition with the Lagos City Transport Service (LCTS), which was the dominant transport player in the Lagos area at the time.

Entrepreneurs and business people operated at a competitive scale in Lagos. With the move from water to land, many Ikorodu people withdrew from most water related activities. Till this day, the Ikorodu people are not known for an occupation like fishing, or aquatic activities like swimming.

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In modern history, Ikorodu is geographically established as one of the five divisions of Lagos. It is populated by inter-related migrant groups, mostly people of Ijebu extraction, whose progenitors concentrated at different locations within Ikorodu. Each settlement bore a unique family name, which was influenced by its own unique history. Prominent among these was the Itunmoja clan.

The Itunmoja clan was founded by three families – Efunolu, Selasoye, and Asekuloye – whose origin could be traced to Ogbonrin, the son of Oba Otutu-bi-osun, the ninth Awujale of Ijebu Ode.

Research indicates that the name *Itumoja* derived from *Itu-omo- ija*. That is, a concentration of Ija descendants. The origin of Itunmoja cannot be thoroughly explored without a full exploration of the life of Ogborin, the great paternal progenitor of Itunmoja clan and the first man to set his feet on the soil of Ikorodu. Ogborin emanated from Ijebu Ode. His father was the ninth Awujale of Ijebu Ode, but he later lost his throne to his immediate younger brother. The incident caused his migration out of the town. He re-settled at Idowa, and became the first Dagburewe of Idowa.

Ogborin's father, Oba Otutu-bi-osun, had contracted a deadly disease during his reign. It was so terrible that he had to be banished so that he could seek an effective cure, and in order to prevent the spread of the disease. In his absence, the authority of Ijebu Ode was entrusted to his brother, who was mandated to hold the fort pending his return. Unfortunately, the agreement that he would re-ascend the throne on his return was breached. The younger brother's insistence to remain on the throne sparked a fierce misunderstanding between the two brothers. As a result of the quarrel between Oba Otutu-bi-osun and his brother, the entire Ijebu Ode was engulfed in crisis. To prevent total calamity from being unleashed on Ijebu Ode, the elders of the land intervened decisively.

Oba Otutu-bi-osun, who had left the town, promised to forcefully invade Ijebu Ode and dethrone his brother, but the elders acted promptly. He was met and begged profusely at a spot between Ijebu Ode and Idowa: The elders pleaded that he should return to where he was coming from and give

room for peace to reign. They also prayed that he would expand and progress at his new place.

After much persuasion, Otutu-bi-osun consented to the elders' appeal, but insisted that the crown in the palace be split into two before his departure. For the sake of peace, the elders had to oblige him and immediately ordered that the crown be split as demanded. That was the reason why the original crown in Ijebu Ode was shared between Ijebu Ode and Idowa. The spot where the elders met Oba Otutu-bi-osun is today known as Imepe in Ijebu Ode.

The essence of the exploration of Ogborin's life is to authenticate the blood relationship between Itunmoja clan and Ijebu Ode and to further affirm that Ikorodu was founded by people of Ijebu extraction.

It was after the demise of Oba Otutu-bi-osun that his son, Ogborin, who was incidentally the progenitor of Itunmoja, surfaced in the historical narrative of the clan. Baba Ogborin inherited his father's spiritual power, but he was still faced with series of vicious humiliation from his fellow brothers. He was so dismayed by their attacks that he made up his mind to migrate out of Idowa and journey down to Ikorodu. He first settled at a nephew's abode at Odonla, the first settlement in Ikorodu.

He later moved out of Odonla to survey some fertile land that would be suitable for his farming business. He settled at Iselu where he established a large farming businesss. At Iselu, Ogborin met a hunter, Baikulatan, also known as Kulatan, the son of the Ajalorun of Ijebu Ife. A close relationship ensued between them. To strengthen their ties, Kulatan's daughter, Oyemade, was given out in marriage to Ogborin. The children of the connubial relationship between Oyemade and Ogborin were called Efunolu, Asekuloye and Selasoye.

Efunolu married a man from Ijeju legureand they had Legure and Siguwa as children. Selasoye, Efunolu's younger brother, was the father of Ota, Alagadagidi, Retuga, Jigboku, Jagundemosu and Laketu. Oyemade's third child had no child.

Ogborin later moved away from Iseolu, and settled at Orimedu. He got married to another woman who gave birth to Asekuloye, the father Edeigbo, Alase, Iwonlu, Osoala, and Tigbebo. Ogborin's third wife, a woman from Odongunyan area, gave birth to Ayele Ayanbade and Semade. Subsequently, Ogborin spent his life in Ojuba, the first house in Ikorodu.

My father, Olowofela, is a direct descendant of Asekuloye, a son of Ogborin, who was the son of the ninth Awujale of Ijebu Ode, Oba Otutu-bi-osun.

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My father, Olowofela Oso-Bello Olusanya, was born into the Asekuloye family in Itunmoja, a settlement in Ikorodu. His ancestors lived in Orimedu village, a territory now occupied by the 172 Battalion of the Nigerian Army. It is a border community between Ogun State and Lagos State, and is presently located in Ikorodu north local development area of Lagos State.

Pa Oso-Bello, as father was later known, was a tall, slim, dark-complexioned man. He was just over six feet tall. He bore the typical Yoruba tribal marks usually inscribed on the body by burning or cutting the skin during childhood for identification and beautification. Such marks were inscribed in different styles and number of slashes. My father had three on each side of his cheeks. That was common amongst the ancient Ijebu people. It was also a trait they had in common with the Egba people. For the traditionalist that he was, he was already becoming acquainted the some of the

modern ways of doing things. His tribal marks were not what he was going to bequeath to his children. Thus, he never inscribed those marks on any of us. He saw and interacted with some of the elite of his time. He admired them, and wanted his children to mix properly with theirs.

Being a core traditionalist, my father actively served as a chief in the Agemo cult of Itumoja, his hometown. His title was prestigious within the Agemo cult. He was respected as the head of the cult. During festivals, he was one of the few people who led others in performing the rites. If there was a need to inaugurate a traditional titular leader, such as the Oba of Ikorodu, he was there. He understood the traditions and rituals, and was a man of responsibility in those regards.

The Agemo cult was not the only cult my father was associated with. There was another cult within the town called Rogunyo. They were also similar to the Agemu cult. It was customary to see them perform rituals before the commencement of traditional festivals in Ikorodu. They were well revered in the community. In fact, the Oba of Ikorodu was always present at the town square whenever they wanted to perform their rites. Whatever they did in their groups stayed within them. Then when they came out for their dances, chants and prayers, they moved around in accordance to the hierarchy of the chiefs within the cult. Most times, I saw my father come out first. All of these did not make sense to me at the time. But as I got older, I developed a sense of sentimentality and attachment.

Sometimes, I along with my brothers followed father to either of these traditional cult meetings. My immediate older brother, Moshood Segun Bello, was the most regular. He would carry my father's leather bag, lioke I did a few times. The leather bag was a paraphernalia of their status in the cult. Not everyone carried the bag. Those who did had a high

ranking of identification in the group. When we got there, Moshood and I would sit quietly and observe proceedings. From the several meetings I attended, I learned about my culture; I also learned some songs which I never forgot even in my adult years. The songs were relatable to circumstances and events in the community. They were valuable songs I enjoyed, and they shaped my sense of identity somewhat.

An assertive disciplinarian who had firm control of his environment, my father always expected compliance when he dished out instructions to children and the household. He was not the type of parent who would sit down with you to negotiate what to do and what not to do. He was rather dictatorial in his roles as husband and father. But he was generally fair to everyone. In those days, parents took adequate control of the family, teaching and imposing morals and values. They understood how necessary these values were in the long run. In addition, such training gave protection to the family's name; none of us as children would go out to misbehave in ways that could bring ridicule to the family.

Father managed a cocoa farm in Ikorodu. Farming was his primary occupation, and he never really left it. He also cultivated other cash crops at Orimedu. When he migrated to Docemo in Lagos Island, he took to tailoring, specializing in the weaving of Yoruba native caps known as *gobi*. He produced such caps so well and skillfully that he got good patronage for his work. He became known in the Docemo area as *Baba Onigobi*, and people sought his service from all over Lagos Island.

Even when my father lived in Lagos Island, he returned to Ikorodu regularly to keep up with his responsibilities as a high chief, to review the work being done by those he left on

his farms, and to attend to family and community matters. Though he was not a wealthy man, he was highly respected in the Ikorodu community largely because he showed commitment to and participated in the pursuit of progressive ideas in the community.

Healthwise, he battled with asthma for years. He would cough repeatedly every time. It became a threat to his life. By the time he moved to Lagos, he visited the University of Lagos Teaching Hospital (LUTH) at Idi-Araba severally for treatment. As a traditional man, he also relied on *Agbo,* a local mixture of herbs as part of his medication. I never saw him use an inhaler. The chronic asthma he suffered might have contributed to his death. As an asthmatic person too, especially in a modern era, I have a sense of awareness and knowledge on how to manage the condition. I go for medical treatments and I know certain things that might trigger an attack, and how to avoid them. Unlike my father, I do not rely on *Agbo*. But things were so different in his time.

My father died on 26 February, 1966. I was in my first year in secondary school when that happened. My older sister, Mulikat (later Alhaja Mulikat Oladipupo), who is the oldest child of my mother had picked me up at Fadeyi in Lagos, where I lived with an elderly uncle and his family, and where I was schooling at the time. We visited my father who had retired from his tailoring work and had returned and resettled in Ikorodu. When we entered his apartment, we found him alone in the room. His wheezing filled the room, like someone in search of air. Panting heavily with a frenzied look in his eye, we greeted. He answered as warmly as he could. My sister, a tender-hearted and benevolent soul, quickly went to a local food market to get some foodstuff to prepare a meal for my father. While alone in the room, my father and I had a little chat. He asked about my new school and the experiences there. I told him it was all fine. I had

missed him so much. As the last child, I had a close relationship with my parents. My older siblings were either married or stayed far away from home. I was the only one who stayed back home with him before I eventually left for Fadeyi. It did not seem like the little chat I had with him would be the last. I did not suspect anything.

I had told my father that I wanted to go to Igbo-Ota, a forest near our house. My plans were to get some farm produce and play for a while. At the time, it was common to find many different kinds of fruits – pawpaw, banana, oranges, and others – in the forest and get them for free. We even found snails there, particularly the white ones. We would pick up fallen pods of cocoa, open them, and suck out the sweet juicy substance in them. The forest, being a primary one, was always very dense with a thick canopy of trees everywhere. Also, a stream stretched across the vegetation, making it a conducive home for snakes. We were not afraid of the snakes. It was either we killed them or they ran away. After a while, I left the forest for home, and met the strangest of gatherings there.

Some old men surrounded the house. I knew something had gone wrong. Frantically, I asked them what had happened, but I got no response. I rushed in to go and see my father. At that point, one of them stopped me. He said I could not go in. And that was it. My father was dead, and I was barely a child.

Since my father was a member of their cult, they had to perform their passing rituals over him. Right after his death, my sister gave me some money to go and inform my brother who was at Muslim High School, Sagamu. I took a *Bolekeja* bus on my own, as a young boy of about 12. Finally, I got there, told my brother, and we returned together. By the time we got home, more people had converged at the house – family, chiefs, and sympathisers. The burial proceedings

and ceremonies had also started, and these lasted for a few days.

In my later years, I got to understand who my father truly was. He was a man whose role and position were of relevance in the community. He was involved in community affairs, associated with different groups, religious cults, age grades, and others that were parts of the traditional institution in Ikorodu in that era. This was one of the attributes I really admired in him, though I saw much of it as a child from afar. I also acquired this attribute from him, learning early in life that one does not stay within his nuclear family only without contributing and partaking in the community development. It is wise and valuable for one to be involved.

Another attribute I admired in my father was his love and respect for other people's lifestyle. Although, he was a traditionalist, he was fascinated by other religions. They acted so differently from his own group of traditional worshippers; the way they dressed, spoke and acted. All of these were intriguing to my father. My father admired the fascinating practice of the Salvation Army School. Their premises were just behind our traditional home in Ikorodu, and every day we would see the children all lines up at the assemble, dressed in white uniforms, march smartly going and go about their usual activities. My father liked what he saw and encouraged us to be a part of them. He had an open mind that was ready to engage positive elements in other ways of life. Though he didn't have the opportunity of western education, he greatly appreciated the value of early education for his children, and almost literally pushed us in that direction. The Salvation Army School thus offered me an early encounter with Western education.

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It is a universal truth that a mother plays the most important roles in the life of a child. The child's first encounter in life is with the mother. Little wonder then that the indigenous language of a child is said to be the 'mother-tongue'. That ascription could be part-compensation for the relentless efforts of the mother in nurturing a child. Success in the life of a man is largely traceable to maternal links. I was greatly influenced and inspired by my mother, and her tutelage and consistent motherly advice and guidance were pivotal to my development and success in life.

My mother, Alimat Sadiat Bello, was born into the Agunfoye family in Itun-Abosun in the Igbogbo area of Ikorodu. She shared some features with my father, but they were also so different in some ways. She was a caramel-complexioned woman, and about 5 ft 6 inches tall. She also had tribal marks on her rounded face, but not as long as my father's. In those days, many women inscribed those marks as beauty trends which they thought made them look prettier and more attractive.

Unlike my father, my mother was calm. She rarely raised her voice. She was the third and youngest wife of my father and cared for everyone, including the older wives and their kids. When she cooked, everyone joined in sharing the meal. But my step-mothers did the same. We all ate from the same pot regardless of who prepared the meal. In my place, eating together signifies unity. There was this feeling of togetherness and family bond when we all ate from the same pot. The children often ate their meals in an open space between the front building and another building at the back, all in the same compound. The kitchen was right between these buildings. It was an open-space kitchen and that was where all cooking was done. That was the family house in Ikorodu.

My father's house was built in such a way that the wives had their separate apartments. At the front building were my father's bedroom and his parlour. All the other rooms were at the back. Also, there were several doors that led to the house. So, most times, the doors were locked, and we came in through the main door that was usually opened. This was the one close to a pavement where my father usually sat. Whenever the traditional worshippers had their procession as part of their rites, they always passed by our house. We were usually aware of the ceremonies or festivals going on in the community. Very close to the house was my ancestral home. It was the home my grandfather lived in before he died, although I never got to meet him.

Though a polygamous home, we lived together as one family. Of course, there is no family without misunderstandings and quarrels. This could be worse when it is a polygamous setting. But my mother and step mothers learned to adjust and live together. Perhaps in that era, and the years before then, it was rampant for men to take in more than one wife. Those women were somewhat prepared for that trend; their mothers did that, so did their grandmothers and those before them. Polygamy was tolerated, especially when there was a 'fair and just' husband who loved the wives in about the same measure.

My father's first wife, _____, had three kids and their names were Saliu Bello, Tariat Bello, and Aliu Bello. Saliu Bello, my eldest brother, just like my father, admired the elite people. He was unable to complete his secondary school education, but he took a vocation in the importation of tailoring materials like buttons, threads and needles. He dressed like the elite people in Lagos who wore luxurious outfits of great quality. He also cultivated the habit of socializing extensively, and enjoying highlife music. Tairat, his immediate sister, too could not finish her secondary

school education. However, Aliu did. He attended and finished from Ahmadiyya College, Agege. Thereafter, he furthered his education, took some professional examinations and eventually became a chartered accountant. At the time I finished my National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in 1977, he was already the Chief Accountant of African Alliance Insurance Company (AIICO), Broad Street, Lagos. Some of his children and grandchildren also followed that path.

Father's second wife, _____, had only a child called Jamiu Adio Bello. Jamiu was the only one that retained the position of my father in the Agemo cult. Just like Saliu and Tairat, he too could not finish his secondary school education. Much as my father wanted his children to get western education, the family was financially constrained; father's resources were actually meager, and he could not stretch his wish beyond his pocket. Of course, each child at some certain age had to bear responsibility for his or her educational advancement

Growing up, Jamiu was an obstinate young boy. He hardly listened to my father's instructions and did things differently from what he was told. `I recall an incident that happened when I was much younger. Some of my siblings and I were with our father as he sat on the pavement in front of the house. There were no street lights, so evening looked like night time. The streets were near empty because most people had already retired for the day and were back in their homes. 'Where was Jamiu?' I wondered. I called him out severally, but there was no response. Jamiu was not home.

My father was fuming with rage. He stood up, collected some stones from the ground and put them beside him. Perhaps, from where he was, Jamiu had seen him collecting the stones, so he stayed out much longer, hoping the anger would

subside and he would go back in. But my father remained on the pavement. The more Jamiu stayed out, the more wrathful father became.

When Jamiu eventually returned home, my father furiously threw stones at him. Everyone could feel the heat. At times like that, the mothers were usually blamed for bad parenting. I experienced all these, and I was mindful of them as I grew older. I did not want to be in my father's black book. So, I always complied with his instructions.

Though Jamiu was a difficult child, he was the one that eventually became a core traditionalist like my father. Before father died, he took us to our ancestral home in Itumoja, which was not far from the house, during the Agemo festivals. A ritual was then performed where my grandfather was buried. For the ritual, we went with pounded new yam, a ram, dry gin, water, palm oil, dry fish, bitter kola, and other items.

The pounded yam and the concoction were put on the ground, then the chief who conducted the ritual led the gathering with chants and prayers, killed the ram and allowed the blood spill close to my grandfather's grave. There was usually a loud gong followed by chants and prayers. Then everyone scrambled on the yam to get pieces to eat from the ground.

When my father died, Jamiu led members of the Agemo cult to where my father was buried. They were joined by some male members of my family, and the same rituals were performed for my father. Effectively, father passed the baton of traditional religion to Jamiu. I got some of that as well. I also got the Islamic faith from him, and I must say a seed that germinated into Christianity.

Chapter Two

EARLY CHILDHOOD, A HONEY POT

At every child-naming, my father consulted the Ifa oracle. Natural substances like water, honey, salt, and sugar were presented for the naming. Though a traditionalist, father was also a fervent Muslim and thus preferred Muslim names as the first names of his children. But the oracles were consulted first for the approval of those names. He thus named me Kaoli. But I was also given a traditional Yoruba name based on the circumstance of the time.

Ayinde was the other name given to me at birth. It was not just another name, but one which demonstrated the relief my mother felt after she had me. The name heralds 'the arrival of good fortune.' It was said that I was an abiku, a "spirit child", who had died twice before I finally returned to earth to stay.

My mother's previous two births had resulted in deaths, and she had to endure the emotional turmoil that came with each loss. She had prayed that my birth would be different, and when I stayed, she believed that God had answered her prayers. Thus it was that she gave me the name "Ayinde."

Often, when she called me Ayinde, my mother would recite my oriki and sing my praises in Yoruba. She continued to do this even when I grew older. To my mother, I would always be Ayinde, the one who brought her comfort in her time of distress. Though she attempted to have another child after me, I came to be her fourth and last child. The child she bore after me died, just like the two before me. Of the seven children she birthed, only four survived.

The circumstances surrounding my birth and my family's belief that I was an abiku child might explain why my mother pampered me the way she did. Perhaps, too, I enjoyed special privileges because I was the last born. My mother indulged me on many occasions, especially when I pretended to be sick so that I could have some beverage, which was a luxury then.

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It was believed that the gods were responsible for the birth and death of children, who could either choose to stay in the world of the living or return to the world of the spirits. So, in an attempt to prevent children from returning to the spirit world, parents appeased the gods with rituals and sacrifices. There was a fear that I might return to the world of the spirits like the two before me. My parents, therefore, did not hesitate in carrying out these sacrifices. If it was what it would take for me to live, then they were willing to do it. My father in particular, as a traditionalist, observed the rituals, which included offering free food to people. This act was known in Yoruba as *saara*, and it usually involved dancing and singing.

"Child of offering, if offering starts, come and dance for us, when you dance for us, death will flee, untimely death will take to flight," my peers and the neighbouring kids would sing at the feast organized by my father.

I would join in the singing and dancing, often displaying my dance skills as my peers formed a circle round me. My father, however, could not partake in the feast because it was strictly for the young ones in the community and not adults. Though he was the organizer, he could only watch and ensure that everything went smoothly. This ritual was said to have protected children like me who were considered abiku.

Wearing of charms was also a part of the rituals that many believed would protect the abiku children. These charms, usually made from materials that clanged and chimed, were tied around the necks and ankles of the children. So, when the children walked, the charms loudly announced their approach. The essence of the charms was to ward off the spirit of death. However, I do not recall wearing any of these charms.

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In retrospect, I can say that the advancement in science and medicine was what kept me alive. As time went on, there came to be more medical facilities which took care of the sick and ultimately reduced infant mortality rate in the community. Healthcare practitioners sensitized parents who were superstitious and blamed the death of their children on the gods rather than negligence or poor medical attention. A proper healthcare system was set up within the community, and many were encouraged to take advantage of it.

This marked a significant growth in the community, as parents learnt of the different causes of infant mortality and took preventive measures against them. Whenever there was a record of an infant death, its cause would be traced to jaundice, poor hygiene, malnutrition, complication at birth, asthma, among other factors. This put an end to the rituals and stigmatization that the so-called abiku children were subjected to. Civilization finally took over the superstitious beliefs that held the community.

My enrolment in a public primary school upon our arrival in Lagos protected me from any of the common incisions that other children suspected to be abiku were known to have. Before I could be enrolled, the school made it mandatory for me to go through the standard immunization process. My mother had taken it upon herself to enroll me at the age five,

with my father's permission. She wasted no time in getting me immunized so that I could be enrolled. There was, thus, only evidence of the immunization on my body and none of the incisions. The antigenic substances in the immunization made me free from all forms of infant illnesses that could lead to an early death.

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My early days in Ikorodu were a lot easier than my later days in Lagos. Those days were filled with exciting activities. I would often go with my friends to Igbo-Ota, a forest that was situated near our compound in Ikorodu, to pick fruits. The forest was thick with fruit trees, and we were often presented with a variety of fruits that we could choose from. Also, whenever there was a heavy downpour of rain, we would go in search of fruits which would have been washed up by the rain. We also found delight in moulding any structure we wanted with clay and water.

Most of the activities we engaged in as children had to do with art. We would carve, mould, and do the work of an architect. We would either carve a thick three-inch wood into a cone-shaped object that could be spun afterwards or mould different structures with sand. We would often dip our legs in sand and keep heaping sand upon sand till it was strong enough to stand on its own. Then we would remove our legs and create a smaller house inside it. Some of the structures we moulded had the shape of huts. We would go as far as building a compound and a house for the security guard. All these would be moulded with clay soil from the mud, which made the structures to last long. The houses were the sizes of our legs, so no one could go inside them. Whenever we built the houses, we would fence them and use twigs to create trees for them.

We also included building trucks with empty St. Louis sugar packs and bottle covers in our daily activities. This would often involve collecting bottle covers and the sugar packs before fixing the perforated bottle covers to the perforated sugar packs to make tyres. We would then have a truck that we could wheel around with a rope. Sometimes, we would load the truck with things just to show that it was indeed a truck.

We loved building trucks and houses, as we could not afford the luxury of toys. Our toys were created from sand, twigs, woods, and the likes. We considered discarded kitchen waste, like bottles, useful while playing. We enjoyed nature and all that it offered us. We had all the space we needed to play in, for my father's compound in Ikorodu was large. It gave us liberty to play. There was a feeling of satisfaction that came from knowing that the compound we played in belonged to my father and those that watched us play were members of my family.

Family was important, and in those days, most of my friends were members of my extended family. My cousins and nephews, both paternal and maternal, all lived within the same Ikorodu neighbourhood. So, I spent most of my playtime with them, and we had such good times together that this could easily be the best part of my childhood. I have the best memories of my times with Kudirat, the daughter of my father's cousin; Adesoyi, a younger relative; Shamusideen, another younger relative; Doja Oseni, who was almost age-mates with my older brother, Moshood Bello. These were my playmates that also lived inside the house with us.

There were others that I played with who did not live inside the house. Nosirudeen Lawal Akolelobasi, who was the son of my father's nephew, was one of such people. We were age-

mates and good friends. Osho was a maternal relative from Ilu-Igbo. We also grew up together, but he passed on in 2021. Before his death, he was the Ogbeni-Oja of Ilu-Igbo. I also recall spending my playtime with Sauda, a maternal relative, who also happened to be my age-mate. She currently holds a chieftaincy title in Ikorodu. We always came together from our different locations to play.

However, when we moved to Lagos and I started school, we all went our separate ways. We kept in touch still, and though some have passed on over the years, we have remained in touch till date. We have continued to share a bond and relate as one big happy family. I remained close to Sauda, for instance, who made our house her abode even after we moved to Lagos. She still comes to me when she needs advice and we can talk about any issue.

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Unity among my siblings, step-siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles was greatly encouraged by my father. He did everything to ensure that his household, filled with members of his extended family, lived together in harmony. He would not hear of anyone going against his rules and orders, which strongly discouraged rivalry. We all ate our meals from the same bowl, whether we were cousins or step-siblings. This created a strong bond between us. My father formed a foundation that has helped us to continue to live in harmony till date.

Each person understood his or her roles in the home. For instance, the younger siblings understood their role as the younger ones and gave the older ones the respect they deserved. Any form of reasonable discipline or punishment from an older sibling to a younger one for an act of disobedience or unruliness was accepted because it was believed that it was well deserved. It was with this respect

for older siblings that we acted while eating together, or even playing together. When the older siblings were present, we would let them take the lead. They apportioned the food or gave orders on how the food should be shared so that it could go round.

There were times, however, when I would go to my mother to ask for my food to be dished separately or for additional helping. She would always oblige my request. Still, I knew my place as the last born and respected my older siblings. My siblings were kind to me and treated me well. They rewarded me when I ran errands, which I never did grudgingly. Each time they sent me on an errand, perhaps to fetch water for bathing, I would make sure to respond eagerly because I knew I would be rewarded for my effort. Even when there was no reward, I would do whatever I was asked to do to the best of my ability. There were times, though, when I did not do exactly what my older siblings asked of me. Whenever that happened, they would punish me. Some forms of punishment I received included beatings and knocks on the head. I would always remember Mulikat, my mother's oldest daughter, for giving me the hardest knocks on my head.

"What took you so long?" she would ask if I did not run an errand quickly enough, before giving me one of her hard knocks on my head.
She was skilled in resetting one's brain with her heavy head knocks, which she gave with her left hand. But whenever my mother was around, the knocks were not so hard. Mulikat, along with my other older siblings, understood how much I meant to my mother and would make my punishment as light as possible when she was close by.

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Growing up in a polygamous home was peaceful. But that was back in Ikorodu. It was different from what many would expect of such a setting. There was no discrimination in our home, and we the children ate from the same pot. This was due in large part to my father's ability to manage the home. He had authority over the entire house, and every one respected him. Any instruction he gave was carried out. Everyone dreaded his wrath and did all they could to avoid it, even our mothers. They would not mistreat any of the children, even if the child was not theirs biologically. My siblings and I lived in peace and did everything together as one.

We celebrated festivals together and played together. An outsider would be unable to tell which children belonged to which woman. We hardly made that distinction ourselves. My brother, Jamiu, who replaced my father at the Agemo religious cult, was my stepmother's son, but of all my siblings, we were the closest to each other. I did my best to support him as well as I could. I enrolled his children and grandchildren in my school, just as I did for other members of the extended Olusanya family whose parents could not provide for their children's education.

All the women in the house – my mother and her co-wives – engaged in one form of trade or the other. My stepmother, the one we called "Iya Ologede", sold only fruits. So, fruits were always available in our home, and we could have some bananas or some other fruits of our choice whenever we wanted. It was a wonder that Iya Ologede never went bankrupt, as we would often take from her fruits and eat to our fill. Surprisingly, there would still be enough fruits to sell, with leftovers. My mother also prepared meals for the entire house which everybody could eat. The other women in the house traded in different things, and we benefited from them

also. Mutually beneficial, the relationship among the wives was cordial.

There was no much in terms of competition that I observed among the mothers, and not such that extended to the children in any significant way. Our home was filled with love, and it was partly the reason why I could bring all the children and grandchildren from the extended family together to attend my school and enjoy the same benefits of modern education. We grew up in a peaceful atmosphere where we extended a helping hand to one another. That philosophy of supporting others still exists among us today. We take seriously the saying that "Blood is thicker than water", and we cherish the people we share blood with. It was on the foundation of love that we were raised, and we remain devoted to family.

In my later years, I had cause to continue to build upon the foundation of goodwill that had been laid by my parents and family. Providing my family with access to education has been my way of assisting those who were or are in need. Not everyone possesses the financial wherewithal to send their children to school, because some are more successful than others. So, I make it my duty to help these ones. I take care of these children in the hostel, clothe them, and feed them. The reason I do this is simple. I do not want the children to miss out on getting good education which would improve their lives. If they miss out on such an opportunity, these children might become outcasts in the society and my father's name which I was charged to uphold will be put to shame.

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In quite some ways in those days, we led an unhygienic lifestyle because we took for granted hand washing before eating and after using the convenience. This was because we did not know its importance and we were not as enlightened

then. There was also the problem of water, which we did not have easy access to. There was no provision of running water from the tap, and we would either have to go to the stream, which was a distance from our home, or fetch water from a stored clay pot which would need to be refilled in no time. This situation resulted in our unhygienic practices, and we remained ignorant for a long time. Thus, I often had stomach upset which left me lying face down till the pain subsided.

My concerned mother would often seek medical assistance at the health centres, where she would be given directives on what to do. Though we received regular support from medical personnel who would prescribe worm expellers and other drugs, our problems persisted because we did not stop our unsafe practices. We survived only by the grace of God.

In Ikorodu at the time, we were surrounded by nature. Though there were a few houses around us, we were largely surrounded by forests and streams. A big canal was usually created by a heavy downpour of rain in front of our house. After the rain, we would go into the canal to dig out things like pennies or fruits washed up by the rain. We called the pennies Onini and the fruits Iyere. We counted ourselves lucky when we found pennies, usually the smallest denomination of coins at the time. The coins had such great value, as small as the denomination was, and we would take them to those who sold baked beans or what is known as akara in Yoruba. We would get enough akara to eat to our satisfaction with soaked garri.

There was always something to pick out from the canal after a downpour of rain. We could find things we would use to build, design and create toys. So, once it stopped raining, we would make our way there, and search for things. Another place we loved going to was Igbo-Ota. There were

all kinds of trees in the forest, which we called a resource forest. There were annual trees and crop trees. There were also crawling animals, like snakes. When I was lucky, my older brothers would go with me to protect me and kill the snakes. They would dice a snake into a number that could go round, so that each member of our household got a portion. They would then prepare it for eating. Snakes were a delicacy back then. So were snails. The white snails, which many claimed were connected to the abikus, were most common. These snails had white shells, not like the normal ones with black shells. We enjoyed eating them as much as we enjoyed the ones with black shells. We did not care for their colour and regarded both as good food for consumption.

Igbo-Ota was a honey pot to us at the time. It was there that we had our refreshment whenever we were exhausted from playing with our toys or just needed to cool off. The forest was always cool, as it was dense with a stream close by to wash ourselves in. We also made a habit of picking cocoa pods that had fallen to the ground before breaking them so that we could eat them. There was a variety of fruits, including pawpaw and banana. We could even fetch vegetables for my mother which she would make into a tasty soup dish. In a sense, we were rich because we had all we needed to survive. There was no reason to compare ourselves with other families, as there was little or no difference between my household and others. This was not until we moved to Lagos, when everything changed. It was there that I noticed the difference in the way we lived. There was a huge difference between life in Ikorodu and what we experienced in Lagos.

Chapter Three

TWISTS OF FORTUNE

Though moving to Lagos provided the change we needed, it was not exactly what I had envisioned. We moved from a spacious house in Ikorodu to a single room in Lagos, which seven of us had to share. My father, mother, some of my siblings, my mother's business helpers and I had to sleep in the room. Our living conditions in Isale-Eko were different from those we had become accustomed to in Ikorodu. Whenever we visited our house in Ikorodu, we saw the stark difference in the way we lived, and we soon realized that we had lived a luxurious life back in Ikorodu. In contrast to our room in Lagos, our house in Ikorodu was a palace, where I could almost choose where to sleep and who to share a room with. More importantly, the house in Ikorodu belonged to us.

Our poor living condition in Lagos was a factor that influenced my desire to work hard and succeed. We lived in abject poverty and could barely get by. But we never went hungry, because my mother cooked and sold food. There were some children in the neighbourhood who befriended me just so that they could get free meals. Feeding was the only aspect of our lives where we did not lack, and I was thankful for that. Such times as when I ate to my fill or pilfered from my mother's money to buy sweets or watch a movie or enjoy a number of leisure activities, I would forget that we were poor and think that we were doing fine. That was until I returned to our single room which was partitioned into sections to accommodate all seven of us.

We shared a pit toilet with what might have been the entire neighbourhood. We also shared a bathroom, which was next to the communal kitchen, with the same number of people. Both the toilet and bathroom were dirty, with slime and algae on the walls. There was a well in front of the pit toilet,

where we usually fetched water from. In front of the well was the kitchen and next to the kitchen was the bathroom. These four were connected in the most irritating way. The revolting condition of these places reminded me of the despicable state we were in. I hated it. I knew then, even at that young age, that I detested poverty. But that was a part of the price we paid for seeking a better life in the city.

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Notwithstanding the new difficult life that became our lot, we faced our struggle squarely and at the forefront was my mother , who worked so hard to make life better for the family. My mother was famous for her mouth-watering dishes in Isale-Eko. She would get up at the crack of dawn, when many were yet to stir from sleep, to make preparations for her meals. Preparations would often include fetching firewood and getting her coal pot cleaned and ready for the day's cooking. She enjoyed cooking and worked swiftly, her strong arms moving methodically as she cut vegetable leaves, diced onions, measured spoons of palm oil or tore pieces of dried fish into the pot of soup.

Once she started cooking, she would not rest until she was done, and before long, the sweet aroma of her delicacies would waft through the air. She cooked a variety of soup dishes, rich with meat and different types of fish. Her ewedu, okro and vegetable soups, including egusi and efo riro, were many people's favourites. Customers who came to buy my mother's dishes would eat and literally their fingers, then ask for more.

Everyone wanted to have a taste of her cooking, and people came from all over Isale-Eko to buy her food. The current Oba of Lagos, Rilwan Akiolu, who was then a young police officer always came to my mother's shop to eat her food. He still remembers eating her food till this day. Her dishes were

delicious. It was no wonder then that hers was the go-to spot for food in Isale-Eko. There was hardly anyone around who did not know about my mother's food spot, and now recalling how good her food was makes me nostalgic. One could almost say that as a small boy then, what did I know? But the testimonies of adults in the community at the time were much to go by, and corroborated my experience.

The meals she cooked for the family were not much different from the ones she sold. They were just as tasty, and the soup dishes were garnished with fish and meat. A food vendor in every sense, my mother sold foodstuff along with cooked meals. She sold dried fish, which you would have to soak in water before cooking. The types of fish she sold were titus, lady, mackerel, catfish and tilapia, some of which she used to garnish her soup. These are different types of fish, and they each have their unique tastes and features. For instance, the skin of the lady fish is scaly while that of the titus fish is smooth.

Eating my mother's delicacies remains one of my fondest childhood memories. Her dishes were worth looking forward to, and we enjoyed each native dish she prepared. Of course, rice was a luxury, and we would eat it only on Sundays or on special occasions. But we were content with the native dishes, which we ate daily and during my father's traditional festivals. From eba to pounded yam, yam porridge and Ikokore, we savoured our different native dishes.

My mother was hardworking, and she was as much a trader as she was a food vendor. She stacked bags of garri for sale in her stores. Perhaps this would explain why the most common swallow we ate was eba. Though cooking was something she enjoyed doing, it was no easy task using a coal pot and firewood every day. It got even harder when it

rained, because then she would have to add more kerosene to the coal so that it could burn better. It was not any easier when there was no rain, for she had to blow the coal to make it burn. The smoke from the firewood badly affected her eyes to the extent that she later developed cataract and had to undergo surgery. She was forced to wear a pair of glasses thereafter, but the fumes from the firewood had already caused a significant amount of damage to her eyes.

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I could not help but feel sorry for my mother. She put so much effort into making sure that we were comfortable and worked hard to get us out of our poor state. It was exhausting dealing with the difficulties she faced in addition to struggling with our standard of living.

At my young age, I knew the difference between how we lived and how others lived. Our standard of living was not only a deep contrast to the way we lived in Ikorodu but was a contrast to how my friends lived. I had visited some of their homes, and I realized that not all houses in Lagos were like ours. Some of my friends lived in houses that you might call high-class compared to ours. Shittu, who lived within the same neighbourhood, was a perfect example. His father was the Chief Imam of Okiti Mosque, in Isale-Eko, which was directly opposite the Oba's palace. Like the homes of most educated clerics, theirs was well organized and was not congested with people. They had a sitting room which housed a black and white television.

The difference in the way we lived helped me realize that our standard of living was low. This made me determined not to remain the same. Shittu and a few other friends, on the other hand, remained stagnant and unmotivated. Perhaps they had not experienced the hard life I suffered, or they had experienced them but were just not inspired

enough to improve their situation. Though they were kids my age, they seemed satisfied with their condition and did nothing to change it. Some of them have remained in Isale-Eko till date, while I have been able to migrate from one place to the other.

It is possible that their lack of inspiration to do better stemmed from the fact that they viewed things differently from the way I did. Their perception was different, and they had a vision which differed from mine. Of course, I understand that, while we could all be exposed to the same scenario, we could have different interpretations as individuals. We could all be exposed to a similar influence, but walk away with different meanings from it.

"I will change this narrative," I said to myself firmly.

This was my resolution, and it remained foremost in my mind when I was in school. I buried my head in books and worked hard to maintain good grades. I realized that excelling at my studies was the best way to achieve all the goals I had set out for myself, and ultimately, get out of our state of penury. I was set on turning our sad situation around, especially for the sake of my mother. And I was going to do it through the most honest means. My father had warned me against getting involved in activities that would bring shame to the family.

"I do not want to hear any negative news from you," he warned me sternly.

It was a warning that I heeded, and his words were etched on my heart. I certainly did not want to disobey him, neither did I want to cause my family shame. So, I was prepared to stay industrious rather than go through any criminal or unethical means to make money. I made up my mind that I would not engage in any form of nefarious activity. My

father's warning and my mother's sacrifices kept me focused on my studies and on my goal to change our narrative.

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I was the fourth and last child of my mother. Her first child was Mulikat Abeni Oladipupo. She attended Ansar-ud-deen Primary School, Alakoro, Lagos. She, however, did not advance beyond that level of schooling. The second child was Habib Abiodun Olusanya. He attended a secondary school in Ebute Metta, Lagos. He also eventually dropped out of school, perhaps because he got distracted by the lifestyle of Lagos socialites, part of which my father had wanted his children to experience. He became an amateur boxer, got into music, and played the trumpet. The life he led always left him frequenting hotels, where he was usually seen. He was hardly at home at night. But because he was a grown man and the room we stayed in Lagos was too small for the family, his absence was not particularly frowned upon. He would return home only during the day and just in time for a meal. He and my sister lived their lives without interference from anyone.

My father's major concern was that they were safe, and it was a relief that he did not have to pay for their accommodation elsewhere. My brother Habib eventually left Nigeria for Accra, Ghana. Without any form of communication from him for a long time, my mother became worried and restless. There were no effective means of communication then like we have today, and we did not have the means to acquire even the few that existed. All we had was a transistor radio. So, there was no way to communicate with him. Fortunately, an itinerant trader who lived in our neighbourhood soon came home with news that she had seen my brother. She reported that she had spotted Habib around a hotel in Accra.

My mother, along with the woman, embarked on the journey to Ghana. She went to the hotel to ambush my brother. He was on stage playing the trumpet in the midst of wine and women, when my mother arrived. He was still engrossed in the socialite lifestyle he had lived in Lagos. My mother approached the stage after observing him quietly for a while. Stunned and petrified when he saw my mother, Habib was so confused that he was at a loss for what to do next. He came down to where she was and held her hands. My mother was in tears.

“Why did you not communicate with us to let us know you’re fine?” she queried.

The next day, he was on his way back home with my mother. Back in Nigeria, he became a trader and sold electronics at Marina in Lagos. That was a time when merchant vessels imported materials through Lagos, where they usually docked. In time, the sale of electronics started there, and my brother started selling cassettes, cassette players and later CDs. He was doing well as a trader, but soon left that to become a sailor. After assisting and observing those who worked on the ship, he was employed by them. Attached to their restaurants, he would sail with them to various parts of the world. He became a rice merchant when he returned from the sea, and along with some Hausas, he acquired a big warehouse. The warehouse was proof that business was good for him and his colleagues.

He was the one responsible for depositing the money they made at the bank. So, you could say that he was successful, and on several occasions, I would meet him counting money. But he did not stop his carefree lifestyle, which usually involved alcohol, women and music. Even till his dying day, he continued with this way of life. He passed on in 2018. My sister Mulikat had died about 12 years before he did.

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My father had eight children, and of the eight, only two are still alive. The two are me and my brother, Moshood Segun Bello. He is an engineer and currently the CEO of Harmony Abattoir in Lagos. He has done well for himself. I was the one who brought him into the fold of the Celestial Church of Christ, and today he is not only a member, but also a patron of the church in the entire district of Ikorodu. While he was alive, my father had said something akin to his children joining "the white robe clerics," as he used to call them. That spoke to the spiritual authority that parents have over their children, and illustrates why parents have to be cautious about the things they pronounce over their children. It is a fact of experience that parents have God-given authority over their children, to bless and also to curse.

Good proclamations should always come from a parent over their child, because their words are consequential. Parents should never make proclamations over their children when they are angry. Instead of cursing, a parent should pray for their children. Parents have the authority and responsibility to pray for their children. They should give their children direction and show them the end result of whatever path they want them to take or which they should avoid. Parents should show their children examples of people they should emulate. It is pertinent that one of those examples should be the parent himself or herself; you have to lead by example. You cannot direct your children to follow a path, while you walk on contrary lanes. They need to see you practice what you preach.

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As a young boy, my mother pampered me. She never laid her hands on me, not even when I threw tantrums. During such times, she would find out what was wrong and what I

wanted instead of beating me. If I wanted food, beverage, or anything else within her means, she was sure to provide it.

“Ayinde!” she would call me lovingly, praising me as she did so and holding me close to her.

I was not spoiled in any way, especially as I knew the kind of father I had. He was strict and had such high expectations of me. But my mother was very calm and caring. She treated me with such tender care that I vowed that when I grew older I would pamper her the same way. And that was what I did. I provided anything she needed or requested for, just as she did for me as a child. I made sure she lived a good life before her death. I made changes to our house in Ikorodu to make her as comfortable as she could possibly be. I renovated it, installed a water system and changed the pit latrine to a water closet. I also opened a grocery store for her, which she managed at her convenience. There was a time I asked her if she would be interested in travelling to Mecca, and when she said yes, I arranged and funded the pilgrimage.

My mother was a practicing Muslim. So, the trip to Mecca must have meant a lot to her, and I am glad that I was able to make it happen. She took Islam seriously and lived her life like any true Muslim would. Coincidently, the Central Mosque of Itunmoja was opposite our house, and that made worshipping convenient for her. She was bestowed with the title, ‘Asiwaju Alasaatu’, in recognition of her devotion to the faith. Her hard work in raising successful children was also recognized. Among her successful children was an engineer, a sailor, and a businesswoman. We were happy to celebrate our mother’s latest achievement, which identified her as the leader of the prayer warriors in the Muslim community where we lived. We wanted to celebrate and pamper her every chance we got while she was alive, and there were opportunities to do so.

Mother was not one to take education lightly, and when we moved from Ikorodu to Lagos Island, she immediately enrolled me in Ahmadiyya School at Ebute-Ero. It was the first school I attended after moving from Ikorodu. Of course, I was still in primary school when we moved, so continuing at a primary school that was easily accessible from where we lived was reasonable. We lived on Oluwa Street, close to the Oba's palace in Lagos Island. You could say that the Oba's palace, also called the Oluwa Chieftaincy Palace, was a major landmark in Isale-Eko.

She was my greatest source of motivation when it came to my education. After my father's death, my mother did all she could to ensure that all her children received good education. She alone shouldered the responsibility of getting us through secondary school to the university. That was almost all she did with her income. Her desire to see us all go to school cost her even her health. The pain that came from using fire wood to cook the meals she sold every day was unimaginable. Yet, she bore the stress quietly and continued the food business for over ten years so that my father's dream for us and our education could become a reality.

"Education is important. You have to go to school," she would always say to us, the determination evident in her voice and tired eyes.

It was not until I was in my last year in the university that my mother retired from the food business, and by that time it had taken a huge toll on her health. Since I was the last born, she could finally take that much needed rest as I obtained my degree. She returned to our home in Ikorodu after retirement.

My mother made big sacrifices for me. Even when she became too weak to do the work, she hung on by a thread, making sure she had enough for me to finish my education.

She played a huge role in my life and was a great influence. She invested her blood, sweat and life to build a future for me and my siblings. Without her struggles, the foundation of who I am today would never have been laid. Her love for me, her desire to see me succeed and her struggles produced determination in me and pushed me to work hard. As the last born, I was especially close to her and remained by her side until she passed.

I built a house in my mother's honour after her death. I called it 'Maami' and I had a carving of her carrying me on her back made in front of it. Inside, there was a painting that perfectly portrayed her life. It was a commissioned work, and the artist did a good job of demonstrating my mother's daily activities in that painting. You could see her going to the market, buying firewood and foodstuff, coming home to prepare food, bathing me, getting me ready for school, giving me food, money and books.

Building the house was my own way of immortalizing my mother, and the way I set up the house with the artworks always reminds me of the sacrifices she made. I never stopped celebrating her when she was alive, and her death was not going to change that. My mother had been ill for six months before her death and needed someone to take care of her. Thankfully, my brother Moshood's wife, _____, stayed with her through it all and attended to her needs. My sister-in-law would do practically everything for her, from bathing her and cooking for her to taking her to the toilet. My mother had grown old, frail and helpless, and she could no longer do those things for herself. Her hard life and struggles had also finally caught up with her.

I visited my mother every day from the quarters of the Lagos State Polytechnic where I was a lecturer at the time. The distance from the campus to the house was not much, and

the traffic was minimal. So, I would spend as much time as was possible with her before I returned to the campus. There was not a day that went by that I was not by her side, and I was with her till her dying moment. She died in 1991 at the age of 83. She had lived a long life.

Her death did not come as a shock to me or any of my siblings. We had all known that it would happen. In fact, I was relieved that she passed, as it brought an end to her pain and suffering. It was heartbreaking to see her in so much pain, especially as there was little we could do. Because of her old age, we had to carry her everywhere she wanted to go. She could barely speak. There were times when it was clear that she wanted to speak, but the words would not come out. She could no longer cook for me like she used to. My mother's death coincided with a festive period.

It was on the eve of the Ileya festival, a Thursday, that she died. It was an occasion when the Ileya festival coincided with the Eid; there was a double celebration for Muslims who go to Jumat service and celebrate Ileya. So, when my mother passed during a festive period such as this, I called my siblings and we all came together to give her a befitting burial.

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My father, on the other hand, had passed on when he was in his 70s. Though I cannot recall the exact age he passed on, some of his contemporaries lived for another 10 years or so after his death. He was also a great source of motivation to me when it came to my education. Before he died, he had always expressed his desire for me to be educated, to do better and be better. It was his dream for us, his children, to receive western education. My brother, Moshood, and I started off in a private school, the Salvation Army School, before my father's death. It was, of course, more expensive

than public schools. The school offered us our earliest foundation in learning, and I appreciate the efforts of my teachers, Mr Oduebo and Mr. Sunmoni, in helping to start what became a lifelong vocation. My father was determined to give us the best that the family could afford.

He wanted us to live a more modern lifestyle than his. It was the reason why we left Ikorodu for Lagos. He wanted us to have different opportunities and to live a life superior to his. It would probably explain why he did not show any of us his methods and ways of farming. He perhaps chose to keep anything connected to the village, including his farm, away from us because he wanted our lives to be different. Such was the life he gave us, so that at the time of his death, none of us had any affiliation to the farm.

We had not received any kind of training from my father to continue his farming legacy. Only a few of us knew where the farm was located, but no one was interested in running it. There is only one person among us who could boast of a slight connection to that aspect of my father's life, and that was my brother who replaced him in the hierarchy of the Agemo cult.

Ironically, I studied Agriculture in the university years later. It was a good thing my father moved his family from the village to the city. Our thinking and perception of life changed because of that move. We would certainly have chosen different paths if we had remained in the village. I would not be who I am today if we had not left for the city.

Relocating to the city gave us easy access to infrastructure provided by the government. In Lagos, we could benefit from many different opportunities which the government offered, including sports, medicine, news, and above all, education and career. There were many more opportunities in Lagos. If

we had remained in Ikorodu, we could have missed out on these opportunities and so much more.

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My academic performance at Ahmadiyya Primary School was abysmal, perhaps because of the state of things at home. We lived well below the poverty line, and we lacked the most basic home appliances and furniture. As necessary as a wardrobe was, we could not afford to get one. So, our clothes were left strewn in scattered heaps across the room. I was often late to school because picking out my uniform from the heaps on time was a challenge. And by the time I managed to find it, it would have been rumpled and creased. I was not careful enough with it. Notwithstanding, I would have to wear it to school like that. That was the reality I lived in.

There was no space in our room to practice the concepts I had learned in school. There was no study corner, no living room, no setup whatsoever to encourage learning and practice. This made me see my academics as just a routine activity that began in the morning, definitely not something I should personally engage on a daily basis. Consequently, I played away most of my afternoons. Notwithstanding, I eventually wrote the common entrance examinations for several schools, including Methodist Boys High School, Broad Street, Lagos; St Gregory's College, Obalende; and Ahmadiyya College, Agege. I was not taken in any of them.

In my primary school, I did not have anyone supervising my academics and performance. I attended some lessons but they did not help so much either. I did primary one and two at Salvation Army School in Ikorodu and continued through to standard six at Ahmadiyya Primary School. I never repeated a class. I was always promoted but the performance was not anything brilliant; just average at most. At that time, I was not interested in many subjects. I was not

good at Arithmetic and my performance was generally average. But I knew I could read and write.

To help my academic performance in primary school, my mother sometimes referred me to a lesson tutor, Mr. Kayode Ajibodu, who lived around us at Isale-Eko. He was a teacher in one of the public schools in my area and he also made arrangements to tutor pupils. Being an Ikorodu man himself, he was affiliated with my family. He contributed to my primary education. Perhaps his help was what kept me getting promoted in primary school.

Despite my poor academic performance, I did not feel shame, disappointment, or inadequacy of any sort. I did not strive to be among the best three in my class. I felt the best positions were reserved for the smart ones. Besides, we did not even esteem the positions. For some of us, our respect was for those amongst us who could play good football, act tough on the street, or grab things from others. We had a special regard for those who could kick with a strong force, such that the receiver would feel almost paralyzed. Such people would easily kick and wrestle others to the ground. There were also those who would throw punches directly to the teeth of their opponents and knock some off. These feats were the ways our respect was earned; streets credibility was the determining factor, not any kind of academic performance.

As I advanced toward my teenage years, I and a few other people of my age group formed Kajola Boys and Girls Club, Isale-Eko. PZ Cussons, a manufacturing firm, had a big warehouse there at the time. So, we painted the back wall of the building black, and wrote the name of our club; “Kajola Boys and Girls Club.” We also agreed to go there from time to time to hold our meetings, and I was chosen to serve as secretary of the club.

Throughout this time, I did not have a vivid vision of how I could apply education to my life and dreams. It was not until I moved to secondary school that such consciousness began to form in me, inspired by my cousin. He taught maths and geometry in the school, and my relationship with him had a lot of impact in my life. In fact, he initiated the transformation of my life. Akeem Taniolodo was a teacher at a school at Fadeyi, Lagos Secondary Commercial Academy, and he enrolled me in the school after my failed attempts to get into any of the well known secondary schools at the time.

Akeem's father, Alhaji Taniolodo, was an Ahmadiyya faithful, a group recognized by some as the elite of the Muslims. He was an administrator in the Ahmadiyya mission in Lagos. Being an Ahmadiyya faithful, his dress sense was typical; he wore his shirt and tie with a unique cap. Also, he was disciplined with timing and routine, and this reflected in the home. The house had a television, was well furnished and so different from our room in Isale-Eko. The contrast was glaring, and reinforced in me a strong desire to push away the crippling poverty in my family while my mother was still alive.

Alhaji Taniolodo lived upstairs in the storey building with his second wife. The television room, library, toilet, were also upstairs. I, my cousin, and my aunt who was his first wife lived on the ground floor. There was a tenant on the ground floor too. Then at the backyard, there was an additional bungalow and a parking space. Every morning, I excitedly woke up to wash Alhaji's car before he was ready for work. I would clean and recharge the battery of the car. Then I would get ready to go to school with my cousin.

In the house, all the other children were still in primary school. So, I found myself acting as a teacher; teaching the juniors and they all respected me. That was the type of

commanding structure we found in the family in those days. They never asked where I came from. They simply accepted me as a member of the family. I started to take them coaching lessons and that position motivated me to improve myself. My cousin was also there to inspect what I did. After a while, I realized that my position in school began to rise, until eventually, I came first in class. That was the beginning of my transformation. I spent two years in that college, Lagos Secondary Commercial Academy, before I moved to Ebenezer Grammar School, Ilesa, where I finished my high school. By this time, I had built admirable leadership qualities stemming from the mentorship of my cousin and my position as a tutor to children. When I got to the new school, even though I joined midway as a new student, I was made the captain of the class by the end of the first year. My life began to change for good when I went to Fadeyi to live with my relatives. My mother initiated and facilitated my relocation.

Chapter Four
CULTURAL METAMORPHOSIS

The migration from Ikorodu to Lagos came with significant changes in my childhood experience. Unlike Ikorodu, where I only had to take a short walk to get to school, the distance from my house to school in Lagos was a long stretch. I would gauge the trek to be between two and three kilometres. In Ikorodu, we lived at Oluwa Street, a stone throw away from Iga Idunganran, the famed Oba's palace. Whereas, my primary school – Talimul Islam Ahmadiyya – was all the way at Elegbata. Through the decades, the school has thrived in the same location and is still there till today. However, the coastal roads and infrastructure that are there now were not there in those days.

My peers and I had two major routes we plied. One way was to go through the Oba's palace, cross the bridge at Idumota, cut through Alakoro, and finally burst out at Elegbata. This route allowed us to feast our eyes on the Ansar-Ud-Deen Primary School and the stylish display of porcelain wares at Oko-Awo. Another route was to go through Ebute. We passed the Holy Trinity Methodist Church and School, went under a bridge, and continued towards Elegbata. For some of us, this was the favourite route to ply. There was entertainment readily waiting for us in the form of real-life boxing. We were fascinated by the valour of the amateur boxers who practised in the make-shift boxing ring constructed under the bridge. The head trainer then was Salau Shittu. We enjoyed watching him coach the younger boxers as they roared, jabbed, and bobbled with enthusiasm.

Going to school every day was an adventure for me and my friends. After agreeing on the route for the day, we would set out in our clusters. The distance was no problem for us as we

had ourselves as companions. Then, there were regular stops on both routes for our mouth-watering delicacies. A popular one was Mosa Aganyin, a curried bite of roasted overripe plantains. Another was the rice we bought in leaves which came with a free pinch of meat pieces. We also bought snacks; oily and succulent buns and puffpuff which we would eat and press until our hands were oily enough to polish our faces into a shine. This was a lifesaver, especially during the harmattan season when the skin began to parch.

Remarkably, despite the distance to school and its associated risks, our parents were never anxious of our safety. They had strong beliefs that we were always going to be safe. Nobody ever walked us to school or did due diligence concerning our security. Back then, a simple drive to school was considered luxurious. So, at the tender age of six, I adapted to walking such long distances. It became normal for me. My experience in those years mirrored the axiomatic expression; there are always two sides to a coin. Even though it would be true to describe those years as difficult, especially at the tender age of six, the experience brought with it a silver lining in the form of the lessons I learnt from the streets. As debatable as it may seem, there are a lot of learning opportunities that can be picked from the streets. The experiences one records when interfacing with a mix of people from different age groups and lifestyles culminate into an informal learning curriculum that can be instrumental as life skills.

Of course, the streets also offered the best forms of entertainment for me and my peers. It was common to see groups of people organising road shows that gathered locals into clusters of spectators. We saw magic tricks, watched boxing matches, and enjoyed whatever form of spectacle was available to us. Interestingly, the various road shows often served as a means of inspiration for many onlookers. Some watched the acts and made life decisions to follow the same

path for their careers. But for us, it was the thrill of being entertained in ways we could not get at home.

All of these experiences made us very eager to go to school. We always wanted to leave the house as that gave us ample opportunity to meet with friends, buy some food, watch some football or boxing, and enjoy the thrilling displays that the streets brought to us daily. Although we enjoyed going to school, there was much more to school for us than the classes. The highlights of our days were mostly in the social activities that brought us together and left us with satisfying memories.

Schooling in Lagos completely contrasted my experience at Ikorodu. While at the village, the routine was simple and insipid. We left home for school in the morning and returned timely in the afternoon. There was hardly anything to spark one's interest or friends to rove around with. Conversely, Lagos brought many friends to me without any stress. I had a lot of schoolmates who lived around my area and some of them went to neighbouring schools. But we would always leave for school together and say our goodbyes when any one of us got to their own school. As we trekked the long stretch, we would often compare the quality of our schools, each one bragging on how superior his school was. The arguments mostly bordered on sports and competitions.

Football was the major competition our schools played at that time. Pupils in their final basic classes were largely the only ones on the team. They outmatched the majority of us in size, height, and maturity. We thought of them as men, mainly because we saw them as overaged for primary education. In those days, literacy in Nigeria had not gained as much thrust as it has now, so it was common to find teenagers in primary school.

As times changed, it became commonplace to find students graduating from high school in their mid-teens. But with such improvements came an observed disrespect of the curriculum by parents. Modern parents now believe that it is their prerogative to dictate what classes their wards should be in, how long they should stay there, and when they should graduate. Unlike the older generation who were compliant with the curriculum demands, these contemporary parents do not pay attention to whether the child is at par with the established curriculum standards. There are fundamental knowledge requirements for students before their final year, but this is hardly a priority for them. Regrettably, the desire to produce graduates turns out to be a more stimulating goal than the readiness to follow due process and churn out top quality products.

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When my family moved to Lagos, we joined the strong Muslim community in Isale-Eko. As part of the community's activities, groups of young boys would go from house to house singing during the Ramadan fast. These were the "early morning breakfast" activities which involved singing that would wake households so that they could have breakfast early in the morning before the fast began.

Muslims were urged to join in the fast which was held in preparation for the Eid-el-Fitr celebration. In order to encourage this practice, the young boys came together to form singing groups. Members of the Muslim community would then wake up to prepare and have breakfast early in the morning. The singing groups, which I became an active

part of, were partly responsible for helping the Muslim community remain steadfast in the fast.

Known as Ajiwere, translated to mean “to wake early”, the groups were from different districts in Lagos Island. Each group had its own name, with the title “Ajiwere” used as an appendix in the name. For instance, there was the Isale-Eko Ajiwere group. Though the focus of the groups was on helping the Isale-Eko Muslim community at large, they paid particular attention to the houses of prominent members in the district. Some of these houses that the groups paid attention to belonged to the leaders of the Muslim community.
The groups consisted of boys, usually between the ages of 10 and 14, and they would move around between 1am and 3am as they performed their tasks. I was between the ages of 10 and 13 when I got deeply involved in the activities of the groups as well as other activities of the Muslim community.

I joined members of my Ajiwere group to practised well into the late hours of the night, between 11pm and 12:30am. This was the time right before we set out for our task. We held practice every day for the entire duration of the 30-day fast. It was exhausting, and as children, we would often succumb to drowsiness and fall asleep. If you were caught sleeping, someone in the group would give you a knock on the head to wake you up before you were reminded that you signed up of your own accord and that late-night practices were a crucial part of the exercise.

Some of these groups birthed a number of prominent musicians over the years, particularly Fuji musicians like Barrister Ayinde, Kollington Ishola, and Fuji Lawal. These are a few of the many notable names that emerged from this practice. They were part of the culture whilst growing up,

and at different times, they were all members of one Ajiwere group or the other in Lagos Island.

The Ajiwere groups came from the various districts in Lagos Island, including Oke Opo, Idumota, Isale-Eko, and others. Before rehearsals, when we moved from house to house, prompting members of the Islamic community to rise for their early breakfast, we included the names of those that we intended to wake up in our songs. For instance, we called Baba Alfa Asiwaju, and the song would go like this, "Asiwaju Baba a tun de, Asiwaju baba a tun de, e dide fun sari, Baba Salami a tun de, e dide fun sari." The song, when translated, means: "Arise for your early breakfast, your children are here to wake you up, wake up for sari." Then we would continue thus, "Ema gbagbe", which means, "Don't forget, don't oversleep. The time is now. Please wake up." These were the things we conveyed in the songs.

Sometimes, the inhabitants of the houses we visited would come out and appreciate our efforts by giving us money. They recognised the value of what we were doing. We would return to our various houses at about 4:00 am. I got home at about 4:30 am, and after having my early breakfast, I would sleep until the late hours of the morning.

There were never any complaints about our singing. No one ever suggested that our activities constituted a nuisance to the community. Our community was largely made up of Muslims, and according to the Islamic doctrine, providing service to another individual is one of the duties of a good Muslim. We were acting as instruments of service, to aid our brothers and sisters in fulfilling their religious obligations. Not only were our activities tolerated and appreciated, they came to be expected.

Within the last two days of the fast, a competition was usually organised between the various singing groups. There

were those who acted as sponsors for the event; they donated prizes and contributed to the funding of the event. The judges of the competition took into account the dressing, neatness and uniformity of the groups, in addition to the lyrics, melody and the production of their songs. They did this before deciding the winners of the competition and the prizes they would be awarded.

Once, my group made it to the finals which held at Isale Gangan. The funding for the uniforms we wore at the competition came from goodwill donations from the inhabitants of the houses we visited, as well as other benefactors. The making of our uniforms usually involved different steps, from purchasing the Ankara materials to measuring each member and sewing the various styles. This became a part of the Ramadan celebration in Lagos Island. My group returned home with a trophy after making it to the finals, and we were all very happy.

We enjoyed the experience and would often reminisce about it long afterwards. During our late-night practices, the environment was usually quiet, as you would expect it to be at that time of the night. When we sang, our voices would echo through the night and we became euphoric each time we heard our voices reverberate through the streets. That was one of my favourite moments during practice. The lead singer in each group was referred to as the Alfa, and it was a privilege to listen to him. He had an amazing voice, and his acoustics were second to none in the group. When the event was over, despite the late nights and the sleep deprivation, the memories of what we had accomplished, the uniforms, the celebration, and those lovely moments spent with friends made us look forward to the next Ramadan celebration.

The active role I played in a major Islamic celebration motivated me to enroll in Arabic classes to broaden my knowledge of Islam. Unfortunately, I did not possess the diligence required to see it through till the end. I lost interest early in the course and pulled out. A similar situation occurred at the Federal School of Arts and Science. I was once again compelled to expand my knowledge of Islam. I became a member of the Muslim Students' Society, but I was not determined enough to go the distance.

Though a largely Islamic community, Isale-Eko was liberal. The idea behind the Ajiwere groups was to encourage the fulfillment of an important Muslim obligation, but for most of us, the reason for joining was for the purpose of socialisation. We wanted to meet new people and make new friends. Another reason was to give us the platform upon which we could be actively involved in a major celebration happening in our community. But those activities were more socially significant than they were of religious import to us.

We observed the fast during the 30-day period, but as children we were influenced by the liberality of our community and approached the practice with some form of levity. In the early hours of the afternoon when hunger set in, my mates and I would secretly break our fast, unknown to our parents who would believe we had endured till the end of the day.

Though Isale-Eko was a largely Muslim community, festivals and celebrations from other religious denominations were treated with as much enthusiasm as those of the Islamic religion. This further demonstrated the community's liberality. During Christian and traditional festivals, it was common to see the same groups of individuals immersing themselves into whatever activity accompanied the various celebrations. The distinction between Muslim, Christian and

traditionalist was not something we attached much significance to. It was not a ground for discrimination in any way.

Due to our unbiased interactions with members of other religious denominations, it was common for practitioners of one religion to have, at the very least, a surface knowledge of the other religions. That knowledge helped foster understanding, and that understanding acted as catalyst for religious tolerance. There is a saying that people fear what they do not understand. But when you understand why a certain faction operates the way they do, not only does it go a long way to nullify fear, it also helps to build mutual respect and curb judgmental behaviours. With the predominant philosophy of tolerance, religion could not act as a barrier in any way, not in friendships or any kind of relationship. This partly explains why mixed marriages became a common affair in my community in Isale-Eko.

Today, religion is used as a tool to achieve selfish ambitions. Difference is used as a weapon of discrimination. But our beauty comes from our diverse nature, because God created each person to be unique. Every culture is unique, so is every nation, every language and every religion. Ironically, even in our diversity, our core beliefs are the same, a belief in one supreme being. We may call Him by different names but He is the same supreme being. We may approach Him differently, but He is the same God. A single faction cannot claim to have the only acceptable doctrine, that judgment is God's alone to give. Understanding, respect, and tolerance are the ideals that can restore peace to our nation.

I had a certain level of independence while growing up. As a child, from the moment I was cognitive enough to make my own decisions, I was given the liberty to do so. The decision to join the Ajiwere group, my participation in the activities

that took place in my community, and the formation of some other groups within that community were all my ideas. With the freedom that I had, I was able to meet different calibres of individuals, who had different upbringings, ideas and philosophies about life. The freedom to meet different people and learn from them and the entire experience I had growing up in my community helped inform the decisions that would dictate the course of my life.

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I believe that people with excellent character can be found across the different religions we have in today's world. They simply cannot be limited to a single religion. Even in traditional settings, such people with admirable qualities are present. It would be expected that people with unscrupulous personalities would also be in the mix. But simply put, both good and bad people are found everywhere. That is how I see life. I do not esteem any faith as superior to another. People should be left to their convictions. Realistically, it is the mutual respect for our individual beliefs that will remain the bedrock of religious tolerance. The Ikorodu people aptly exemplified this. From my birth, the orchestrations around my life positioned me to be involved with the major religions in Nigeria. I was conceived into the home of a core traditionalist. As I grew older, especially when we relocated to Lagos, my religious involvements fashioned an Islamic identity in me. I participated in the core activities of Islam, even in the Ramadan fasting period.

I would say my religious awakening occurred in my early years of being an adult. I had a spiritual epiphany that changed the way I approached religion. My mind began to develop what I could describe as a God-consciousness. I said

to myself, “I want to speak with God directly; not through any interpreter or intercessor.” I believed in the spiritual connection of the cosmos, and I still hold the belief; that all humans, irrespective of race, are constituted by primordial elements. These elements are, but are not restricted to, fire, water, vapour, air, rock, stone, soil and animals. There is a spiritual connectivity between these elements and human beings. Our beings were all designed with an abstract constitution of specific elemental mechanisms. This is how I believe we can find an alignment with God. It starts with identifying a spiritual cosmic resonance. If this is achieved, a connection to God will be made. I must add that this is not merely got through consultations with people who know more than we do. There is a need for one to pay a closer attention to his innermost parts, listen attentively, and watch the trend of occurrences.

For me, one of such trends was the consistent troubles in my marriage that climaxed eventually. I observed that there was a definite trend in how my marriage became quarrelsome and unstable in the second month of the year, and this happened year after year. Swiftly, I applied the understanding I had of cosmic spiritual resonance. I paid close attention to my core until I hit a resonance within my spirit. This changed everything. Because then, I found that I was able to communicate effectively, using the same words of God which otherwise could have been used differently.

I broke into a skill of using those words in ways that commanded things to fall back in place. I realised that the raging marital storms ceased, and like the bewildered disciples of Jesus, I too recorded the testimony of how words brought peace after a storm. After that experience, I decided to give more diligence to the practice and it worked wonders for me. Now, this experience did not turn into a self-righteous veil that made me begin to judge or condemn

others as erroneous. Rather, it was a testimony of actualising resonance between my spirit and the cosmos, such that my steps were ordered in precision. I connected to God, spoke with him, and He listened to me. This would be discarded as tenuous in other climes.

For instance, the traditionalists will insist that connecting to God requires some form of physical location; a shrine where libations, oil, gin, nuts, and even clothes are set amidst loud gongs and incantations. That is what they believe. I will not be the one to tell them otherwise.

My first real connection to Christianity as a religion came through the first school I ever attended; the Salvation Army School. The school stood beside its Pentecostal mother ministry – the Salvation Army Church. There was an excellence in the way the members of the church carried out their activities that intrigued my dad. The men wore white clothes that radiated esteem and prestige; crisply pressed and neatly sewn to near-perfect fits. Their dress code earned them the phrase “White People” as a moniker.

Sometimes, some foreign missionaries would visit the church and worship with them. The light of education beamed from that church to the rustic city where we lived. My dad, being moved by the glories of the educated members of the church, urged me and my brother to subscribe to Christianity. As an ardent lover of education, he wasted no time in enrolling us into the Salvation Army School. And he did not stop there. Being the liberal man that he was, he further encouraged us to practice the religion of “the white people.” It did not matter to him that we were traditionalists by birth.

My mother saw all of this happen. I would describe her as a religiously liberal person. But in general, she hardly ever had a different opinion from whatever my dad said. My father

operated as judge, jury and executioner. So, no one, not even my mother, ever stood up to him or queried his demands. There were other wives in the compound; three from my dad and four from Oseni Baale, his cousin. All the seven women had the utmost respect for their husbands. Nothing the men said was ever opposed or debated. In fact, they referred to their husbands as "Oluwa mi", a Yoruba term that interprets as "My Lord." In their days, it was practically impossible to find parents quarrelling and bickering at themselves, especially in front of the children. I still irk at the sight of modern couples who are involved in such acts. Oh well, I did in my earlier marriages! I see it as an acute digression from the normal. There is also the issue of debates between husbands and wives stemming from modern clamours for the rights of women.

In 1995, the Beijing Declaration affirmed that women's rights are human rights and that equality between women and men benefits every person. As the world rode on this, many women began to internalise that they are equal to men. Well, the truth is; as humans, we are all equal in a sense. But as with every system in the universe, there is always a hierarchical coordination that ensures orderliness. There should be mutual respect and understanding of individual responsibilities. That is how progress is made; in harmony and in leadership. The position of leadership ought not to be contested for. When this happens, the proverbial ship wrecks and everyone suffers.

Compatibility is also another important factor to consider in these matters. A couple should be mentally and intellectually compatible. As a man, it is not advisable for one to reach for a partner outside his league. That could burn him out. Our older parents knew this, so the marriages in their time were customised to the level of education the couples had. Illiterates, semi-literates, and well-educated folks found their

fits and built happy homes with their partners. Compatibility is crucial, and a lack of it might be contributing to the problems of marriages today.

Chapter Five

SECONDARY EDUCATION

Unlike these days when students are pampered, when all the admission processes are taken care of by the parents or the school, when students undergo little or no stress due to the large pool of private schools to choose from, many students in my days were not fortunate to enjoy such privileges. Finding a high school for me was a daunting task. I enjoyed no parental assistance when it was time for my secondary school education. We wandered from place to place look for a school of choice. During this period, a friend and I took it upon ourselves to obtain admission. In our desperation, we met an elderly man, the security officer of a school in Yaba, who assured us of admission. Having explained the rigours we had faced, I was scheduled to meet him in his personal apartment the following day. I was overwhelmed with joy over the man's assurance, but completely ignorant of his evil machination.

As arranged, I was alone with him in his apartment and I met what I least expected. The man wanted me for some sexual engagement. With the help of some foreign films I had watched in the past, I was able to read between the lines and had to run away when I saw that he was only interested in destroying my dream of finding a secondary school. It took me some time to shrug off the ugly encounter from my mind, and I didn't share it with anyone.

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Secondary school education was a memorable landmark in my life, and laid a solid foundation for university training. A

student's academic success at the university depends largely on the quality of the education received at the secondary school level.

Fully aware of my abysmal performance at the primary school level, and doing all in my capacity to prevent a repeat of such a miserable performance, I became fully dedicated to my studies. I left no stone unturned in my quest for excellent performance in all my subjects. It took a lot of rigorous work in those days for a student to emerge at the top among his contemporaries. I believe it still does. I thus put in check all social activities that were capable of endangering and thwarting my plans. Of course, one still indulged in some exuberances and escapades of the teenage years.

As a boarder, my days in that school were immensely exciting. It was at this school that I was first exposed to the rudiments of leadership and discipline. Discipline and orderliness were the order of the day. Students were given leadership roles as school prefects and empowered to lead fellow students. In those days the prefects were selected from different departments, based on their outstanding academic performance. They were always given such responsibilities as assembly co-ordination, class supervision, discipline of late comers, and maintaining the cleanliness of the school premises. The punishment meted out for any improper behavior was flogging or cutting of grass; the punishment had to be commensurate with the enormity of the offence. There was never a situation, at least none that I knew of, when parents came to express disapproval over the punishment meted out to a child or ward. Discipline was everything.

Unfortunately, the reverse is the case these days. Teachers and prefects have to exercise caution and apply wisdom before flogging another person's child for any form of

misdemeanor. In the days of old, students dare not report at home about being disciplined at school. It is not uncommon to see parents storm their children's school to report or fight a teacher for the measure of punishment given to a child for misconduct. Of course, cases of excesses have been established against some teachers and prefects, and these have to be checked as well. But there's the need to retrace our step to ensure that discipline is fully restored to our schools.

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My experience at Ebenezer Grammar School was memorable, and I thoroughly enjoyed my time there. I had good classmates and teachers. I loved the environment and the community. We had time for church activities, and taking on a leadership role was beneficial. Of course, I also graduated with good grades.

The period of the Civil War coincided with my time at the school, but the war did not extend to our location. We hardly even realised that there was a war in the country. The threat to us was minimal.

The hostels were labelled with letters. Hostels A, B and C were for boys and hostels D, E and F were for girls. The hostels were far apart from each other, and one could only see a hostel from a distance. There were several other structures in between the hostels, which included the classrooms, the dining hall, the teachers' quarters, the principal's house, the power house where the generator was kept, and the school field. There were also several lawns scattered around. So, the chances of a boy sneaking into the girl's hostel and vice versa were between slim and zero.

The hostel arrangements were subject to change on a yearly basis. So, the allocations were not permanent and could have

depended on the time a student resumed or if teachers sought to reorganise and split certain groups of students. The latter would have been futile, considering the fact that we were all still in the same school. It was easy to converge if we wanted to. I stayed in hostels A and C at different periods during my time at the school.

In the hostels, each person was given a single bed, and the space under the bed was where you kept your luggage, provisions and all your possessions. I cannot recall that there was any space provided for us to hang our clothes. We were all boys, and to a large extent we were within the same age group. There were, however, some oppressive seniors that took out whatever personal frustrations they had on their juniors. One thing that was common with many of those who did such things was that they were not doing well academically. Those who excelled in academics were usually much calmer, encouraging, and even when one faulted, they would correct such person with love. Those who were coarse and had a distasteful personality were usually underachievers, and unfortunately in some cases, their personality continued with them further into their lives.

Fortunately, from the moment I was admitted into the school, I developed a reputation for good grades. So, I was not often the object of bullying, but there were still a few instances when I was. In the classrooms, boys and girls sat together. I had a good relationship with my male classmates. I also had a good relationship with my female counterparts, and I was admired by a good number of them, because I was a peer teacher.

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Most of my teachers at Ebenezer Grammar School were young men who were perhaps in their early or mid-twenties. They were age-mates with my brother and cousin, and I

cultivated a cordial relationship with each of them. They were good teachers and taught their students so well that we could not help but love their subjects. There were a few exceptions, though, as I did not enjoy French. The teachers also had great qualities that were worthy of emulation. For instance, Mr. Akindele, the Biology teacher, was admired by all, for he was always immaculately dressed. Mr. Ogundipe, the Geography teacher and house master, was a nice young man.

These men made their subjects interesting. Not only did I love most of the subjects, I was also good at them. Mathematics, Economics, Geography, and Economics were some of my favourite subjects. I also enjoyed all science subjects, except Physics and Further Mathematics. These were the two subjects I struggled with. But I was good at elementary Mathematics. I was also good at History, Government and Civic Education.

In my final year at Ebenezer Grammar School, I became the teachers' favourite for the position of senior prefect and head boy of the school. This was during the election for prefects, but the school authority had to take into account the fact that I had only joined the school midway. So, the position was given to someone else who was older and more mature. However, I exceeded him in academic performance. Another reason the school passed me up for the position of senior prefect was my size. I was of a small stature, and the school authority feared that I would be unable to command the respect that would be needed for the role.

In the end, I was appointed as the dining hall prefect, and I commanded respect. Once the bell was rung, everyone would come inside, and I would punish those who were late. The punishment included kneeling down outside the dining hall. The latecomers, no matter who they were, would obey

me. When I raised my voice at the dining hall, everyone listened and followed instructions. Not only did I have authority and command respect, the dining hall was also close to the principal's house. So, no one dared to disobey. The principal overlooked the activities in the dining hall from his house, but he would not interfere. His name was Chief J.J. Omoworare. His son, Jide Omoworare, later became the Special Senior Adviser to President Muhammadu Buhari on Legislative Affairs. So, while the principal watched from a distance, I did my work. I directed the sharing of food, maintained order and discharged my duties. It was around the time I was doing all these that announcements were made and labour tasks were shared out to students.

There were three prefects who had jurisdiction over the dining hall. The senior prefect was in charge of the entire school and his work extended to the dining hall. The labour prefect was responsible for distributing labour tasks. I was the dining hall prefect, and my domain was the dining hall. We each operated with a certain level of autonomy, and that experience taught me leadership and respect for authority. There was never a time when parents came to question a prefect for meting out punishment to their child. The teachers did not interfere with how we carried out our duties either.

It was the ideal training ground, for it helped me develop my leadership skills as well as other crucial areas of my life. When you are at the helm of affairs, you learn how best to construct ideas, how to lead a group of your own contemporaries towards achieving set goals, and how to organise a community. As prefects we organised activities which included moulding blocks, ensuring that the compound, dining hall and school field were clean. The teachers only acted as supervisors.

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By my fourth year at the school, relationships among my peers were common. Boys started having girlfriends. I also had a girlfriend, a respectful girl from a royal family in present-day Osun State. Conservative and traditional in her thinking, dressing, and behaviour, she held her virtue, values and culture in high esteem.

She had a good body structure, too. She was not fat, but she was strong and had a great stamina. She was an average student, so we were usually together during prep time. Then, I would tutor her and some of her friends. From class four we already had a relationship, and by the time we reached the final class, it became public knowledge.

Though we had such a relationship, we understood that it was necessary to nurture that friendship with a strict adherence to the school rules and regulations. As a senior who was also a prefect charged with the responsibility of upholding these rules, I had often meted out punishment to those who violated the rules. Indeed, I was a figure of authority, and I could not be punished in the presence of my juniors for violating the same rules I had pledged to maintain. We avoided anything that was outside the limitations of the school's precepts or anything that would attract punishment. We understood the implications, and had the warnings carved on the walls of our minds. Even our teachers had knowledge of how close we were, but since we did not violate any school rules, we were not disturbed.

However, in my final year at the school, I got entangled with another girl. She was also from Lagos, and was a year my junior. At that time the Ijebu-Jesa region was still a rural area, so a girl from Lagos, who was bred and brought up in Lagos, and who had imbibed the Lagos lifestyle, had a different carriage, personality and philosophy from one who came

from Ilesha or Ijebu-Jesa. When you saw this other girl, you would instantly recognise that she was a Lagos girl, and when she came into my life, I was completely captivated.

At the send forth party for the final year students, which was held at the dining hall, something occurred which marked the end of my relationship with First Girlfriend. While I was on the dance floor with Lagos Girl, First Girlfriend appeared before us out of the blue and slapped me across the face in the presence of the entire school. I ran out of the dining hall in shame. She was a girl I saw myself marrying, and she could have become my wife. Decent and decorous in manners, she was a good girl and had all the qualities you would look for in a wife.

Her reaction suggested that she either knew of my relationship with Lagos Girl, or had a strong suspicion of what was going on. Gossip was common then, so the information could have reached her through any channel. On several occasions, I tried to reconcile with her. During my first two years at Ife, whenever I travelled through Ibadan, I stopped there to visit her, but she did not wish to hear anything I had to say. The damage done was irreparable. Meanwhile my relationship with Lagos Girl ended the moment I left secondary school.

When my friends later teased me about running out of the dining hall the way I did, I told them that the incident was my fault and that I deserved what I got. I respected First Girlfriend too much to have done anything to her. I knew what I did was stupid.

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In a school setting, it is very common among students to establish peer groups, and through some of these, people establish lasting or lifelong relationships. I cultivated some

of such friendships at Ebenezer Grammar School. Among such loyal friends were Lateef Gomez, Ogunnusi, Gbolahan Jones, and Friday Elahor. These all made great mark's in their chosen careers in life.

The moments I could never forget then as a boarder was the end-of-term journey back home. We were always anxious for this special day of departure en masse from the school. The railway system of Nigeria then was functional, affordable and reliable. We tagged ourselves Lagos Boys and Girls. We would board the train with great excitement, sing all types of songs till we reached Lagos. The journey from Oshogbo to Lagos was always a leisurely ride, and we would buy one food item or the other at every stop. The first train stop was Ibadan, followed by Abeokuta, and finally Iddo in Lagos. After alighting at the Iddo Train Station, I would trek all the way home through Carter Bridge down to Isale-Eko.

Chapter Six

"READ YOUR BOOKS, PLEASE!"

After my secondary school education in 1970, I returned to Isale-Eko, where I wasted no time in making plans for my future. I had performed well in my Senior School Certificate Examinations, and it seemed that my next option was to go for the GCE Advanced Level programme offered by a number of secondary schools at the time.

My discussions with friends soon left me with a yearning to attend the Federal School of Arts and Science (FSAS), Victoria Island, which was a sixth form college school known especially for its specialisation in the sciences. As a student who wanted to be distinguished in the sciences, the FSAS piqued my interest and it quickly became my school of choice.

So it was that I applied to the school. In addition to applying, I wrote the entrance examination, which I passed, and I was thus able to secure my admission into the school. It was indeed a gratifying moment for me, and I felt special, because it meant that the poor young boy from Isale-Eko was going to attend a highly reputable school. Not only was I going to be one of the students of FSAS, I was also qualified to be among the best to attend it.

I made earnest preparations to resume school. By the time I started classes at FSAS, my excitement had reached a feverish point. Indeed, the Federal School of Arts and Science was many a student's choice at that time. I was to study Botany, Chemistry, and Biology for two years. However, I was unable to complete the two-year course, as I went on to the University of Ife after my first year. It was towards the

end of the first year that I wrote the prelim examination into the University of Ife and was offered admission shortly thereafter.

At that time when I wrote the various school entrance examinations, it was pointless to know anybody or go through anybody in order to gain admission into a school. Everything was done on merit, and for each exam I wrote, I passed, qualified and was admitted into the school. First was my Senior School Certificate Examinations, which I passed with good grades. Next was the entrance exam into FSAS. Again, I passed with flying colours. Then came the entrance exam into the University of Ife, which I also passed. On every occasion, when I had to write an exam, I was motivated by my previous performance and accomplishment.

"You can do this! You can do it!" I would tell myself as I sat to write my exams, and I did not for once doubt myself.

So, I was always admitted into a school on merit. I did not have to look around for anybody to help me. Things were different then, and it was so unlike now when people have to attain different positions through the influence and position of others as well as through a quota system. The society then was quite different.

The fact that I could get things on merit definitely helped to build confidence in my capabilities. There is a feeling of pride and accomplishment that comes with getting to a position on merit. You would know whether you are qualified for that position or not, and it would make you work harder to get that position if you performed badly the first time. The system then helped people to improve on their skills, abilities, and performance.

There were many things that I loved about the Federal School of Arts and Science. The laboratories stood out to me.

Of course, because it was a school that had the sciences as a mood specialty, it housed various laboratories filled with functional equipment. There were competent teachers to guide us, too. They could command your attention from their professionalism and teaching. Whatever they taught in class was relevant to one's aspirations, and they ensured that students worked hard to meet all the requirements for a course. Dr. Afolabi, who was the principal then, and Dr. Raul, an Indian, were some of the lecturers who taught us.

The lecture rooms were also well furnished, and teaching aids were made available so that we never lacked. Teachers cultivated great, cordial relationships with their students, which was different from what was obtained in secondary school.

There were many academic pursuits at the school that kept us preoccupied, from lectures to laboratory assignments and other tasks. Joining a learning group at the FSAS was easy, and we would often conduct experiments and record observations together as a group.

Conducting experiments was an integral part of learning at the FSAS. It was considered important, and no one ever took it for granted. We were taught invaluable lessons that proved to be useful to us within and outside the class. One of such lessons was that there can be no guess work in science. The importance of precision in science was thus emphasised. As science students, we learnt that it is impossible to guess the outcome of an experiment, as it could not be based on anyone's perception but on precision. The result of an experiment depended on observation, inference, and deduction. Thus, we should ask ourselves questions based on what we see rather than what we wish or think might be.

Whenever I was conducting an experiment, I would ask myself, "What can I infer from my observation?"

This concept, which we learnt at the FSAS, is good for the development of logical thinking. It helps you think and observe. You observe nature and the interactions of the elements in nature. Then you ask yourself questions like, "Why does this happen? What causes it to happen? What is the effect of this happening? If the element is taken away, what will the impact on the environment or the system be?"

Science is about methodology, and we learnt this in the Federal School of Arts and Science. If the methodology is clear, the concept becomes clearer. With the training of the mind, it becomes easier to make enquiries after making observations, which in turn leads to deduction and inference before conclusion.

Indeed, it was a year well spent at FSAS, even though it might not seem like it since I left mid-way for the University of Ife. However, it prepared me for the years ahead at the university. The lessons and concepts learnt there were deeper and a little more complex than what we learnt in secondary school. The science facilities made learning easy, and the system was quite unlike secondary school where we were taught about 12 or 13 subjects.

Focusing on science at the school deepened my knowledge, and made me grounded in the concepts of the subjects that I offered. Of course, there was the fact that the many subjects I was taught in secondary school helped develop my strength in different areas. Science was still my forte, and when the time came to write the entrance examination to the University of Ife, the lessons I had learnt at FSAS gave me an edge over other candidates. It helped me write the exam well so that I qualified for admission.

I avoided those subjects that I struggled with when I got to the FSAS. For instance, I did not register for such courses as Further Mathematics and Physics, which I did not

particularly like. I only enrolled for courses that I loved. I took included Biology and Chemistry because I found them to be easy, of course with the right amount of study.

I was a day student and went from our home in Isale-Eko to school every morning. The FSAS had no boarding facilities at the time. Back at home, we were still living below the poverty line, and our house was still bereft of furniture pieces. But I knew what I wanted to be, and I was going to do all it took to get there. I was conscious of my environment, and I did not want to be like many of my age-mates who had dropped out of school or never even went to secondary school. Though we were still friends, I was not going to become like them. So, I would often study, going to the Central Library on Broad Street every chance I got. I think that the library was years later converted by the Lagos State Government to a forensic laboratory of some sort, which was burnt down during the EndSars riots. I would forever remember it as where I spent most of my time after school, and it was for this reason that I cried inside when I heard that it was razed to the ground.

The library was one of the greatest spots for people like me who had developed a consciousness of their environment. These were people in the same Isale-Eko community. We had a group of about two, three or four, and we would go to the library immediately after school hours, depending on the number of lectures we had that day. We would then read for hours before leaving for our various homes. I can recall that we usually left at about 6:30 pm and walked home together. The following morning, we were back at school. This was our daily routine. It never changed, except on a few occasions when I would go swimming at the pool at Onikan or go watch a football match at the National Stadium in Surulere. I could also go watch films at Corona Cinema, Sheila Cinema in Surulere, Rainbow Cinema at Sabo, Yaba, or visit Glover Hall

for one activity or the other. We knew a lot of cinemas and we frequented them. There were some nights, too, when we would go to the cinemas.

There were many books in the library in those days, and we found most of them relevant to our courses. We also had our own books, so we had a lot of books to read. This made it easy for me to pass my prelim exams.

In primary school, I had not concerned myself with books. I was but a little boy who played most of the time. It was after I gained admission into secondary school that I cultivated my reading habit and discovered the library. I had become a school leader in secondary school, leading most of the classes, leading my peers and also becoming a pupil teacher of sort. So, I knew that I had to study hard while I was at the Federal School of Art and Science, especially as I had no other enterprise that I was engaged in.

Often, I would walk home from the library with my group of friends. But sometimes, we took a bus, as it was quite a distance from Isale-Eko to FSAS. Also, we did not want to destroy our white school uniforms. We wanted to be neat and appear well-dressed all the time.

Swimming was one of our favourite hobbies then. We learnt by ourselves and without a trainer. We would just try it out and imitate some of our mates who were good swimmers. We practised together, and that was how we learnt the many different swimming techniques we knew. We learnt to swim a little like professionally, but more for leisure. There were some times, too, when we came across a trainer that would observe and advise us.

“Oh, no! That is not how to do it. This is how to do it. Do it this way,” they would correct us. This was perhaps how they found those young talents early.

Attending the school of science was one thing that made me different from the people around me. The way I dressed to school, the time I went to school and returned stood me out. I did not have the time to get involved in any form of rascality and lurking around idly with my peers. My determination to succeed at the school, which some of my peers and others observed, set me apart.

“Don’t you see what Ayinde is doing?” some of the elders in my community would say sternly as they scolded their children who misbehaved. “Don’t you see what he is doing? Get up like your friend, go and do like he is doing.” The children they talked to were my friends that I still played with. We sometimes went to the cinemas or watched football matches together. But I was not one to allow someone else’s path influence mine, and I did not let them distract me from my school and library routine. Besides, only a few of us knew about the library. So, I would often just laugh over everything their parents said and go my way.

I had other friends at the time who were serious-minded and later became successful. Ola Mudashiru was a classmate, and we grew up at Isale-Eko together. His family and mine usually returned to Ikorodu for Ileya because they were also from there. He worked at Chevron for years and is now retired. Akin Kekere-Ekun was also a friend at FSAS, and we often played together. He later headed Habib Bank as CEO, and has been Chairman Board of Trustees of American University, Yola. There was also _____ Bakare who was my friend at Isale-Eko. He also rose to the top hierarchy of management at Chevron.

The most significant element of my time at FSAS was going to the Central Library, Lagos. I loved the library. One found so many nice books there. It had glass windows through which you could have a good view of the library’s

surroundings while studying or reflecting. I did a lot of reflection there, and I was satisfied with what I read, learnt and understood. We made some girlfriends there, so there were no dull moments. The Federal School of Art and Science offered me so much, but I did not have any doubts about leaving it midway for the University of Ife. Going to the university was my ultimate goal, and I was glad that I was finally able to do that.

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While I was at the Federal School of Art and Science, I had an inkling of what I wanted to study at the university. With my combination at the FSAS – Botany, Chemistry and Biology – the most likely courses I could study were Botany, Chemistry, or Biochemistry. The other options I considered were Biology, Microbiology, and some other similar course.

However, I did not think of these single subjects as professional courses, and I wanted a professional course. So, I opted for Agriculture. I reasoned that if I could not be a medical doctor, engineer or accountant, I could be an Agriculturist. So, this was what I picked as my first choice when it was time to apply to the University of Ife.

There was the option of studying Environmental Science. I could also have gone for Pharmacy, but I decided to stick with Agriculture, perhaps because of the predominance of farming in the rural area of Ikorodu where I had lived for a long time.

Strangely, I did not offer Agricultural Science in secondary school. It was, in fact, not one of the subjects that was offered at that time. But I had been exposed to farming, not only where I lived, but also in school where it was part of the activities we engaged in during the labour period.

No one influenced my choice. The decision was solely mine, and I was satisfied with it. My surviving parent, my mother, was not educated per se, neither did she concern herself with such matters besides encouraging me to go to school and study hard.

“Read your books, please,” she would often urge me. “Just read your books.”

Chapter Seven

COMING TO IFE

I wrote the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) examination while I was at the Federal School of Arts and Science. My goal was to attend the University of Ife, which would later become Obafemi Awolowo University. It was the school of my dreams, my school of first choice, and I did not mind not finishing my A-levels at the school of science. So, I took a bold step and wrote the exam. When I passed, my friends and family were excited about it. It was a huge accomplishment.

Back then, when I travelled from Lagos to Ilesha on my way to Ebenezer Grammar School, the drivers always went through Ife. It was impossible to get to Ilesha without passing through Ife. It was then that I noticed the university. I would see the university gate from afar, with the "University of Ife" boldly inscribed above it. It fascinated me.

Great Ife!

"Great Ife! Great Ife!" I would say to myself, dreaming about someday becoming a student of the great Ife. I knew that was where I wanted to be.

I had looked up other universities, like the University of Lagos, but they did not offer Agriculture as a course. The University of Ibadan, at that time, offered Agriculture, but I had no dream of going there and did not bother myself with it.

While travelling from Lagos to Ilesha and vice versa, the drivers always went through Ibadan. But they never took the

roads that led to its university, that is, the University of Ibadan. Instead, they took a more direct road, Iwo Road, which led straight to Ilesha. So, I never got to see the University of Ibadan just as I saw the University of Ife. I could not have been fascinated with a school I did not know, a school I had no interest in. That was a major factor that contributed to me over-looking the University of Ibadan. I was deliberate and unwavering about the University of Ife. It was as though I were enchanted by it. Ife was a green paradise. The architectural designs of the historical building from each faculty were captivating. Each building's paintings depicted unique cultures, which engendered exploration, and made one anticipate what the next building had to offer. They were attractive. They had good medical and health centres, a conducive library, among many other facilities. The university was also an interesting place.

Just before the Faculty of Arts, they had several rows of small shops, where they sold local foods and drinks. The Kegites (Palm-wine Drinkers Club) were also part of these groups. It was an open-market. But the Kegites had their own special place. They were jolly lively fellows who always sang beautiful songs. They would either come up with old songs, recreate already existing ones, or compose new ones at that moment. Fellow Kegites would sing along, beating their palm-wine bottles and kegs as if they were drums. When they sang, they pulled in the crowd - traders, school children, other students, and passers-by, and everybody sang and danced along. It was a beautiful experience that touched my soul, but I never participated.

My refusal to participate was not a result of being unsociable. Rather, it was because I had come from Isale-Eko where we did some of those things. Exciting as they were, I reasoned that I had already had enough of them. Also, I did not want that to distract me from my studies. The Kegites club was

one which you would join and be engrossed with. It was like any bitter-sweet substance that could be pleasurable and addictive, but also harmful and time wasting. Such invariably, would affect my grades. Of course, their activities were not time-wasting to their members. They were only creating liveliness out of their businesses. They entertained themselves and the onlookers, thus serving the purposes for which they are there. That was not my purpose.

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There were other activities I participated in, and these were within my faculty. I joined groups like: the Young Farmers group, The Soil Scientific group, and others. Whatever group I participated in was worth it. All groups I joined had the impact of developing me positively as a student and a human being in general. They were not time wasting.

I also joined religious groups. I was part of the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSS). I had joined the MSS while I was at the Federal School of Arts and Science (FSAS), before the University of Ife. At the school of science, I became inspired when I saw the religious leaders of the group. They were vast in the Quran. They read it effortlessly and efficiently, and could recite and interpret it, too. I was enthralled, so I enrolled.

The MSS was a leader in facilitating Islamic education. They conducted Islamic lectures, studied the Quran, organized prayer sessions, and inclined us to the Islamic doctrine. But I left the group while at the FSAS because I was passive.

It was during my preliminary year at the university of Ife, while I stayed at the Modakeke-Road hostel assigned to those doing the preliminary programme, that I rejoined the MSS. Soon after I enrolled, I left the group again. I was not actively engaged with the doctrine, so I backed out willingly.

Though I was born into a Muslim home, I never discriminated against it, neither did I discriminate other religious beliefs. I just was not getting the satisfaction I needed. When I needed to study the word of God, I was unable to, because it was written in Arabic. So, I would get someone read the Quran to me, and another would help me interpret it. When they prayed, I just followed the others at each point when they responded "Amen." It was challenging.

Perhaps if my parents or some other relative had enforced it, or had enrolled me for Islamic lessons earlier, it might not have been challenging. I was at a phase in my life where I wanted to communicate with God, and I did not want to be at the mercy of always having someone interpret the Quran for me. The result was that I ended up choosing Christianity, which I thought was quite similar but in a language that I could easily access.

It was at the end of my preliminary year that I converted to Christianity. I joined the Scripture Union group. I had seen their information on the notice board, so I took note on when next they would hold their fellowship. I looked forward to joining.

At the fellowship, the people were friendly and their warm smiles were welcoming. I was impressed to see a group of young individuals lost in praises and worship. They acted as if they were far from worries. The experience was fulfilling, and I had a beautiful time. At the end of the sermon, the organizers asked for the 'first-timers', and I stood up alongside the others who were new. We were embraced and encouraged to keep attending. They also asked basic details about each new person, like their names and addresses, so they could follow up. And they did follow up. We were like family. Later, I and the other baptismal candidates were taken to a Baptist church to be baptized.

I had chosen Christianity because I was able to relate with it effectively. The Bible was written in English, in a language I understood. I could read, understand, and interpret it all by myself. At Bible studies, I could understand and contribute to the discussions; they were always interactive sessions. I could also talk to God whenever I had to. It was natural to me, unlike my previous religious experience.

At the time I converted to Christianity, my mother was a reputable member of the Muslim community in Ikorodu. She was leader of the women's prayer group. It was reasonably expected that a mother with such reputation in the Muslim community would be disappointed. But she was not, neither was my father, who was the head of the traditional worshippers.

My parents were neutral about other religions, and did not discriminate against them. They gave us, their children, the freedom of choice so that we could explore. Their only concerns were that we did the right things and followed the right path; as long as we did not contradict the moral values of the family, they were fine. They were not supportive of evil or its destructive lifestyle. We had each other's support.

After my father died, my mother continued to perform her religious roles in the community. Regardless of our religious orientations, when her rites and prayers were being done, she always prayed for me. I also prayed for her always. It was basically about communicating with God in different languages and styles; but the substance of the prayers were the same.

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Another thing that did not change was my open-mindedness and relationship with my friends. Though I had voluntarily taken a leadership role at the Scripture Union, I was not the

fanatical type. The fanatical ones were usually not liberal; they were too mindful of the way they dressed, and were conservative about friendship and lifestyle. I was not like that.

My being a member of the Scripture Union did not stop the relationship I had with some of my friends who were smokers, or the ones who attended some social gathering that were relatively termed "ungodly." Gatherings like night clubs were prohibited, but I did those occasionally with friends at the university. My lifestyle was not old fashioned. When it was time for fellowship, I studied and prayed with the SU group. When it was time for celebration or a night out, I celebrated with friends and family. I knew what was right and wrong. That did not change my personality. I was open-minded, yet mindful of what I did or didn't do. I did not associate myself with any gang or cult, nor did I do evil things. I did all I could do, managing friends, family, the church and every other indestructible activity of my interest. I balanced things appropriately.

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Just as I was able to balance religion and my social activities, my education was not exempted. Right from my preliminary year, I took my studies seriously. I was able to pass to the required point for transition into year one. I, along with a few friends, who applied for the preliminary programme, was aware of the consequences of not meeting the required grade point. We had been told all that during orientation, and I could not have tolerated not being qualified for progression in the university. So, I put in the work, met the required grade point, and was allowed entry into year one.

In my first year, we were introduced to the basic courses in Agriculture. There were course names and codes like Agriculture 101, which was an introduction to Agriculture.

There were many other introductory courses, which explained the basic knowledge of the course. We also interacted with some of the lecturers; some were rigid, but others were welcoming. It was a start of something new even though the whole process was familiar. I had already had experiences from the Federal School of Arts and Science. Having read science, I had experimented in laboratories. The methodology was the same in Agriculture. Agriculture was a science that related to plants, soil, animals, and the environment. We also took courses like Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Extension in Education. So, adjusting to the system of learning at the university was not a problem.

Every year, I was focused on the growth of my Cumulative grade point Average (C.G.P.A.). Throughout my years in Ife, from my preliminary year to the very end, I never had cause to retake a course. I made sure I passed all courses. When I had a fall in grades in a course, as I sometimes did, I made sure to find out my weaknesses in the course, and I studied harder. I literally did my best to excel.

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Quality education is said to be the end product of effective teaching and learning activities. Teaching and learning activities can only be effective and productive in a conducive and learning-enhancing environment. Most students would be motivated and eager to learn if the environment is conducive to learning. The unwillingness of students to learn could be traced to the state of the school environment. The University of Ife of my days was an environment suitable for learning in terms of availability of teaching and learning facilities, and dedicated and highly knowledgeable lecturers whose lifestyles, personalities and pedagogic skills were worthy of emulation.

Lecturers disseminated meaningful information to their students. Integrity was never compromised. Seminars and inaugural lectures where professors presented new theories and ideas were often organized and students were allowed to participate. All these had great influence on my development, and I envisaged working in or establishing a similar learning environment.

My lecturers also had a positive impact on my growth in school. Many of them were reputable in the fields of specialization. Amongst these were Professor Wale Omole and Professor Abisogun Leigh. Wale Omole, who later became the Vice-Chancellor of the university, used to be at the Animal Science Department. He taught me Animal Biochemistry, which related to the anatomy of animals. He explained the different elements that interact with the vital organs and how these elements contribute to the performance of the animal. For example, organs like the brain, lungs, pancreas, intestines, bones and many others are made up of different cells and tissues. Any imbalance or the presence of worms could hinder the function of an organ. The biochemical elements in all parts of the animal should be stable and if not, must be treated in time so it does not damage other connected organs. Such stability determines the wellness of the animal.

Professor Abisogun Leigh taught us Animal Breeding. Just like Omole, he always took his time to explain things. He was patient and painstaking. He talked about the genes of animals and how they were made up. He talked about breeding animals, identifying the DNA of animals, and how animals interact. He also mentioned that animals could be bred to human satisfaction and would appear the way we wanted them to be. Animals used for the production of milk should be robust and have wider veins. Animals being bred for meat must have bones that are strong enough to carry

the weight of the meat. And there were animals that were made suitable for farm labour. Professor Leigh later served as Vice-Chancellor at the Lagos State University (LASU).

There were other lecturers that were involved in my growth at Ife, but I became good friends with Abisogun Leigh and Wale Omole. Sometimes, we met at social gatherings and exchanged pleasantries. These men were much older than me, but we subsequently interacted as friends. Professor Leigh once visited my school, and he gifted me a book. I also became friends with Professor Osuntogun, who was a lecturer in the Department of Agricultural Economics. These were people I loved to interact with. I enjoyed their company because they were wonderful people, and they impacted my mind in positive ways.

We were taught that plants could also be bred in about the same way like animals. Cassava, for instance, is short in stem and broader in canopy. So, it could obtain energy from sunlight and water which makes it produce larger tubers. The same is applicable to yam tubers. Fruits like oranges, if not carefully bred, could come out small and scanty in form.

We also learnt that not all soil types are suitable for cultivation. Many people, especially those who are not into farming and agriculture, ignorantly assume that all lands could be cultivated upon. They sometimes query government, for not using specific lands for cultivation. Before going cultivating, soils should be tested to determine the minerals in them and how much they could help sustain plants cultivated on them. Every plant demands certain nutrient to be able to grow. And it had been scientifically proven that since all soils do not contain the same level of nutrient and element, it is important that a soil test is carried out. Likewise, a test should be carried out on different spots so as to measure the availability of nutrient on the space,

because the levels of nutrient could vary even within the same space.

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The university environment is such that guarantees greater liberties and privileges to students beyond what was allowed in the secondary school. But playing in that environment requires a high level of intelligence and care. The student union in those days was the mouthpiece of all students and the only channel through which students' agitations were communicated to the school authorities. I got involved in union activities at the university. Even though I was not one of the executive members, I was always willing to be part of the force that worked towards the realization of our agitations.

I participated in one of the protests against what we considered "an unpalatable decision" of the school authorities. The protest which commenced in an ambience of conviviality suddenly turned gory due to the presence of anti-riot policemen who were brought in to disperse us. Students resisted the action of the police who heralded their presence with sporadic shooting of tear gas. But when all eyes were terribly smarting from the tear-gas and it became unbearable for us, we had to run for safety. We rushed into our chartered bus, but I couldn't gain entrance into the bus. It was already jam-packed. With a leg on the bus and my entire body outside, I held on precariously to the cant rail of the bus. The position was simply life-threatening because I felt terribly uncomfortable with my hands. I could not let go of the rail because that could mean a fatal accident. The bus was at top speed on the highway, and I bore the pain with prayer to God to save my soul. The bus eventually stopped at the school gate, and I felt like man who had just been delivered from hell.

The story would have been different, but for God's mercy. I could have thrown my dear mother and family into mourning. But I am thankful to God that that did not happen. That horrible experience notwithstanding, I still participated in several protests because “Aluta” was in my gene. But I tried to apply wisdom in my participation subsequently.

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It is an incontestable fact that the environment where a child grows up has both positive and negative impacts on their development and identities. Growing up in the Isale-Eko area of Lagos State brought about some behavioural lapses in me. It was rare in those days to grow up in Isale-Eko without being exposed to drugs. I became exposed to drugs at a very tender age. There were two Indian hemp dealers among our neighbours then: one lived on the top floor of the building where we had an apartment, and another on the ground floor. Sometimes, my assistance was solicited to help wrap and pack the Indian hemp for sale.

Most of the rapscallions within the neighbourhood did come on a daily basis to patronize these dealers. At times, the law enforcement agents would come around to arrest them, but before evening of same day, you would see them on the street again back to their illicit business. The plain truth is that corruption has been with us for a very long time. It baffled me as a young boy that with clear evidence of their criminality, the dealers never spent one day in prison. They seemed to enjoy some immunity because they were connected with powerful people in the country.

Despite my association with the hemp dealers, I strongly held on to my principle that I would never taste Indian hemp. I resisted all temptations. It is sensible to always talk to one’s self in order not to be negatively influenced by the activities

of miscreants. But it was an irony that I was later lured into a practice that I had detested and resisted while at home.

During my undergraduate years at University of Ife, I shared a room with a friend from Ibadan. He was born into a wealthy home. So, it was easy for him to get all he needed. Because of the poor environment back home in Isale-Eko, I was reluctant to go home to spend short breaks with my parents and siblings. I spent my short breaks in Ibadan.

My relationship with my roommate from Ibadan soon took a horrible turn. He was a compulsive weed smoker, he successfully lured me to emulate the habit I had abhorred right from home. No single day passed without him consuming weed. We would rendezvous around Dugbe area in Ibadan in search for weed. One day, I decided to give it a try; I tasted weed for the first time. I almost ran amok the first time I smoked it. Each time I tried it, I always lost my balance. Sometime later, I began to query the sense in what I was doing. It dawned on me that if I should continue in that path, my future would be endangered. I summoned courage to sever my relationship with my roommate. I also stopped spending my breaks at his house. Unfortunately for him, he died from the use of hard drugs a few years later.

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While at Ife, I had a group of friends, who made an impact on my academic development. Our educational vision aligned. We came together to study, and often exchanged ideas through group discussions. This continued till our final year. We made sure to run the final race without our overall grades dropping. Samuel Ayenuola was the only one amongst us that was on a first class. He was exceptionally brilliant. I usually called him a magnetic brain because he did not struggle to study or remember anything. He was serious with his courses, socialized with friends, and when it was

time for exams, he prepared appropriately. He was not nerdy, neither did he struggle with his academics. He was simply gifted.

The rest of the group – Tokunboh Aromolaran, Segun Aribiyi and me – managed our grades and tried not to go below what it already was at any given time. I spent extra hours studying even after studying with the group. I would go to a quiet environment, study and rehearse all that we had discussed. Whenever I rehearsed, I shut my notes, got a blank sheet of paper and wrote down all that I knew. I avoided cheating my way into my already closed notes. This helped me to be sure that I fully understood the course, and I was able to tackle any question that came up during the exams. When the exams came, I could always visualize and recall all that I had studied.

This method helped me all through my years at the University of Ife. My grades were usually in the range of 3 points. It was between 3.5, 3.6 and 3.7, almost close to the point of a first class. Unfortunately, I never made it to a first class. I left the university with a second class (upper division).

Chapter Eight

A JOURNEY UP NORTH

I was posted to Borno, Maiduguri, for the year-long National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) programme, which I registered for shortly after my graduation from Ife. I was excited to take in that chapter of my life, to experience life somewhere far away from home. My journey there was by train, and it took us 30 hours from Iddo in Lagos to Borno. Frankly, the journey was nothing short of a wonderful experience. I was able to see a side of Nigeria I had never seen. It was all different – the undulating landscape, the towering forests, the thick vegetation, and the style of houses. Everything stood in contrast to the city life I was used to in Lagos. I finally began to understand how vast and culturally diverse Nigeria was, and still is. The ride was an eye-opener in that regard. Eventually, we got to the NYSC Orientation Camp in Maiduguri. We did the necessary documentations and were handed our official uniforms.

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Camp life was basically three weeks of trainings and physical drills. While at it, most of us learned to look smart and stay fit. It was interesting to interact with young Nigerians from different backgrounds and universities coming together to serve their fatherland. It demonstrated the factuality of the axiom; there is strength in diversity. Indeed, the programme echoed national unity. We easily made friends and connected with people across different tribes and ethnicities. We knew that Nigeria belonged to us collectively. So, volunteering to serve our country for one year was an honour.

During the training programme, we were taken to some of the remote parts of Borno State. One of such places was

Gwoza Hills. It was a rural settlement where the inhabitants hardly wore clothes to cover their bodies. They lived like primordial people, dwelling in caves and covering nothing but their private parts. These people were happy with themselves. They were not interested in the urban life. Yet, they were Nigerians just like us. We were not shocked to see them, though. We had been briefed accordingly, so we acted natural and respectful around them. We first met with the village head who welcomed us with water and fruits, then we explored the environment. The people there were equally excited to have us around. They seemed comfortable and cheerful, but I could not help but marvel at the reality that people, including children, were still living within rock clefts in Nigeria.

Climbing the hills was the toughest part of the Gwoza journey. It was a daunting task. The environment was surrounded by vegetation from ground to top. As we climbed, I wondered how they got drinking water all the way at the top. The top of the hill was an undulating plane littered with caves and tents where the people lived. In that moment, I reflected and compared their lives with mine. The difference was undeniably clear, and I realized I was truly blessed, especially when I considered the choices of transportation I had, the quality of my food and shelter, and my overall well-being. It occurred to me that these people were vulnerable to attacks from wild animals, and that possibility frightened me the more. From Gwoza, it was easy to see how people from the Republic of Niger flowed into Nigeria. They were hardly differentiated or segregated from Nigerians. Again, that showed to me fluid, superficial nature of the borders between Nigeria and some of her neighbours.

We also visited other areas in Bornu such as Biu, Bama, and Yola, which is now in Adamawa. In fact, we toured the major towns and cities in the state before we were finally posted to

our place of primary assignment. That was how it was done back in my day. We were first trained, then we toured the state, and finally returned to camp where we got the letter to our Place of Primary Assignment (PPA). Based on my university training, I was assigned to the Borno State Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Maiduguri, where I lived in one of the farm settlements. In my time there, I got to realize how diverse the north is. There are several different ethnicities there, each unique to their own cultures and traditions.

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My allocated accommodation was a cubicle I shared with another youth corps member. It was the first time I lived alone. I had to adjust to the responsibility of cooking my meals and the other demands of adulthood. Thankfully, my three-week stay in the orientation camp had given me some experience in that regard. In time, we adjusted to the place, its people and its rich culture. We also learned a bit of their language for the sake of exchanging pleasantries, and that helped in building a connection with the local people. Whenever we had to go to the secretariat in Maiduguri, we either used public transport or were chauffeured in official vehicles.

Interestingly, I had travelled to Borno with the notion that it was a desert, but that turned out to be false. The vegetation was certainly not as dense as it is in the South, but it was far from being a desert. In fact, there was a lot of planting on the roads and some areas had thick forests. They also had a lot of agricultural production going on. The first time I went to a market there, the mangoes I saw were unusually big, fleshy, and succulent. That proved to me that the region was not what I had preconceived it to be. They also practised aqua-farming and nomadic livestock farming. It was always

fascinating to see young children lead hundreds of cattle, mostly from behind the herd. From what I saw in Maiduguri, I was convinced that Nigeria is well blessed with resources which, if explored, could lead to greater prosperity and proper establishment of citizens across the regions.

We spent about nine months in service before we were called back to the orientation camp. A couple of times within that period, we received some government officials from the NYSC office who came to conduct job interviews. Being a Lagos State scholar, I suppose it was reasonable to be offered such consideration. The officials were from Lagos State, and they conducted my first job interview. I aced the interview and was offered a letter of appointment as an agricultural officer, even before I finished my service. Subsequently, officials from the Federal Government also interviewed me and offered me an appointment as an Agricultural Officer in the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Thus, I had two appointment letters and it was up to me to make a choice. My sense of place of origin inclined me towards service in Lagos, but the desire to function in a much wider space – travelling and bonding with people from diverse regions of Nigeria – made me contemplate the federal appointment.

In the one year I served at the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources, I gained valuable experience and learned a lot in my field. I was attached to senior officers in the ministry. Our job description was mainly to visit farms and work with farmers by advising them and providing them with farm inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and herbicides. We also helped in connecting them to units for hiring farm machinery such as tractors. The seeds we gave them were improved seeds from research institutes. Unlike the seeds from the previous harvest which must have gathered pathogens, the improved seeds had been scientifically

enhanced to exhibit desired characteristics like drought resistance and immunity. However, as a government official, we were never involved in the production processes. We only worked as facilitators and extension officers. We taught the farmers how to improve their processes and showed them the advantages of forming cooperative farming groups. In the end, our work with them was evidently successful; their productivity significantly surged.

That experience was my first hands-on practice in agricultural extension. It was also a training for me in the field, and I loved every moment of it. It was fulfilling to solve the problems of farmers, to be a competent figure that others could learn from. Every morning, I was ever eager to get to the office. That was the only place I could go. I had neither family nor close friends in Maiduguri.

Once a week, youth corps members were required to participate in community work where we would go on important visits. We visited other schools, markets, hospitals, and even the palace of the emir. To a great degree, we interacted with the community we were in. We understood their culture and traditions, and that significantly bridged the ethnic gaps between us

In all, my NYSC experience revealed to me how rich, diverse, and great we were as a people. I realized that we had the potential to build a great nation where everyone had access to resources and good infrastructure to support individual and corporate endeavours. Despite our social and communal differences, it was clear that we had much more in common, especially in the ways we value life and family. At the orientation camp, there was hardly any form of ethnic segregation. We saw ourselves as the multifaceted picture of the Nigeria we desired. Through the experience, I realized how wrong it was to stereotype any group of people. The

truth is that we are all very similar in our ways and ambitions in life. As I got to meet many people from the north, I experienced first-hand how charming they could be. In fact, many of them shared the same vision I had for Nigeria; a truly united country where things work for everybody.

I visited Lagos a few times during my service year. Each time, I proudly wore my NYSC shirt around. It was an insignia of status and elitism. I was serving my country and that was certainly considered worthy of vaunting. It also meant I had been across regions of Nigeria that many of my contemporaries had only heard of. Indeed, it was a remarkable year for me. Also, I had a lot of fun as a corps member in Maiduguri. On several occasions, I went clubbing and partying in the night. Maiduguri was a lively place, so far removed from the common stereotypes of southerner about the north.

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When I eventually finished national service, I began to reflect on the conversations I and my clique of friends used to have as undergraduates. We had maintained a resolve to switch from agriculture to accounting as soon as our service year was over. Accountancy had appealed to us as an elite endeavour where we would be in the position to offer value and give directives to others. It was not even about making more money. But little did we know that we could run agriculture as a business and apply all the principles of accounting to it. I guess the thrill of working as an accountant in a sophisticated office environment had more appeal to us than the field work associated with agriculture.

Finally, I got to the crossroads, and I needed to make a decision concerning the matter. Was I truly going to follow through with the dreams I had as an undergraduate? I

honestly was not sure. Still in my indecision, I applied for a role at an accounting firm, Cooper and Lybrand. I was later invited for an interview at Igbosere, which I prepared and went for. At the interview, I wrote a test and presented my documents to a panel of three persons. That same day, I was allocated to a table to immediately start work. Then I was given a bulky training manual to study. As I carried on my duties there, I could not help but notice the executive treatment that the staff members were receiving. We were being treated with respect and reverence. I marveled at it all. For starters, I did not expect them to grant me immediate employment. I had felt they would get back to me at a later time, but I was proud of myself. I had two appointment letters in my bag already, and then a decent job barely a month after completing my national service. Eventually, I settled into the job. I decided to go with the accounting flow.

Chapter Nine
STARTING AS AN AGRICULTURIST

By the end of the service, either by telepathy, almost six of us from the same department were employed as accounting officers at Coopers & Lybrand at Lapal House, Igbosere, Lagos Island. As a graduate of Agricultural Economics, I was not comfortable with working at the accounting firm. I kept thinking about this until I sought the professional help and brotherly advice of my step brother, Aliu Olusanya, a Chief Accountant with African Alliance Insurance Company, who frowned at my childish and incongruous decision. He suggested I pursue my career as an agriculturist. Brother Aliu's advice heralded the end of service to the firm. There was still hope to grasp the Lagos State job opportunity. A week after, I approached the Ministry of Agriculture for the job opportunity I was offered. I was glad that the opportunity was yet to elapse. I reported at the Ministry, I was already being anxiously expected to resume work. The recruiting officers at the ministry were glad to see me that fateful morning. Documentation process was rapidly done and I was posted to the division office Ikorodu as the agricultural officer at Imota farm settlement After consulting with my brothers, Aliu, who was the Chief Accountant at African Alliance Insurance Company, Broad Street, and Moshood, who had qualified as a civil engineer and was worked with the Lagos State Ministry of Works, I decided that I was going to accept the offer by the Lagos State Ministry of Agriculture, and exit the field of accounting which I had forayed into.

Contrary to what I had expected, because I was trying to walk in his footsteps, Aliu advised that since I studied Agriculture at the university, I should stick with it and not

bother about accountancy. Moshood had no objections and stated the need for me to quickly decide the path to follow. He counselled that if a career path in Agriculture sat well with me, I should consider it. The option of pursuing a career in agriculture did not require much additional effort to kick-start it. It was just a matter of acting on the letter of appointment I already had. I gave some thought to what was before me. As a Lagos State scholar, I thought that it might be good for me to work with the Lagos State Ministry of Agriculture. That was how I changed my mind about accountancy and I decided to forfeit my job in the accounting firm.

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So, the next Monday, armed with my letter, I reported at the state office that handled appointments and postings. I was confident that I would pass their checks and be gainfully employed. It happened just that way, as I had hoped. I was drafted into the civil service and asked to report for a general orientation programme with all new government employees. After the orientation, I was posted to the Ministry of Agriculture where I had to go through a second orientation. This time, I was taken round the various farm settlements in Lagos that were affiliated with the ministry. The settlements were mainly in Ikorodu, Epe, Ojo, Badagry, and Agege. We also visited abattoirs, poultry and piggery farms. We were thereafter taken to the fish jetties, travelling from Victoria Island to Epe, all along the coastal lines. Eventually, we were deployed to various office units, largely based on the qualification and sub-sectoral inclination of each individual. I was posted as an extension officer to Imota, a farm settlement in Ikorodu. I assumed duty at the Department of Agricultural Extension, Lagos State Ministry of Agriculture, in 1977.

My responsibilities there mirrored the activities I engaged in during my university days. I visited farmers, tried to understand their problems, offered solutions, and shared as much modern knowledge of farming as was needed.

I left Maryland in Lagos where I lived temporarily with Moshood, my immediate older brother, for Ikorodu. In Ikorodu, I moved into our family house with my mother, who had relocated there from Lagos Island in the previous year. I did not even consider getting another accommodation; I lived in the family house with her and this brought me so much satisfaction. Every day, I would set out from the house on a journey of about ten kilometres to Imota. I settled in swiftly and embraced me work not just because I enjoyed what I was doing, but also because it brought me closer to my mother. I was excited about the opportunity to finally live with her and assist her in all the ways I could.

Though senescence had set in and she had become feebler, I was happy to be around her. I had always had a deep relationship with her since childhood, and it became even stronger in the days when I saw her sacrifice, sweat and tears just to ensure that my siblings and I were okay. Returning home gave me the opportunity to take care of her, listen to her, and nourish our relationship. I was genuinely happy to be back in Ikorodu, and to my mother's warmth.

In 1978, within six months of working at Imota, I was able to buy a brand new car for myself; a dazzling Ford Cortina. I had taken a staff loan of N4,800, and bought the car for about N4,350. I kept the change for myself. Though I spent some money in revelry with friends, I made sure to take good care of my mother. She was my priority and I had enough to make her life better. I also renovated the family house where we lived, fixed a borehole for pipe-borne water, built modern

toilets with a functioning WC system, and re-erected the fences that were falling apart.

Realizing that it might be precarious for my mother to live idly, we discussed the idea of running a small provision store, which she accepted. So, I set one up for her. My sister, Mulikat, and I went to Apogbon where we bought all that was needed in mother's store. The store was fully stocked and well arranged after which I called my mother and handed it over to her.

She was moved to tears. Her blessings had multiplied. She had me living with her, and now she had her hands busy, too. For me, it was great satisfaction. I was a young graduate doing well at work, living with my mother, and taking care of her. It was bliss.

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The farm settlements at Imota had administrative offices which managed, coordinated and supervised the activities and processes of the farmers. Known as the Divisional, Agricultural, and Natural Resources Offices (DANRO), these administrative offices represented the Permanent Secretary's extension office for each division. The DANRO's office in each division had a representative of the Permanent Secretary, a senior officer from the Permanent Secretary's office, a senior officer from the Ministry of Agriculture, a senior officer from the Accountant-General's office, and a senior officer from the Auditor-General's office. Most new employees in the ministry were posted to these divisional offices. The respective Heads-of-Division at DANRO were responsible for allocating the employees to farm settlements.

We held weekly meetings at the DANRO, where officers from different farms – both crop and livestock – met and shared their experiences at our primary areas of appointment, the

issues we faced, and the challenges of the local farmers. There were also officers specialising in processing and marketing present at those meetings. The DANRO acted as our link to the secretariat, and all directives from the secretariat were given at those meetings. The junior officers, irrespective of their fields of practice, were also required to communicate with their respective departments through the DANRO.

There were twenty-four family unit houses built by the government in the farm settlements, and families who lived in them were required to run the animal farms that were at the back of the houses. While some engaged in poultry farming, others invested their time and effort in piggery. A central building on the farm served as a point for the supply of inputs. The supply of farm inputs followed a procedure for distribution from the state secretariat in Alausa, Ikeja, through the DANRO, to the various farms where they were warehoused. Serving as a centre for agricultural development activities, the DANRO building was a distribution point for several farm inputs like fertilizers, seeds, and chemicals.

In addition to the livestock farming which the families practised, there was the crop farming which farmers practised through a defined cooperative structure. They did this on the farm's expanse of land. Unlike the smaller family units that practised livestock farming, these large farms boasted of arable crops. In this case, families worked jointly to cultivate, nurture, and harvest the corn and cassava crops planted even as they managed a joint poultry farm.

My job was to make sure that there was great productivity on the farm always and that the spread of diseases within the farm was prevented or curtailed. This I did by swiftly bringing in veterinarian services when there were needed.

Ensuring that the inputs such as loans were given to the farmers and that payments were made after they had used the inputs was my major administrative duty. A well-structured cooperative system was put in place to encourage prompt payment for all inputs.

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The things I had learnt in the university came in handy while I led the farm settlements at Imota. I applied the concept of translating knowledge to value and value to money. Everything I had learnt, thus, became practicable, and the first three years I spent at Imota were fulfilling. In spite of the fact that I was younger than most of the farmers that worked under my supervision, I cultivated a good working relationship with them. Not only were they always ready to learn from me, there was also a mutual respect in our interactions. They submitted to my leadership just as I honoured them. When they brought the issues they faced to me, I would listen attentively before relaying them to the Permanent Secretary through the DANRO. Senior officers who came to inspect the farm settlements to make sure things were going as expected were always satisfied with my work there. That was because I handled my leadership responsibilities with the passion and the exuberance of youth.

The result of the work, time and effort I put into the Imota farm settlements soon became clear. Not only did families live in financial satisfaction, with sufficient income, some were also able to buy lands and build homes for themselves in the municipal areas of Imota. A few others bought motorcycles and bicycles to move around. They were also able to afford education for their children. There was no

doubt that the needs of these families were being met, and that was definitely a win for me.

While keeping a close eye on the productivity of the farmers, I observed that each family unit had a minimum of three sources of income, including the crop produce, the piggery farms, and the poultry houses, which could either be layers or broilers. These outputs, therefore, covered the state loans and met the needs of the farmers. As soon as the farmers paid back their loans, they made requisition for fresh inputs which came to us from the Central Feed Processing Centre, Oko-Oba, through the DANRO. They were then distributed to the farmers based on their needs and documented accordingly. This arrangement was suitable for the farmers, who were thriving and growing as they shared their knowledge and experiences among themselves, even as they participated in healthy competitions. Since I was close them, I watched how well they thrived. I also took supervisory walks round the farms, checking on the welfare of the farmers and the small farms behind their houses. It was indeed a memorable experience.

The lessons I learnt from my mother kept me away from getting into scuffles with any of the farmers during my time at Imota. Etched on my mind were her words of advice, “Soft words turn wrath away, and even the most cantankerous people are deserving of mercy.” According to her, fighting with a pig meant that one had to shamefully descend to its level. So, I avoided trouble as much as I could.

Since I knew that I had no wealthy family to rescue me if I got into problems, I learnt to behave myself. I avoided heartaches for my mother. Moreover, it is expected that if one works with a sense of purpose, transparently and honestly, others will acknowledge and appreciate the good intentions. Such was my case.

Motivated by the prosperity of their counterparts, farmers in my division worked hard, and those who lagged behind hustled their way up when they realised the opportunities they were missing. Farmers who chose not to farm in the spaces behind the house were disqualified from certain benefits. There was a robust assistance scheme in place which the farmers missed out on if they remained lazy. This was so because the system was designed by the government to provide housing and credit facility for all the farmers. Once the farmers met all the requirements, their residency in the farm settlements remained permanent, and food remained plenteous in the buzzing city of Lagos. It was thus important for the farmers to deepen their understanding of their respective fields, multiply the inputs they were given, and pay back their loans promptly.

The merchandise of the farm produce at the DANRO was another interesting aspect of Imota. Several extension officers brought in farm produce from their various farms and production centres to be sold at the Farm Gates Markets. These were makeshift markets where goods were sold at rock-bottom prices, located both at the DANRO and the secretariat. The requital was done every week in an orderly manner. Weekly produce from each farm were valued into a point system that was jointly used with cash to request for fresh supplies. The Farm Gate Markets were popular for their low prices and accessibility. People gathered to buy in different quantities; wholesalers, retailers, and unit consumers were ever present. Family women thronged there to buy food items for their homes. Even visitors in Ikorodu anticipated the market days. It was a jolly good time.

Regrettably, however, the DANROs are no longer in existence. The different administrations that came afterward changed the structure I met there then. The ministry has become departmentalized, with the director of each department

liaising directly with the field officers on the farm, and not through the DANRO.

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After my third year at Imota, I became bored with my job. The exuberance and agility that characterised my early days there had waned. The routine of work left me disgruntled. There was hardly any mental rigour or tasks that challenged my mind. I looked at my superiors and wondered, "Is this what I really want to do year in, year out? My mind continued to regurgitate the decision I had made earlier in life; to take accountancy as my career, a decision I did not follow through. I could not but reflect on the lives of my friends who were bold enough to make the transition. They were all doing very well at the time, working elegantly in sophisticated offices, while I pined away in an agrestic settlement. After giving it much thought, I came to the conclusion that my time there was up.

I began to reflect on the next appropriate step to take. Several thoughts jostled for my attention. I was completely overwhelmed by the fear of losing my intellectual traits. I could not continue in an environment that was not tasking my mind, a job that lacked the thoroughness of academia. I never really thought much of the work environment where I was; I had wanted to be like university lecturers and work in a beautiful environment like the University of Ife. I had to take a bold step by seeking a transfer to an academic environment.

That was when I conceived the plan to move away from Imota. I acted on my convictions and applied to the ministry to be transferred to an academic institution. I wanted to be a lecturer. The processing took a while, but I was finally accepted to teach Agriculture in the apex state tertiary

institution in Lagos at the time – the Lagos State Polytechnic. That, indeed, was the beginning of a new chapter in my life.

Chapter Ten

AN ACADEMIC EXPEDITION

Towards the end of 1979, after my transfer to the Lagos State Polytechnic as a lecturer had been effected, I found myself in the same location as the DANRO office. Apparently, the Lagos State Polytechnic, which at the time was the apex state-owned tertiary institution, was in the same compound as the DANRO. It is possible that the latter were scrapped because of the polytechnic's growth, or it could have just been due to a reorganization of the Ministry of Agriculture. Expectedly, I moved out of my mother's house to the living quarters I was provided on campus. I was still close to her. The distance was barely ten minutes. Upon resumption to my new office, I discovered that although my office changed, I was still within the same big campus.

Based on my degree and undergraduate thesis, I was posted to the Department of Agricultural Economics and Extension Education, where I began to teach courses for National Diploma 1 and National Diploma 2. By my third year there, the experience I had gathered made way for my promotion. I was subsequently allocated courses to teach in the Higher National Diploma programme. Across the various levels, I taught courses on Extension Education and Agricultural Economics. The latter was broken down for HND students into concepts like principle of economics, agricultural production, agricultural cooperatives, and agricultural management. My classes offered a blended knowledge of farming practices, economics, and accounting. It was practical, and the students enjoyed it.

In terms of physical appearance, I was quite similar to the students I taught, so I easily blended and flowed with them, enough for most to realize how passionate I was about lecturing. I took my job very seriously. I adequately prepared before my classes and made sure to engage the students in class, a little different from the prevalent teaching style in those days. For me, it was a platform to further express the practicality of my job description as a field officer during my national service. I had worked as an extension officer on a farm, so teaching about it came naturally. I taught my students concepts around respecting the farmers, demonstrating knowledge and applying flexibility to the farming methods by blending their practical knowledge with theoretical concepts. My relationship with them did not end in class; most of them flocked around me in social settings, too.

In studying and teaching the courses' curriculum, I hardly found textbooks that covered all the topics to be explored. As a result, I frequently had to search through the library and incorporate personal notes from my university days to develop my lecture materials. Over time, when I realized I had built a satisfactory collection of lecture transcripts, I decided to produce a textbook. My students were enthusiastic about that. They typically admired me. I had distinguished myself as a considerate lecturer, not one who breathed out threats of failure – a trait I consider to be used to hide inadequacies. My students came together to support the project. It involved quite a lot of typing and proofreading which was done in-house. The day I bound it together was a proud one for me.

Before then, I had been intrigued by academic authors. I reasoned that they were university graduates like me. So, binding my book felt like I had taken a big step towards becoming an accomplished author. Besides, I had changed

my job for the purpose of becoming an academic. Authoring a textbook meant I was definitely on the right track. It felt good to contribute to the body of knowledge around a subject. As I worked on getting my book ready, I was also processing my master's programme. My intention was to have the work vetted by a senior lecturer before I publish it. While I was still working on it, I got notified that I was being summoned by the university's disciplinary committee, on grounds that I sold handouts to students. I could not believe my ears.

"Me? Disciplinary committee? What wrong could I have done in producing a body of work which I intended to turn into a book?" I wondered to myself.

As a matter of fact, money was never the motivation to begin the project. I was moved to solve the issues I was facing; there were no books available to cover all the topics I was teaching. I wanted to create an all-inclusive material that comprised of the practical experience that I had on the field. I had to start from somewhere. That was why I began to sell to the students; to help them study comprehensively. The handout was called the *Principles of Extension Education*.

I eventually found myself facing the disciplinary team. They laid out the allegation accordingly and I clarified that it was not true. I argued my case vehemently, pointing out that I never compelled any student to buy the material. Unlike some other lecturers, I never attached the sales of those materials to marks. The motivation for it was not even financial. It was to solve an apparent deficit in knowledge and achieve my goal in academia. To buttress my point, I presented student witnesses who had helped me in the book project to testify. They did, but the committee did not buy the explanations. They slammed me with a general

punishment for all the summoned lecturers; we were to lose a year of promotion.

The punishment made me feel stagnant and I began to consider resignation. Before then, I had been making attempts to go for a master's programme at the University of Ibadan. When I finally got the admission, the polytechnic declined to grant me permission to pursue it on grounds that I was facing a one-year punishment. I swallowed it and pushed my master's programme to the following year – 1981. Shockingly, when the time came, the polytechnic declined again. According to them, it was mandatory for me to get my leave of absence approved before I left for studying. It was a bizarre situation. I was astounded that a university community could express this discouragement to an individual who was interested in pursuing higher academic knowledge. At that point, I was sick of the delays so I sent in a resignation letter and left without getting a response. Afterwards, I travelled to Ibadan for my master's degree.

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After my master's degree, I reapplied to the polytechnic as a lecturer but I was declined. They claimed that since I forcefully left, I was ruled out from future employment with them, despite my master's degree. I then had to locate the Chairman of the Governing Council, Professor Olorunimbe Adedipe, to appeal to him and explain my side of the story. He intervened on the matter and I was re-invited for an interview. This time, I got the job but it was on some unfavourable terms; I was admitted as a level 10 staff, instead of level 12 which was commensurate with my higher qualification. I gamely accepted it and began to work there

until gradually, from 1985, I began to lose interest in the job. It became clear to me that intellectual drive was not being promoted. There was hardly any research being done there, too.

The kind of intellectual development common in universities was not there. Nobody was presenting or defending scientific papers. It was a dismal situation. Predictably, my satisfaction in the job drastically waned. Once again, I began to search deeper, questioning my intent and self-examining my vision. I wondered to myself, "Is this where I would rather be? Can I not do better with myself?"

That was when I began to consider the option of starting an enterprise in agriculture. I knew from university that knowledge can be converted to value and money. I had some knowledge in agriculture. It was time for me to embark on a journey of conversion. I could not continue to work in the choking confines of the polytechnic system; I was ready to create and innovate. Also, my decision was not based on finances. I and my family were relatively well-to-do at the time and we lived comfortably in the school quarters. However, it was habitual for me to think about my future and reconsider the path I was travelling. I believed I could take the risk. I knew I was better than that salary job.

In 1986, I approached Mr. Ogunbowale, who was my Head of Department, and intimated to him my plans to quit. It was a tough moment for me, especially because he saw me as his brother and partner. He had arrived at the department as a senior lecturer from Ibadan in 1984, and we became good friends. Barely two years later, I was in his office describing my dissatisfaction with the job.

"Kaoli, what are you going to do if you resign?" he asked, looking perturbed.

I explained that I had plans to venture into private practice and set up my own farm. He bluntly opposed my idea and tried to make me see the opportunities that were available for me in the polytechnic.

“You can be a director here, or even a rector. Our economy in Nigeria is unstable, too. Kaoli, don’t throw all you have away,” he advised.

Although his points were solid, my mind was already made up. I was back at his office in three months to submit a letter of resignation. I quit by the end of the 1986 session.

A contributing factor to my resignation was the progress I recorded when I aided a group of farmers to upscale and grow their businesses. The whole thing happened in my time as acting head of my department. I had worked on a project with some Indians from the Indo-Nigerian Merchant Bank. They were referred to me when they came to the polytechnic, looking for a typical farm settlement area where they could advance credits to aid farming. I took them to Abule Osorun in Ibese and we engaged the Baale of the community, Alhaji Saminu Ayege. After some meetings, I facilitate the pilot programme for farmers in the community. I continued to help them as an agricultural extension officer until the programme began to take a solid shape and farmers were doing very well. In my heart, I believed that if I could help others achieve such a goal, nothing stopped me from doing it for myself. That was how I began my vocation as a farmer. My first farm was acquired and cultivated in Ibeshe, at the exact location where I subsequently established a school. There were no houses around there then. It was a purely virgin forest.

When I started operating my farm fully, there were many times my mind strayed to the wonderful times I had at the polytechnic, especially with the students. My approach to

teaching was such that enabled my students to apply learnt concepts to life's problems. Agriculture is a classic example of this because many times, the theoretical knowledge of agriculture can be applied to solve farm problems like fake fertilizers, stunted growth of crops, and ill health of animals. In my time at the polytechnic, I was ever-free with my students. A number of them always wanted me to supervise their final-year dissertation. For me, it was an opportunity to make a contribution to human capital development.

I inspired my students by telling them about my career journey and how I navigated through career choices. I taught them to always self-examine their future plans in comparison with their current path. To many of my students, I was more than just a teacher. We spoke about life, family and everything. I was a friend and counselor to many of them. Just a few years after I left, I began to see the fruits of my investments in the lives of some of my students. Some of them became agriculturists, some went into the academia and became lecturers, a few others went into the finance industry, and some into banking.

Bola Odusanya Olumide, a bright student I once taught, later became a bank manager in a first-generation bank. Some of those who remained in the agriculture sector eventually rose through the ranks in the Ministry of Agriculture. I was always proud to be associated with them and they maintained honour and cordiality in our relations. Bimpe Enifeni, Koiki, Funlola Ajayi, and Kudi were some of my students who went on to become elites in the community. In fact, Kudi later became the Senior Special Assistant to President Obasanjo on Agriculture. Quite a number of my students became highly placed in society. They still call me from time to time, reminiscing on our days at the Lagos State Polytechnic.

My time at the polytechnic taught me some important life lessons. It was customary for me to be well-prepared for my classes because my students, being adults, were ever ready to engage me with various perspectives on any topic of discussion.. They had the liberty to question me and raise alternative viewpoints. So, the onus was on me to develop a deep understanding of whatever I was teaching and communicate it as effectively as possible. I, thus, learned to display competence in knowledge and richness of understanding. Those are important factors that enabled me to earn respect from others.

Another useful habit I picked up was the use of diaries to outline my to-dos. This entrenched time management skills in me up till today. There were always many activities to be done as a lecturer – assignments, academic engagements, and other social requirements. In spite of those, I had a mantra which I always communicated to my students. It was simple: "There might be numerous excuses you could give, but always get the job done." I lived by it and it helped me greatly in life. When I took the risk of starting my farm, I reminded myself to always get things done through proper time management and adequate planning. I had a family to feed. It would be detrimental to make moves without adequate planning and precision. Of course, issues came up along the line, but I made sure to absorb the shocks, reorganize myself, and tackle the roaring challenges. Even at my lowest points, I held my head high and assured myself that I will do better in life. True to my words, I did better. Imbibing these attributes was one of the ways I was toughened by my polytechnic experience. My confidence was built to engage people and my ability to plan was bolstered.

Naturally, my venture into farming boosted my entrepreneurial skills. Setting up a farm usually involves sufficient planning and understanding of finance, business,

budgeting, cash flow, accounting, and net income analysis. It was a long and rough ride. I fell to a nadir at some point, but I was able to recoup my strength and push for the life I wanted. In the end, I had zero regrets. Since then, I have been in private practice till now and it has been a better experience for me and my family. I also became immersed in community service, which in turn led me to politics.

Chapter Eleven

QUEST FOR MORE KNOWLEDGE

As a student of the University of Ife, I was enthralled by the quiet, serene environment, one which boasted of facilities and infrastructure that made learning easy. I wanted to experience it again, enjoy the ambience of the school environment, bury myself in books at the library, and engage in mentally stimulating discussions with other students. This was what sparked my desire to return to school for a master's degree. But before that would happen, the allure of teaching what I loved at a tertiary institution was too strong to resist.

So, after leaving the ministry, I moved on to the School of Agriculture, Lagos State Polytechnic. At that time, it was the biggest tertiary institution in the state besides Lagos State University, LASU. It was also the only school that had a department of agriculture. LASU had not then started its agricultural studies, and I wanted to teach what I had studied in school. I was a lecturer from 1979 till 1986, with a break in between.

In 1981, I commenced my master's programme in Economics at the University of Ibadan, where I immediately immersed myself in work. My course entailed a lot of research, and I spent most of my days in between classes and the library. The scope of my course covered different interesting fields in economics, including monetary economics, production economics, macroeconomics, the implication of economics on GDP, etc.

Though my coursework and research took up most of my time, I did not neglect the needs of my growing family back home in Ikorodu. I had as much a financial obligation to them as I did to my education. So, I worked hard to maintain good grades and to ensure that my family was comfortable. I travelled on weekends after a week of lectures to spend time with my wife and child. Thankfully, I still had the Ford Cortina car, which made transportation from Ibadan to Ikorodu and back easy.

Transportation on campus was also easy with the Ford Cortina. I did not have to bother about boarding commercial buses. During the registration process, I went from one end of the campus to the other in my car. However, there was an experience I had with the car which shook me to my very core.

I was driving at high speed somewhere in Ibadan when I suddenly hit a car. Perhaps I was so overwhelmed with the stress of juggling school and family that I failed to see the car ahead of me. Besides, it was my first time driving in Ibadan, and I was not yet familiar with the roads. Though there were no casualties, the experience left me shaken. A crowd quickly formed at the scene of the accident to inspect, judge, and sympathise. Passersby, traders, drivers, students and even lecturers remained expressive of their thoughts.

“Hope your car has insurance?” some asked me, perhaps more out of sympathy for the driver of the other car than for me.

It was expected that I would pay for the damage caused to the other car, and its driver wasted no time in telling me so. After making formal statements about the accident at the police station, we took the car to the engineering department of the school where it was to be repaired. This was done in order to save the extra cost that I would have incurred at a

mechanic's outside the school. The repair left a huge hole in my savings, and it took me a while to recover. These were savings kept aside for school and family, and incurring expenses that I had not budgeted for put me in a tight position.

Then at my tether's end, I sought financial support from my colleagues, who in turn rallied round to help. They prepared third-party insurance, which they sorted out while I worked on having the car repaired. The expenses I incurred from the car repair could have discouraged me from continuing my studies. But I forged on, determined to pursue a life in academia. In no time, I concluded my registration and began my master's programme in earnest. Yet, there were hiccups along the way, one of which was finding my feet after the car repair. Three months into the one-year programme, I was still struggling to recover.

Monday mornings were usually busy, as I would often make the journey back from Ikorodu, where my family lived, to the university campus. Then I would resume my class work and research, which left little time for anything else. The challenges notwithstanding, I enjoyed school and its environment, which reminded me of my days at the University of Ife.

It was a few years after I obtained my first degree that I got married. Soon afterwards, my wife Yetunde and I had a child called Adebukola. She was later followed by our first son, Lukman Adebola. But I could not enjoy marital life as much as I had hoped, for I spent the whole week in school and only weekends at home with my family. I was worried about the issues I was beginning to have with my wife. Our relationship could be described as rocky, at best. My mind was always in a turmoil as a result, and it would explain the accident that left me in a financial mess. If I was not confused,

I was angry at myself. That was how much of an emotional wreck I almost was. While it was my dream to further my education at the university and perhaps become a university lecturer, my wife was not interested in school or academics. In spite of it all, I remained determined to continue with my master's degree and would not let anything interfere with it.

I soon became absorbed in my studies, focusing all my energy on the course. It turned out that the year I spent at the University of Ibadan was an eye-opener. I learnt the concepts of economics like I had never known before. Such concepts as monetary economics, production economics, macroeconomics, its implication on the gross domestic products of the country in terms of production and productivity were taught in detail. There was a large number of Nigerians at that time in the field of agriculture. This was obvious when one visited any rural area or village. So, lectures at UI helped answer the questions, "How could we maximise productivity? What are the factors that can really help?"

This was different from what I was used to, as I was coming from an agricultural background. But because I wanted to help farmers increase their productivity and help the GDP, I decided to study Economics. It was going to be beneficial to me even as an agriculturist, because it increased my level of understanding, interpretation of data, and manipulation of data. My interest in sharpening my understanding of the concepts of Economics motivated me to enroll for the course. The idea was to apply all the concepts I learnt to agriculture and any sector of the Nigerian economy. In fact, the concepts could be applied to manufacturing, trading, group stock, and other areas. I wanted to be multitalented with access to resources that would be applicable anywhere. I did not want to be streamlined to a particular sector and not be able to apply my knowledge in other fields. Perhaps that was what

inspired my decision at one time to go into accountancy, which is also applicable everywhere.

Studying pure Economics at the master's level with a background in Agricultural Science might have seemed like a daunting task, but it was not. I was able to catch on easily, even though I had not studied the course as an undergraduate. The level of assimilation could also depend on the individual who is taking the course. Agricultural Economics and Agriculture are almost the same, and both departments offer courses to students across the two disciplines. As an undergraduate, I took courses in the Faculty of Social Sciences. I took Economics 101, which was a foundation course in Economics, and we were taught the same principles before concentrating more on agriculture. Besides, at the master's level, anyone who did not possess a background knowledge of Economics could undertake some private study themselves. There was such little gap between B.Sc Agricultural Economics and B.sc Economics, for instance, that it was almost inconsequential. The gap could be filled quite easily, and that was partly why we had group discussions and tutorials. I took advantage of the discussions and tutorials, and within a year, I finished my master's programme with a PhD grade.

My master's programme definitely gave me a new understanding of agriculture. With the concepts I learnt, I was able to think of ways to add value to the production of raw materials, because agriculture is the basis of the production of raw materials. I was also able to learn how to maximise profits for the country, how to translate production to GDP, how to enter the export market, among other things. The knowledge I acquired also helped me learn how to grant moratorium to industries that would add value to our raw agricultural produce. I understood that if we

could give manufacturers moratorium on taxes, we could entice or attract them to further investment and productivity.

I was as financially prepared for the one-year programme as I was mentally, although the accident and subsequent car repair caused a financial hitch. But I had saved money in the year that I deferred my admission. I knew what the cost would entail, and so I had prepared myself for it. It was why I was able to resign from my job at the polytechnic. I also did a few teaching jobs by the side during my programme, which supplemented my savings. I was thus able to take care of myself and family while I schooled full time. Regularly, I returned home on Fridays and went in search of part-time teaching jobs around the public secondary schools in Ikorodu. Whenever we were on our semester break, I also returned to Ikorodu. I usually taught Economics, and I was paid according to the number of hours I spent teaching.

One of the schools where I taught regularly was Ikorodu High School. I also often went to Isiu Grammar School. The Principal of the school at the time was Mr. Lekan Ogunsola. He was a friend, so he facilitated my teaching engagements. I told him that I needed to make additional income, and he gave me those opportunities. I did this often so that I could stretch my funds. There were times when I went to two schools in a week, and each school had about three periods which meant a total of six periods. I got paid at the end of each month after the school had done the voucher for payment. The voucher did not go to the state Ministry of Education but was within the school, which made payment fast and easy. There were also perhaps PTA accounts where they could get extra funds for part-time teachers.

The environment of the University of Ibadan was almost the same as the one at the University of Ife. It was quiet, and there were many opportunities for group discussions. One

could not afford to be shy in class, as that was where you shared your ideas with all your course mates. No one judged whether your arguments or ideas were right or wrong. The lecturer would clarify any point you made and give you a list of references to check, either in journals or textbooks. This was after your classmates had contributed to your discussion. So, we got our resources from the latest journals and books in the school and faculty libraries. We would read and develop our ideas in time for the next class. If we could not understand a topic, we would bring it to class where it would be further discussed and explained. We did this regularly, and it helped improve our knowledge and critical capacity tremendously.

We each had a supervisor, and I would approach him every now and then for discussions. He would ask questions, add to my ideas, or direct me on how to find more information on a topic. Most times, he gave me a list of references to check. This was different from teaching, as he was not giving instructions but was merely telling me where and how to find information. Discipline was important, as we had to dig out information, read, and present it to the class for discussion. Every step we took led us to digging up more facts and concepts, and widened our horizon.

“How is it related?” we would often ask ourselves. “How is it relevant? How could it lead you to discovering what you want?”

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I made a few friends while I was at the University of Ibadan, but the closest to me had a degree in Economics from the same school. He returned for his master’s degree. Better

grounded in the basics of Economics than I was, we always met for discussions. I made sure I was close to him during our discussions and even after classes. Coincidentally, we came from the same area in Ikorodu, and we also lived in the same Azikiwe Hall at the time. There were larger groups that I socialised and relaxed with. This was what helped me cope with the rigours of research. Of course, we had to do a lot of research together, not just for the purpose of classes, assignments or coursework, but also for group discussions. We were able to share experiences with another, talking about the areas in which we had difficulties, among many other things. As we did this, the topics and concepts became clearer and learning became easier.

There was no reason to hold back because of fear of being wrong. There are many ways to get to a destination. We could have similar goals but view them from different perspectives. The answers would depend on one's research. There are many ways to spin a cart, and you cannot tell anybody how to arrive at their goal. We had to learn how to question assumptions or statements, and raise questions and doubts. The more we raised doubts, the more answers we found to different questions.

During my programme, especially when I had to write my dissertation, I collected data, which I took to the Nigerian Institute of Tropical Agriculture for analysis. It was the first time I would use a computer, and I possessed neither the knowledge nor the skill to operate one. So, I had to get help from the technical assistants in the IT laboratory. One of the technical assistants helped arrange my data in the format that I could analyse. What he usually did was run the data through the programme in order to come up with something that could be interpreted. I was always there with him while he did this. He also taught me how to read and interpret the data. It was thus through his assistance that I was able to

succeed with my data analysis. I took it to my supervisor who raised some questions about it before referring me to some other sources.

Our teachers at the master's level were called facilitators. They would leave you to do your research and find out information on given topics. They would then come to class and listen to you speak on your topic. Student participation was in the form of the presentation of seminars.

There were some old professors there that I admired because they were helpful. We admired them and listened to their lectures where they revealed their depth of knowledge and wise analysis.

Life as an undergraduate who had never worked before and had just graduated from secondary school was different from life as a master's student with a family. I now had a wife and children to take care of. There were also the marital issues, which weighed me down, and I had also just resigned from my job. So, I was no longer the carefree undergraduate that I was once. I needed to focus on my goals with all the ruggedness and determination that I could muster. Though I had had a first bad experience with the accident, I could not afford to give up. Also, besides my part-time teaching jobs, I had no other source of income, except I was asking friends like Lekan Ogunsola for support. I had to exert myself and maximise the friendships I had cultivated and my relationship with lecturers that could be supportive.

Each time there was a seminar or class, I went there with the intent of absorbing myself in everything. I made sure it was beneficial to me and not a waste of time. Usually, I would go from there to the library, where I would do as much research as I could to help myself. This I did in addition to running around Ikorodu in search of part-time teaching jobs in secondary schools. I was multitasking, and my life was more

complex at the University of Ibadan than it was in Ife. I was under a lot of pressure, unlike those times when I waited for my mother to send me money.

The three things that made my life more complex were marital turbulence, supporting a family, and being out of a job. Perhaps if I had a lot more money and had a peaceful home with a wife who supported and understood me, I would have been more relaxed.

When I was at the University of Ibadan, my vision was to finish my programme, with the hope that my wife would support what I was doing. Then I would take my family abroad while I study for my PhD. My desire was to become a university lecturer. I wanted to be in an academic environment. But when I eventually finished, I did an assessment of my situation, my life, and my relationship with my wife. I found out that I could not do any of the things I had proposed. I thus closed that chapter and chose to go back to the polytechnic.

The one year I spent at the school was not smooth sailing. There were bumps and potholes, mostly as a result of having a home that was not peaceful. The home front is important, and if one wants to get anything done, one must first sort out that aspect of his life. In the end, I completed my programme with flying colours. I attended my convocation ceremony alone. My wife was not interested in my academics, or in hers; for that matter, and I had to celebrate by myself.

Chapter Twelve

VENTURE INTO FARMING

Before my eventual exit from the polytechnic, my mind was made up about going into private practice. At that time, there seemed to be no options for me besides farming. It was all I knew, and I had garnered enough experience in the field to help me sustain a profitable business in it. In addition to working at the Lagos State Ministry of Agriculture, I had facilitated farm settlements in different villages. It was now time to own a farm and I was finally ready to take the plunge. My specific area of interest was poultry.

I conceived the idea of owning my farm long before I knew I was ready. It happened during my earlier visits Abule Osorun, where I introduced the local farmers to the officials of Indo-Nigerian Merchant Bank, who were open to farming. Years later, when I no longer found fulfillment in teaching at the polytechnic, I asked myself: "What can I do?" Farming came to mind, and I vowed to do it to the best of my ability and with as much passion as I could muster. I wasted no time in sourcing for a land through a friend, whose efforts helped me in no small measure.

My friend's name was Matti, and it was with his help that I was able to acquire a piece of land along the main road to a village. I knew when I saw the land that it was suitable for farming, and I immediately got to work. I cleared the land for use and constructed a building there, from where I could plan and oversee the activities on the farm. During this time, I was still a member of a few savings schemes and

associations organized by the polytechnic. So, I had some savings, as well as support from friends.

I also applied to Indo-Nigerian Merchant Bank for a loan. The bank's condition for granting a loan was the submission of a business proposal. Because I had such great skill, knowledge and expertise in the field of Agriculture, writing one was easy. Besides, I was the leader of the bank's farm support initiative at that time, and that fact was helpful. My proposal was detailed, and I included information about my plans, cost out lay, as well as the projected income. With all the help and support I received, I was able to get the farm up and running in no time.

My loan application at the Indo-Nigerian Merchant Bank was approved, and by the second year of farm operations, the money was disbursed. However, the disbursement was made in parts to align with the different stages of farm production. This was to ensure that the loan was properly utilised. The bank officials also visited the farm for inspection on a number of occasions before the money could be released to me. When they visited, they assessed the amount of work being done on the farm. They also noted the developmental stages of the birds. Then they wrote a report, held meetings, and reassured the bank that everything was going according to plan. Since I had some money to fall back on, this did not delay farm operations and the activities on the farm continued in earnest. After the disbursement of the loan, the bank waited for the period of massive sales in December.

I took my time to structure the farm so that it had three divisions, which included the egg layers, broilers and turkey production. There was the section where the egg layers were kept. There was also the section for the broilers, and the section for the turkeys which were sold only at

Christmas. In January of the second year, just after Christmas, I paid back the loan and then began the process for another loan, which would be for the year. This usually involved a submission process from January through till February. I received the second loan in March, and we immediately started another cycle of production.

The loans paid off as and when due for some years until I ran into troubled waters. It is worth noting that for the first few years, I made significant profits at the farm as I gained much more than what I was earning at the polytechnic. What you could make from poultry farming depended on how much work you put in and the amount of risk you were willing to take. It also depended on the meticulousness of your bird selection. It was as important to select birds for breeding as it was to ensure that their feed contained a generous amount of what they needed. This was my job, and I worked hard at it. I spent most of my time at the farm, and my hours were usually from morning till late in the evening. You would always find me at the farm. When I was not there, I was probably out buying feed for the birds or buying supplies. I did this on a full time basis till I delved into politics.

Of course, the profits I made from farming were fair. At the time, I had about 500 to 750 in cage laying birds. Even at 60% production, that gave me about 500 to 550 eggs a day. When I divide 500 a day by 30, I would get almost 25 crates of eggs in a day. 25 crates of eggs a day multiplied by how much we sold there at that time. That was maybe less than N100. The proceeds from that were more than enough to pay for the feed which the birds consumed per day. I saved from the margin for the repayment of my loans, provided for my family, paid for the little things I needed, and settled the running cost of the farm. I had only two attendants; one was the poultry attendant and the other was the security guard

who came in at night. So, there were just the three of us working on the farm.

Running a business requires three things, at the least – expertise, finance and passion, which of course comes with commitment. I had all three. I had received adequate education on farming, I understood it and had even instructed people on its routines and practices. I had received loans from Indo-Nigerian Merchant Bank. The bank provided the financial support I needed.

The loans from the bank were life-saving, and I understood how much impact they had made on my farm. As a result, I introduced my friend, Jamiu Animashaun, to the bank. Jamiu owned a much larger and more successful poultry in Ikorodu. He had broilers, turkey and did some feed production. The officials of the Indo-Nigerian Merchant Bank who inspected his farm were impressed with what they saw and were immediately taken in by the size of his farm. They wasted no time in approving his loan application. He was thus also able to benefit from bank loans. Though my farm was much smaller, the officials saw the prospects it had.

I was committed to farming and was passionate about what I was doing. This was also a demonstration of my personality. I had always approached everything I did with passion, irrespective of what it was.

It was easy to adjust to my full-time job of farming, because of my experience at the University of Ife. While in Ife, we went to different farms where we learnt the practical aspect of what we were taught in class. The farms were known as demonstration farms, which had everything students needed to see, from different kinds of crops and animals to poultry and piggery. Indeed, Ife town had so much to offer students of Agriculture, and it did not matter what branch of the field you were interested in. Every agriculture enthusiast had a

unique opportunity to access crops, animals as well as vet doctors. Also, there were opportunities for those in Agriculture Engineering. Some of the students in this department already started producing tools and machines for mechanised agriculture.

There was no doubt that Ife was a big town with a lot of resources and support from international organisations. People could access the many international grants that were available. These grants supported infrastructure and research in Ife. There were also many foreigners in the town at the time, and most of them were lecturers who had come on sabbatical, while the few others were just tourists. It was an interesting place to live in, and it was all I needed to give life to the interest I had cultivated in agriculture.

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My farming business was doing well, and I was sure that there was still so much more I could do. While forging on with my business, I also thought of how to make an impact in society in some other ways, and politics did not seem like such a bad idea. In 1989, President Ibrahim Babangida came up with the zero-party system. As a result, there were no political parties, but there was a call for election. I regarded myself as a community service person; I had been involved in several community projects in Ikorodu through my role in the Rotary Club, which is discussed elsewhere in this book.

I knew I could do more for society, so my interest in politics surged. I reached out to my uncle, Alhaji Mufutau Ajisebutu, a most pragmatic and rugged politician. I also knew him to be bold, courageous and sociable.

My uncle probably had only the primary school leaving certificate. But what he lacked in education, he made up for in experience. He was smart and had worked with leading politicians like Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Alhaji Lateef Jakande. In fact, he was Chairman of Ikorodu Local Government during Jakande's time as Governor of Lagos. However, he was unable to finish his tenure as he was sacked because of his hard stance on issues. We were from the same clan in Itumoja, and I was confident about making a head way in politics once I receive his blessing.

Of course, there were people who thought that I would be better off if I joined a group that was different from the one being led by my uncle. At this time, he had parted ways with Jakande, and the latter's supporters, for instance, thought that I deserved something different.

"You are an educated young man, come to our side," they would say.

I would immediately respond with the words, "No. I am not going with you. I would rather join my uncle."

My uncle was perceived as rebellious because he was non-conformist. But everyone knew that he was a politician to the bones, for he was always about talking about politics. I often would look at him in admiration, convinced that he was the person I wanted to go with. And so it was that I started politics with my uncle. We started making preparations together for the upcoming elections. We had a godfather who was also a non-conformist but on a much higher level, and that was Chief T.O.S. Benson, a Senior Advocate of Nigeria. Brilliant, outspoken, and perhaps unpredictable, Chief Benson was certainly a big political influence and was different from everyone else. He joined politics and started serving the country long before we

attained political independence. He was Nigeria's Minister of Information during the First Republic in the 1960s.

Chief Benson was our backbone, and he sponsored most of the campaigns and rallies we held. We were held accountable by him, and whenever we had a problem that was beyond us, we would run to his home at Falomo in Ikoyi, Lagos. There, we would give a report on what we were doing, and he would encourage us to go ahead with whatever was right. He was the opposite of the Awolowo and Jakande people. This was the reason why I had refused to join them. I also wanted to do things differently. It was not because I had anything against Chief Awolowo. In fact, I admired him. I read all his books during my National Youth Service year. But when I asked myself the questions: "Is it the truth? Is it beneficial to all concerned? Will it bring good results", the kind of questions we had asked at the Rotary Club, I could not receive the depth of positive answers that I had expected. Also, I saw some of the people that claimed to be Awo's supporters as lacking in sincerity of purpose and action. I wanted to follow a practical way of life, and not one of contradiction between belief and practice. It was with this mindset that I went into politics and started campaigning. I was running for the office of councilor in the Itumoja-Itupate Ward D3.

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Campaigning took up all my time and attention, leaving little time for me to spend on the farm. As a result, my farm began to suffer. The number of birds in my poultry reduced drastically. I could not count the number of birds I had every day, but it was obvious that there were fewer birds with

each passing day. All I had to do was look at the birds on the ground, and I could tell that the number was not the same. There were the ones in the cages, too, which might have seemed easier to count, but that was not so. My attempt to count them left me confused, and even then, I could hardly settle in to do it properly, for I would immediately be summoned to resume one political activity or the other. Indeed, it was tough combining my political career with my farming business.

I also observed that the number of eggs reduced. There were fewer eggs produced each day than in the past. It took a long time before I noticed some of these. Eventually, I could not deny the fact that something was happening. In retrospect, I would say that this marked the beginning of my problems in the farming business.

“I’ll arrest you with the police,” I would threaten the poultry attendant and the security guard to get the truth out of them. “What is going on here? Something is happening here! Something is happening.”

Of course, no one would tell the truth. They would tell a lie after another, winding different unbelievable stories.

“We don’t know what happened in the night. People from across the road came to the farm and we saw them carrying the chickens away,” the security man would lie through his teeth.

Later, I heard that some girls would often come to spend the night with the poultry attendant and would cart away as many chickens as they could lay their hands on. In time, the stealing was extended to even the poultry feed. Each time I checked the poultry feed, the attendant’s pilfering fingers were never far away. Stealing became common practice at the farm, and it was ravaging what I had. All this happened

within a couple of months in 1989. The turkeys, which would have fetched me money to recover from the loss I had made at the farm, suddenly started dying. They died in huge numbers, and I had to throw out even the ones I had preserved in the freezer. This was because they got spoilt in the freezer where I kept them. My business failed and I lost the election. It was double jeopardy for me.

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I lost the zeal and enthusiasm for farm work. I no longer had any interest in going to the farm, because I thought of it as a failed business. The resources to help with the farming were not available anymore, and it felt like all my efforts at the farm had been wasted. The little I had left was used to maintain the birds. Birds start to die if you do not give them the quality and quantity of feed that they require. Their levels of production and immunity also decrease. They become infected with diseases easily, and these diseases could wipe them out in a matter of days. This was my experience at the farm over time.

The problem with the loans I received from the bank started in 1989 when I went for the first election. As far as I knew, the loans I had received earlier in 1987 and 1988 were successful. By January 1990, I was required to pay back the loan I received in early 1989, but there was nothing on the farm anymore and I could not repay the money. The farm closed down shortly after, between 1991 and 1992.

I was struggling in 1991 to keep the farm afloat. One of the greatest challenges I had was not being able to feed the birds well. The quality and quantity of feed greatly affected the birds' production, and because I had not reacted to the

stealing and all that was going on at the farm early enough, I was in a deep financial mess. I was probably giving everyone the benefit of doubt when I chose not to react to the stealing that I had observed initially. I did not want to label my staff thieves, because they were the only ones looking after the farm. If I had accused them wrongly and they decided to leave, there would have been no other person to work at the farm anymore. That was my reasoning at the time, but it only led me into more trouble.

Though I wanted to bring my family into the farming business, I could not consider it. My children were still young, and unfortunately, the wife I had at that time was not interested in it. She was not particularly interested in anything I was doing, whether it was my education, the training of my children, or my business. So, when the business failed, it was not as much a loss to her as it was to me. Things got so bad for me financially that feeding at home became a problem. I ran from one friend to another begging for money. I would often go to my sister who was living in Surulere. She was running a canteen at the post office within the same neighbourhood. Each time I visited, I would have my breakfast and take some more food home to feed my family. She let me have the quantity of food that would satisfy my family, and she would often give me money. I was running from pillar to post, seeking financial assistance from anyone who would help me.

I, in fact, had no car to call my own. It was in early 1992 that my brother, Moshood, who was living close to me in Ikorodu then, gave me a car. He had just bought a second car, and he gave me the one he was previously using. I went to his house and asked quite simply, “Where is the key to this car?”

He gave me the key as I had requested, and I drove the car which was still in good condition away. He never asked me

for it, perhaps because he understood the situation I was in. He bailed me out of my dire financial condition several times. It was to him that I often ran, if I was not going to my sister for help. I needed to take care of my family, and I ran around a lot to get help. But through it all, I was determined to focus on my children and teach them as much as I could. I kept a blackboard in the house which I used to teach my children.

I was not disheartened by my situation, because I was confident that things would not always be the same. Armed with the courage and boldness I had picked up from the Rotary Club and meeting people of high calibre, I often told myself with conviction: “My tomorrow is sure. I must get something done; something must be done. This is not the end.”

There were times when I would repeat to myself the words, “My position today will not be the same tomorrow. Yes, I am here today, but tomorrow it will not be the same.”

Chapter Thirteen

MARITAL TURBULENCE

Three years into my marriage with my first wife Yetunde, I met another girl, whose name was Kafiat Adetutu Adele. She was 17, which was just about the same age as Yetunde when I met her, and had just finished from the Lagos State Government College, Majidun. She caught my attention during my times of frustration with Yetunde. My mind was already divided since Yetunde's energy did not align with mine.

This was in 1981. My marriage was toxic. I started to enjoy the company of Adetutu. One thing led to another, and she became pregnant. It was not a joyous thing, especially as I had a wife. But it would have been worse and inappropriate if I had refused to take responsibility. So, I accepted her, even though that was not my intention when I had just married Yetunde a few years back. My mother and sister were not pleased, but they had no choice than to be supportive of me for taking responsibility.

As expected, Yetunde was angry. She became rebellious and rude to everyone. She would often get into altercations with my sister, Mulikat. She had concluded that it was Mulikat who encouraged me to marry Adetutu, since Adetutu's mother, Kafayat, was friends with my sister, and they had attended the same primary school in Alakoro, Lagos. Apparently, when I met Adetutu, I did not know that she was Kafayat's daughter. It was later that I got to know.

In 1982, when the pregnancy was due, Adetutu delivered my second child and first daughter, Halimot. I later renamed her as Rebecca Adebukola Olusanya. But prior to the renaming,

my mother had named her after herself, 'Halimot Shadiat.' It was a Muslim name.

This gesture infuriated Yetunde, and she began to nag. She accused us of being against her. She felt my mother preferred Adetutu and her child to hers.

"So, that was the plan! That was the plan! They never liked me," she would fume.

I tried to reassure her that it did not mean anything. I told her I loved her, but she refused to believe it. The following year, in 1983, Yetunde, got pregnant again during the rare periods we had manage to be at peace with each other. She then delivered a baby girl, Tawa Kalitu Abisola Olusanya, my third child.

Though we had only had our new born child, the cat and mouse relationship between the two of us became intense. We had series of quarrels. Our families and relatives summoned us for countless meetings just to resolve the issues we had, but it was to no avail. It even went beyond family's intervention. Many eminent and elderly people in the town also attempted to put an end to the marital issues. We sometimes managed to resolve the quarrels after every intervention, which required persuasion and forced apologies, but within the next few days, another storm would erupt. It was frustrating.

So, in 1984, when Bisola was a year and some months old, and I had already completed my Master's degree at the University of Ibadan, Yetunde packed her belongings, without any communication or agreement, and left. She left our baby, Bisola, with my mother and stopped being a part of my life.

I was not surprised when she moved out. I knew it would happen, I just did not know when. I had seen all the signs

earlier, especially when she was doing her secretarial training at the Sight and Sound Training Institute. The storm began to gather when the institute was moved to Badagry, and it left her no other choice but to move into the hostels provided for the students. Yetunde would not return home during the weekends just as we had earlier agreed, and those times when she came home, there was no apology from her. She communicated less to me, and when she eventually did, the explanations were not convincing. I became furious. I knew the love I had for her was not reciprocated. Perhaps, she had found interest elsewhere.

Also, after she completed the secretarial training, she got a job in Surulere. She never communicated how she got the job to me, or who or what organisation she worked for; all I knew was that she worked in Surulere. This behaviour of hers did not give me full confidence and trust to continue to build a home with her.

In fact, immediately she left, I did not feel sober. My skin became thick and rigid. I was determined to upgrade my economic level; to be at the same level with my contemporaries in society. So, I challenged myself.

I did not even bother finding out where she lived, or if she had moved in with anyone. I was not interested anymore. My older siblings always asked, “Ayinde, do you know where your wife is?”

“What wife?” I would respond.

My love for her died immediately. I would describe my love as a match stick. It was a burning light with undiluted flames, and immediately it was put out, it died. When it struck again, there was no fire. I forgot about her.

Our family and friends still thought it was just a phase and that we would pull through.

“Don’t mind them, they will come back together again,” some said. “These two cannot break up.”

But it became a shock to them when days turned into months, and months turned into years. So, after Yetunde left, as a new single parent, I carried my youngest child, Bisola, in my arms when she was about two years old. I took her from my family house in Itumoja, to a photographer, across the round-about at Ikorodu motor park. It was a less busy environment in those days; there were not many vehicles around, just mostly bicycles. The roads were not congested as is the typical 21st century Lagos. One could walk a long distance freely without the fear of being run over by a vehicle. Bisola had begun to walk, but I carried her anyway to the photographer’s shop to take passport photographs, which were a criterion for school registration. Then, I registered her at St. Margaret Primary School, Ipakodo, for her nursery education. It was the school my older kids attended, and I wanted all of them together.

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As a single parent, I asked Adetutu, who was living in an apartment I rented for her in town while I was still married to Yetunde, to move in with me in Solomade Estate, also in Ikorodu. During our stay together, I realised that there was no difference between her and Yetunde. These women had a lot in common. Both were light-skinned women. I had met them about the same age, and they became short on contentment immediately after getting further social exposure. They yeaned for the glamorous and flamboyant life. They had no patience to commit to a struggling spouse. I had no luxury, but they wanted quick luxury. They admired

people who drove the latest cars like Datsun and Mercedes Benz series. And there I was, managing a vehicle I had taken from my brother. They never believed in me, and they were not ready to accept me for who I was. They did not want to work with me or share in my vision as I had proposed.

The relationship I had with Adetutu seemed to have been worse than that which I had with Yetunde. She got a job at the United Bank of Africa (UBA), Marina, Lagos, so her exposure was different. The environment was more developed, and the lifestyle there too was different. They had fancy houses, expensive restaurants, cinemas and play houses. This was nothing compared to the rural area I lived in, and that was the life she fancied. It was challenging for me, because this was the era I chose to no longer work for government. I had resigned in 1986.

So, Adetutu, without giving notice, went out every Friday night for the weekend and returned home the following Monday, leaving me to take care of the children all by myself. It was as if I had become a single parent again, and I became furious. The storm began to gather, and in no time the turbulence increased. Just like Yetunde, people intervened. But this time, it was Adetutu who called for their intervention. Family, friends, eminent people, elderly folks, and everybody intervened, all trying to resolve the issue.

“Ah, good girl, don’t do this. You have not done well. But we would plead with your husband,” they would say in Yoruba.

The people would warn that it was my second marriage. They preached, advised, and prayed that things would get resolved between us. When we resolved things, there were still no changes in her character. We quarreled day and night. The quarrels were never ending.

This continued until 1994, when we eventually ended things. It was a 10-year relationship, and during those years, she had three children for me, all girls – Zainab, Suliat, and Bilikis.

It was two years earlier in 1992 that I was appointed as a Commissioner in the Civil Service Commission. Adetutu was still with me, and we moved from Solomade in Ikorodu to Glover Road in Ikoyi.

My oldest children were already in secondary school. Adebukola, often called Bukky, and Zainab were at Civil Service Model College. Adebola, my first son, was at the Federal Government College, Kaduna. Bisola was subsequently at Queens College, Lagos.

Things started to get better financially. I had the opportunity to earn more money and live a better life with my family. But that did not improve my relationship with my wife. There was no apparent change. She did not see the likelihood of me climbing the ladder of prosperity. Perhaps, she did not think me smart enough to embrace opportunities. So, one day, in December, I decided to make a deliberate effort to avoid any altercation with her. I chose to go spiritual; I confided in God.

As a member of the Celestial Church, we usually went to a large Celestial ground at Imeko for our Christmas convention. It was usually done at midnight, like a cross-over service. On Christmas eve, without discussing my intentions and plans, I went to the celestial ground with a stick of candle. With the knowledge and the faith I had developed over the years, I spoke to God. I asked for His intervention in my marriage. I asked that if she was the right woman for me and my kids, there should be reconciliation; and that if she was not the right person for me, it marriage should come to an end. I sincerely pleaded with God. On 25 December, I left Imeko for home.

The following year, on a Monday morning in January, I drove Bukky and Zainab to school, while Bisola remained home since her school, Queens College, had not resumed yet. It was the first Monday of my children school's resumption. After I dropped Bukky and Zainab off, I went straight to work. On getting back, Bisola ran to me with trepidation. I could tell from the way she sounded.

"Daddy! Daddy! Some people came home today, they packed everything away with Mama Zainab," she cried out. She also told me that she had hidden somewhere when it all happened. Hearing all these from Bisola, I knew it was God's doing. I told her to remain calm. Then I went inside to scrutinise the whole place. Her belongings were gone. Indeed, she had packed everything. She had taken all the money, my properties, including the government properties. She also took our youngest kids, Bilikis and Suliat, though she later returned them after two or three weeks. Perhaps they hindered her from enjoying the good life.

The next Tuesday, I wrote a letter to her parents, in query of the property she had claimed ownership of. I itemized every property, fairly willing to forego the ones that were mine. She could have my property, but those belonging to the government, must be returned, I stated. I also went to the police station on Glover Road to make a report and request for immediate intervention. But they ignored my request, suggesting that I settle my marital drama by myself.

At the end of my solo protest, nothing was done. The properties were never returned. Her flee was surprising, but a part of me was thankful. I was grateful that God answered my prayers. It was exactly 14 days after I made those prayers, and God speedily reacted. I had not threatened to chase her out like I always did, and without any of those, she left willingly. It was good news.

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I started to live alone with my six children as a single parent. I took my mind off ex-wives and focused solely on my family and work. I was not even ready to commit to anybody else till I found a stable ground. I was determined to work harder. Most times, I referred to myself as Tunji, my middle name.

I would say, *"*Tunji, these people *wan gba!"* This, when translated to English, means that I was going to show them how great I would become. I was going to prove that there is always light at the end of the tunnel. I was focused.

I did not put all the blame on my ex-wives, because along the line, while thriving to be a better version of myself, one thing I learned was to own up to my mistakes and the parts where I had fallen off. I accepted that there were times that I was rash and jealous. Also, I had judged them on infidelity, when I might have also been a culprit. So, being in the same peer group, as young women, they probably felt there were limits to what they could deal with.

I made sure I raised my children to the best of my ability, and each day, I thrived to be a better father. I was available for them and provided the necessary things. This remained my life pattern until 1995 when I met my present wife, who had come to the state secretariat at Alausa seeking a job.

Just like every other week day, I went to work. My first glance at her felt like I was enchanted. The one thing that caught my attention was her height. I had always been attracted to tall women, the ones taller than I was. She was dark and beautiful, her eyeballs gleamed. Just staring at her felt like I knew her, like I could read through her. I perceived

that she was not like my ex-wives, who lived under the illusion of their beauty, and what they could gain from it. She seemed like a hustler, determined on getting a job. So, all of these things attracted me, and I decided to follow up.

Things progressed really quickly, and we courted. It lasted for five years. I completed my tenure at the Civil Service Commission. She moved in with me, but not completely. After my tenure ended in June 1997, I moved her and my family from Ikoyi to my building at Ibeshe in Ikorodu in July. The place was a carcass. I had not fixed a lot of things, the windows had no frames, the house had no toilets, no electricity, and the floor of the compound looked dirty because it was still in its laterite form. My children later confessed that when we moved in, they would hide themselves and cry because of the living condition. While my children cried about the new state of living, I was proud that I was finally on my own property, which saved me the cost of paying rent. I told myself that later, when I become financially buoyant, I would improve on the house. That was what I had planned.

Ruth Olukemi Olanrewaju Lawrence started work at the Ministry of Education as an Inspector of Education. She became so supportive to me and my children. She loved them like they were hers. She would go to work, and when she returned, she would buy so many things – food stuff, snacks and the important things needed in the house – for us. When she cooked, I joined; when I did, she joined. It was a peaceful relationship. It was also during this time that she encouraged me to start a school. She had seen how good I was with teaching my children. The encouragement and support were uplifting. I then realised I loved her more than I had thought. I decided to take further steps.

After courting for five years, we agreed to get married. I informed my family about my plan and asked that they visit her family's house in Ibadan with me, for a formal introduction. They agreed. We went to Bodija in Ibadan and met her humble family, the Lawrence family. They were from Ilesha but lived in Ibadan. They were religious people and strong members of The Apostolic faith. They were welcoming.

Since The Apostolic Faith Church frowned at the idea of a member getting married to a divorced or married person, especially because her parents were elders, it was challenging. My wife was determined to marry me, and went with her siblings and relatives to persuade her parents. After series of questions, they obliged. They blessed us. We were not still able to have a church wedding because they were adamant that it was against their doctrine. So, immediately after the introduction, we went to the Ikoyi Registry and had a court wedding. Among all my wives, she was the only one I had married appropriately; it was legal and religiously blessed.

Chapter Fourteen

A LIFE OF COMMUNITY SERVICE

My involvement in community service took a serious turn in 1986, when the Babangida regime initiated the Community Development Associations (CDAs). Representative leaders were encouraged to partner with the government to form local development associations within their communities. Thus, the CDAs were established as small units within communities that worked to propagate developmental projects across the localities in Nigeria.

I was a young man at the time, bubbling with a passion for leadership. I believed that my education was something that should outlast me, and that it was not rewarding until my environment could also benefit from it. In the light of this, it was natural for me to invest myself in a cause I deemed noble. I put in the work and mobilised as many people as I could from Itunmoja, my birth community. This earned me a pioneering role as General Secretary of the Itunmoja Community Development Association, a position I served in for three years.

There were specified criteria for forming a CDA. The process involved registering the CDA at the relevant government ministry level through the local government council, and then receiving a registration certificate from government. There was a minimum number of required members and meetings that should have held before the government was brought in. For us, the confirmatory processes started with inviting government officials from the local government to observe our meetings and our in-house elections into executive offices. I was able to set the ball rolling by

involving the traditional leaders in Itunmoja, particularly the Alashe. These were notable community heads who instituted rules, resolved conflicts, and mediated between indigenes of the area. I sold the idea to them, describing the initiative as a means of partnership with the government for the development of the community. They swiftly bought the idea and we agreed to name it the Itunmoja Community Development Association.

Once registered, executives of the CDA proceed to form the CDC; the Community Development Committee which comprised of the chairman, the secretary and a third consensus member. The CDA initiative was instrumental in bridging the gap between people and government. More people were involved in governance and there was increased representation for communities at the local and state government levels. Interestingly, my involvement with the CDA coincided with my endeavour in the Rotary Club where I was further exposed to a world of community service.

The Alashe, Chief Akinsanya, served as the Executive President of the CDA while I was Secretary. Alhaji Murphy Ajalogun was another young man who served in the executive team as the Public Relations Officer. We all worked together to solve problems in the Itunmoja community, most of which revolved around drainage, waste management, and community security issues. Our work also extended to the lives of the people there on a more personal basis, such that we were frequently called upon to mediate and resolve civil disputes.

Periodically, we had meetings where we converged with leaders from various other CDAs to rub minds with government representatives. However, those meetings proved that the formation of the CDAs in itself was more politically-driven than it was developmental. The military

government at the time was innovative in its bid to bridge the subsistent gap between the government and the people. The reasoning followed that if more people were involved in government, especially at the grassroot levels, citizens would consider themselves ably represented and would identify with the ruling government. But developmental projects and infrastructural installations were hardly implemented across many communities.

At best, we were able to push for the erection of some classroom blocks in schools that did not have enough. But that was as good as it got, nothing out of the ordinary. For their health needs, most people in Ikorodu town relied on Ite-Elewa Primary Health Centre, which was not designated under any CDA. After serving in the CDA from 1986 to 1989, I decided to take a different political trajectory. I contested for the office of a councillor.

I believed my role at the CDA had prepared me for a higher degree of community service. I was a young graduate who had proven commitment to the development of the community. Representing Itunmoja felt natural. Itunmoja was my home, and I was familiar with everything there; the people, the culture and traditions, as well as the communal issues that subsisted. As a matter of fact, the community was tight knit in such a way that one's identity and family could easily be deciphered by others, simply by the mere mention of a name. All these gave me the assurance I needed to pilot my political career in Ikorodu.

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As a young academic with a clear vision, I was held in high esteem by members of my community. Thus, it came as no surprise that my friend, Adekunle Oduborisha, invited me to

join the Rotary Club of Ikorodu, an exclusive group that brought the crème de la crème of the society together for social impact. This was after the President, Engineer Laye Adebola, introduced the Rotary Club in Ikorodu as a charter society.

My friend, at the time, was working at Chevron while I was a lecturer at the polytechnic. The club had considered expanding its membership to specific people who met their criteria. “Flattered!” I said to myself. “They must have discussed me at the meeting and maybe I met their criteria, and the invitation meant that I am qualified.” I did not have the best relationship at home, and I was looking for somewhere to have great relationships and engagements; somewhere I could connect and interact with people.

The then Ayangbunren of Ikorodu, Oba Salaudeen Oyefusi; his wife, Olori Muyibat Oyefusi; Chief B.O. Benson; and Dr. Ade Ogunsanya were members of the club. Most of them were older than I was, and the age difference was quite obvious. These were the elites of the town, and I had the opportunity of ecoming acquainted with them.

In addition, my experience at the club significantly propelled my adventure into private practice and community service. There was so much to learn at the club’s weekly meetings. We usually dressed formally for meetings. We learnt the etiquette of sitting at a table with elders, and all the other formalities of the Rotary Club. We would often recite the four-way test, which was what one was encouragd to consider in our thoughts, relationships and actions:

“Is this the truth? Would it be beneficial to all those concerned? Would it beneficial to all concerned? Will it generate goodwill and better understanding?” we would ask ourselves.

We recited this weekly, and it soon became a part of me. So, independently, before I make a move or decide on a plan, I would first ask myself the same questions. Asking these questions has helped me make tough decisions.

I quickly became active and prominent at the Rotary Club. I was at a time the Director of Community Services, while Dr. Ade Ogunsanya was the President of Rotary Club of Ikorodu. During this period, we embarked on the rehabilitation and upgrade of *Ita Elewa*. It was a terminal transport station in Ikorodu, where all the *Molue* buses stopped. Because of its size, it had become difficult for the *Molue* to ply through the crowd in the area. Thus, we explored the idea of reforming the park and terminating the movement of big vehicles at the garage, while smaller vehicles would move people and their goods to the inner parts of the town. We also made plans and got the approval of the local government to convert a piece of land around the motor park terminal to a recreation ground. I was the director that initiated and completed the project.

The execution of projects and my interactions with highly accomplished statesmen and other young professionals at the Rotary Club prepared me for two things. The first was establishing my farm and the second was going into politics. I confident that I was ready for such ventures because I had seen many young and old men successfully manage their private practice. Some of these men were Tunji Sunny, who was running a family business; Olowu Shago, who was running a community newspaper; Sheriff, who was running a printing organisation; Dr. Ogunsanya, who was running a clinic in Surulere; Chief B.O. Benson, a Senior Advocate of Nigeria, who was running a big law firm, and the Kabiyesi himself, Oba Salaudeen Oyefusi. If I could associate with these people, I believed that I could do what they were doing too.

Chapter Fifteen

Navigating the Curves of Politics

I joined the National Republican Convention (NRC) in 1992 and chose to contest for the position of Chairman of the Ikorodu Local Government. Following my active involvement in community service from 1986, I was convinced that I would succeed in politics. So, I began my journey to politics in 1989 when I ran for the office of a councilor during Babangida's zero party system. Unfortunately, I lost that election.

However, I was not deterred. When the opportunity came for me to contest again a few years later, I did not hesitate to throw my hat into the ring. This time, there were two political parties – the NRC and the SDP. The former was my choice of party. I contested a second time because I believed that I could win. I was confident in my potential to represent the people. I had their best interest at heart. As an educated and resourceful young man, I understood the dynamics of importing a developmental vision into local settings. I had plans to actualize concrete economic and infrastructural goals in my hometown. It was all about partnering with the government to solve pressing issues, and interpreting such partnerships to stakeholders. With these factors aligning correctly, I was ready to serve my community, exploring its potential to the fullest.

Remarkably, there were those who, at that time, had institutionalised themselves as political leaders. They were mostly Chief Obafemi Awolowo's followers from the defunct Action Group (AG) and Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). I considered them to be players in an older generation of politics. I shared Chief Awolowo's philosophy of social

welfarism, but I was dissatisfied with the politics of his followers at the Ikorodu grassroots levels. Their actions did not align with my expectations and I feared that my approach to politics might be stifled under their influence. They had a rigid attitude towards decision-making, which I believed could debilitate my innovative style. That was what inspired my move to contest through an opposite party despite the glaring fact that I would be contesting against an established political structure.

The voters hardly cared about the solutions being proffered by candidates. They were fixated on the personality and heroic name of Chief Awolowo, making it tougher for a new face like mine to campaign effectively. Somewhere along the line, it became clear that my chances would plummet if I did not run on the popular platform, but I did not care. Going with their flow would amount to searing my conscience. I absolutely did not want that, so I continued to push my campaign as hard as I could. The young people in the area were incredibly supportive. They joined in as we rallied across the community from time to time; dancing and canvassing for votes. My manifesto was penned down and distributed in our campaigns; but manifestos, no matter how credible or verifiable, meant very little to the people. The personality of the godfather, Awolowo, was where alliance stood. Indeed, I made laudable and coordinated efforts to shift the political narrative at the time, but the political scope was largely dogmatic.

During my campaign, several community members welcomed me into their homes. As you would expect of a close-knit community, some had cheerful stories to share about my parents, others commended my progress in life and applauded my cause. Yet, a good number of them sat me down and advised me to follow the path of godfatherism. I tried to make them see what I was offering; innovative

solution to their problems and trusted representation in government. Some were moved by my passion and ambition, but they made it clear that they were not supporting my party. I was quite popular and widely admired in Itunmoja, but that held no weight beside the prevailing political ideologies and structures, making it almost impossible for me, or any other young person, to effect new beneficial changes.

This, unfortunately, is the sad story of Nigerian politics up till today. Bright and forward-thinking minds that can significantly change the infamous narrative are hardly found at the corridors of power. While they might be active on social media, they fail to go through the rigorous process that will institutionalise them as worthy players on the political field. It starts with defining a political ideology, pushing through the legal frameworks of the electoral umpire, and finally putting in the requisite discipline to watch the movement flourish. Discipline is paramount because in reality, it takes a lot of consistency to commit to a cause while sticking to a political ideology. This could be the missing piece in our politics of today and a plausible explanation for our political shortcomings. Young people who constitute the highest population demography are mostly unequipped or uninterested in the electoral process. I strongly believe that if Nigeria is going to change, then the lethargy towards electoral processes must be frontally tackled.

One good thing that characterised my political ambition was that I was never desperate for power. The onus was on me to demonstrate to the people that I was fit to represent them, and I did that accordingly. I publicised my agenda for change and emphasised my qualifications to them, then I left them to make a decision. I could not allow myself to be forced into a party simply because of a public office, especially when

their beliefs were contrary to mine. Though I eventually lost that election, I was proud of my efforts. In retrospect, I do not think there was anything I would have done differently. In fact, two years later, in the 1993 Presidential elections between MKO Abiola of the SDP and Bashir Tofa of NRC, I stood firmly with the less-liked NRC. I remember that there were only three people who joined me and my wife to vote for Tofa at my polling unit, whereas the queue to vote for Abiola extended far. Nonetheless, I was happy to campaign for Tofa, whether we won or not.

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After losing the zero party election, I still did not consider crossing over to the prominent political party because I was not convinced of the genuineness of their promises. In the NRC, I ran for the position of the Chairman of the local government. The only opposition was the SDP, and their candidate was Chief Mathew Awolesi; a respectable community man who had just retired as Permanent Secretary of the Lagos State Ministry of Education. He was a technocrat. I did not think him suitable for the office, mostly because he had got to the peak of his career and I felt that, unlike me, who was just beginning a career, there would be less motivation for him to work hard. He was well supported within Ikorodu, but that did not stop me. I tapped into my youthful exuberance and pushed my campaign as far as I could. Each morning, I would move with my team across the communities in Ikorodu, vigorously campaigning and canvassing till late at night. We enjoyed the experience. It was thrilling and audacious. We campaigned with a ferocity that our opposition could not match, but that did not equate to victory. Regrettably, the metrics for winning were not

based on manifestos, capacity, or age. If those were considered by voters, I believe I would have won that election.

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Prior to my chairmanship election, Mrs. Abosede Oshinowo, wife of Hon. Oladosu Oshinowo, the speaker of the first Lagos State House of Assembly, contested and won the state chairmanship position of the NRC party. Her victory as chairman was unprecedented. I was actively involved in her campaigns and that was where I understood the intrigues and dynamics politics. The first striking thing about the contest was that she was the only female candidate going against fourteen prominent men. Some of her contenders were Chief Rasheed Alaba Williams (RAW) and Dr. Charles Fadipe.

The two men were eminent sons of the soil. Williams, in particular, was a charming politician. He had great diction and charisma, and spoke with a confident baritone voice that decorated his personality. Our allegiance in the Ikorodu group was to him. We supported his movement until the intervention of Chief T.O.S Benson. Chief Benson called a number of us, including Chief Ajisebutu, to his home at Falomo, Lagos. He stressed that Oshinowo was a candidate from Ikorodu and the only female candidate for that matter, and urged us to pull our weight to ensure that she won. We immediately acceded and switched our support to Mrs. Oshinowo's campaign.

Just like he did for me, Chief Ajisebutu took on the job of campaigning for Mrs. Oshinowo enthusiastically. He initiated a high-energy and vastly strategic approach to the

campaigns. That was the secret of our eventual success. The resultant effect of the improved strategy was that her campaign became very mobile, interactive, and engaging. We went around communities, creating bonds through interactions and publicising her and what she stood for. We knew her closely, so we were able to sell her effectively, thereby bridging the common gap between candidates and voters. The day finally came for the party primary elections. It held at National Arts Theatre, Iganmu, Lagos. The stakeholders were there for over 24 hours, watching the entire process from start to finish.

The beauty of it was that President had institutionalised a two-party system in the country; NRC and SDP. That made the process simple, credible, and easy to follow. Only stakeholders with accredited identity tags were able to access the voting hall. After entry, the gates were locked and manned by security. All candidates were then allowed a few minutes to render a speech to the voters, after which the balloting process began. By the next day, the results were out. Mrs. Oshinowo emerged as the winner. The process was free and fair, arguably one of the most transparent primary elections I have ever seen here in Nigeria. Nobody faulted the process, even those who lost knew they failed genuinely. I remember that people massively engaged in the electoral process. They understood that they were an integral part of the process, especially when they saw the results which clearly reflected their choice.

After her victory, I was advised to remain with her as personal assistant. So, I served as her PA for a while. That position helped me to learn the ropes and dynamics of politics. It was a year later, in 1991, that I took a break from the PA role to run for the Chairmanship position. After I lost, I returned to the PA role and worked closely with Mrs. Oshinowo.

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1992 was an election year in Lagos State and across the country. There was an interesting political tussle within the NCR that put Oshinowo and the NCR's National Executive Chairman on different sides. That was the year Sir Michael Otedola won the governorship election in Lagos State under the NRC party. Asides Otedola, several other prominent politicians declared their interest to vie for the governorship position, including Engr. Ganiyu Tobi, Remi Adikwu, and Olu Kosoko, who subsequently becale the Oba of Badagry.

While Ganiyu was wholeheartedly supported by Oshinowo, his rival, Otedola, was the choice of the national executive of the party, led by Chief Tom Ikimi. It was indeed a fierce battle that tested Oshinowo's guts and submission to authority. As the scenario played out, it became clear to us – me, Chief Ajisebutu, and some others – that we were standing with the wrong person. By all means, the national executive had more power and influence than a state chairman in deciding the party's gubernatorial election candidate. They were the ones to interface with the electoral body and present the winner of the party primaries.

We considered what would happen if Oshinowo lost the battle; we would all be swept away with her, possibly marking an untimely death of my own political career. We could not let that happen, so we made an attempt to convince her to accede to the will of the higher executives. I remember there were four of us from her team who arranged a meeting with her – me, Dr. Segun Ogundimu, Chief Segun Adeyemi, and another Dr. Segun who was head of administration. These men were highly intelligent and

eloquent. With their acumen, they naturally commanded respect and admiration.

We all analysed the situation and foresaw her loss in the fight, so we considered talking to her either through Chief T.O.S Benson or her husband. We believed they could make her change her mind, considering the fact that Michael Otedola was a resourceful and influential man, respected across the press, the NRC party, and the Epe community. Ganiyu was outmatched in these qualities, and even Chief T.O.S Benson did not support him. Regrettably, Oshinowo refused to comply to the arrangement, even after we involved her husband.

Our dread finally played out one morning as I drove with Oshinowo from her Ikoyi home to the NRC Secretariat at Oko-Oba, Agege. She got an emergency call from the office. The voice yelled at her, "Madam, don't come to the office today! Otedola's supporters have taken over the office. Don't come at all. Street urchins are here too. It is a charged environment. They don't want to see you here at all. They are radically overtaking everywhere… don't show up."

Quickly, we diverted from the office route and began to reassess the situation. It turned out that the national executives had partnered with Otedola's supporters to disrupt the Lagos NRC Office so that a state of emergency could be declared there. Their next step was to appoint a temporal caretaker committee in Lagos to override Oshinowo's position. It all happened so quickly, but that was the reality. Mrs. Oshinowo was expelled from office that very moment, which was only days away from the primary elections. In the end, Otedola was adopted as the consensus candidate of the NRC party.

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At the time of the elections, SDP was the predominant party in Lagos. We were consigned to our history; that it was not possible for us to win. Nobody really cared about what was happening at the NRC, but Sir Michael Otedola believed he could win and pushed for it strongly. At the time, he was working with Mobil as a public relations officer, so there was a stroke of professionalism in his campaigns and his relations with the press. Truthfully, in terms of capacity and leadership qualities, Otedola ranked better than Yomi Edu, the SDP candidate.

Eventually, infightings in the camp of the opposition SDP led to our victory. Yomi Edu, Dapo Sarumi, and Femi Agbalajobi were all involved in the ensuing SDP brawl. The events that followed the NRC victory catalysed the process that led to my future appointment as Commissioner in the Civil Service Commission. In the end, my decision to stay away from the dominant political party paid off. A contrary path would have required me to ignore my conscience, beliefs, and instincts. I might have got it wrong in my life's trajectory. Throughout my political journey, I never supported any group because of their weight in the game. It did not matter to me if the crowd hailed them. If I realised that my philosophies and beliefs were not in tandem with the party's, I quit without hesitation. That stance cost me a number of wins, but I stayed true to myself and my vision.

In some ways, Sir Otedola mirrored the kind of politician I am – daring, believing, and non-conforming. I maintained relationship with him even after Oshinowo was ousted. He once arranged an appointment with me at his house in Surulere where he explained that he had made sincere efforts to Oshinowo to enable him run for party primaries,

all to no avail. I apologised to him on her behalf and explained that I, and a number of other people, had tried to make her see things differently. We had appealed to her to make the process free and fair, just as it was in the election she won. But she was adamant and refused to budge. I told him about the four of us who had tried to convince her at her house.

He embraced us and brought us all four of us into his government.The roles we assumed were not merely assigned to us. We played pivotal roles in Otedola's campaign process because he was the party's man and our allegiance stood with him. Chief Segun Adeyemi, popularly called 'wake-up', was exceptionally gifted in public speaking. His speeches drove the hearts of crowds at our campaigns, converting people into believers of our cause. The campaign was strategically divided into multiple sub-committees. I joined a few of them and participated actively in the outreaches. I was part of the mobilisation committee, the electioneering committee, and the youth committee. We established our presence in communities across Lagos daily, canvassing and trumpeting our candidate. I learnt a lot from the experience and from people like Chief Adeyemi, Chief Ajisebutu, T.O.S Benson, and even Mrs. Bosede Oshinowo; especially her earlier effective campaign strategy which had familiarised me with the nature and scope of Lagos-wide campaigns.

In all of this, I made sure not to abandon the relationship I had with Mrs. Oshinowo. I communicated with her from time to time, but I had to put a leash on how close we were perceived because being too familiar with her could have worked to my detriment. After all, she had almost become an outsider who was no longer in our political picture. So, I could not afford to be aligned with her. Her position as state chairman was no longer effective, especially as Otedola, the

man she vehemently fought against, was now Governor of Lagos. The national executives defined her actions as anti-party moves, asserting that she did not act in the best interest of the NRC. It was a great lesson for us all.

Mrs. Oshinowo's experience taught us a lot about the administration of political parties. Another important lesson I took from those experiences was that elections were supposed to be grassroot driven. It is always better for candidates to strongly engage their electorate. That is proper democracy. The voters should be listened to and acknowledged as being integral to the process. They should understand the vison and manifesto of the vying candidate. This will cause them to make the right decisions and massively engage in the election process. When this is done, securing a primary ticket will only blow up what was already in place and position the candidate in a trajectory of victory. Candidates should not be imposed on people. The collective wisdom of the voters must always be respected.

Otedola's win was astonishing even to us on his side. Three weeks to the elections, it seemed like our hopes were low but we were determined to try our best nonetheless. Suddenly, only about a few weeks to the elections, the political scope changed as war broke out within the SDP camp. They bitterly fought themselves to the ground.

I gathered from the news that there was fractionalization in the SDP. Jakande, the former governor, led one of the factions. Other prominent politicians who fell out with him were Otunba Bushura Alebiosu, are Bushu Aribiushu, Alhaji Mufutau Hamzat, Olorunfunmi Bashorun, and Dapo Sarunmi. Interestingly, most of them served in Jakande's government as commissioners, special advisers, and other reputable roles. We learnt that Jakande chose Prof. Femi Agbalajobi as the party candidate, while Dapo Sarumi's faction presented

him as their own candidate. Some of the SDP elders like Chief Reuben Fasoranti, Chief Bisi Akande, and Chief Ayo Adebanjo made frantic efforts to reconcile the factions, but it was all to no avail. Because of Lagos' pivotal position in the western political arena, there were intensified attempts to put the tussle to a halt, but it all proved abortive.

In the end, the SDP had separate primaries; an inimical move for any political party. The results of the primaries were rejected twice by the national executive committee of the party. Following the disqualifications, the Jakande-led faction anointed Abiodun Ogunleye, the current Prince of Ikorodu, as their candidate. In response to that, Yomi Edu was brought forth as the candidate of the Sarumi-led faction. The unified primary election was the next step.

Fascinatingly, the Ikorodu SDP members who were not in the Jakande-led faction took it upon themselves to thwart the process that could have made Ogunleye the party's consensus candidate. They campaigned against him, maintaining that it was not time for Ikorodu to produce a governor. Then they went on to disrupt the election process in Ogunleye's ward in Ikorodu. Thus, no votes were casted there and Ogunleye consequently lost. The Jakande-faction then tried to negotiate for the position of deputy but Sarumi declined.

In my opinion, it was a matter they could have applied simple conflict resolution mechanisms to and built a consensus around. Instead, some parties to the crisis made the mistake of thinking they could push ahead without the support of other party men. That caused them the elections. In his vexation, Jakande decided to move his political strength towards a collaboration with the NRC. It worked and Otedola won that election, to the regret and disappointment of SDP party members. Of course, if a party

man was not on your side, he would form associations that would be against you. This makes you more vulnerable because your in-house strategies are exposed and your strength would have been divided against you.

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We were super-elated to be winners of that election. Our hopes had been bleak because the other party had such a strong influence. They were affiliated with Awolowo, a man who was greatly venerated in Lagos. So, votes in that election were not based on manifestos or promises. But through it all, we emerged as winners. It was a euphoric experience. The first day we met Otedola at the Governor's House, Marina, it felt like the beginning of a new dawn, a world of possibilities and opportunities.

His victory made me appreciate how he had handled the election. He always inspired us, painting an imagery of hope in our hearts which we, in turn, passed on to our communities. In government, Otedola ensured that the ideas of people across the communities in Lagos were drafted into his nine-point programme. He followed a bottom-up strategy to implement his manifesto in Lagos. Although his rule was short, it was quite a smooth sail. The Jakande-led faction never expressed any grievances towards him. Being the gentleman that he was, he made sure to maintain the pact that he had with them.

Sir Otedola was highly methodological and articulate in his leadership style. He was not one to be rushed to action, earning him the alias "Baba Go-Slow." He was a very good listener too and was quite prudent in decision-making. In less than six months after he had formed his cabinet, he

presented my name as commissioner in the Civil Service Commission. Six months seemed like a long wait, but I was confident that I was in the Governor's good books and that he would set me up rightly. He knew that I was a teacher too. Maybe that was what prompted his decision for me to be at the Civil Service Commission, since the office revolved around employment, discipline, and regulation of the entire civil service of Lagos State.

Unfortunately, approval for my appointment was declined by the House of Assembly. In another three weeks, he sent my name to Teaching Service Commission as a commissioner. It was a lower commission that didn't require the approval of the House. So, I remained there for about two months before my name was sent again to the House of Assembly for the Civil Service Commission. The Governor did not replace my name. Though three out of the five names he sent earlier were approved, he did not swear them in. Rather, he waited and resent the other two names. This time, we were swiftly approved and were sworn in accordingly. I had no hand in whatever caused the state assembly to change its possition, but I was happy to finally occupy the office.

Sir Otedola spent only two years in office before the military took over, but I remained in the Civil Service Commission for five years. My appointment was a statutory one, so it was not affected by the change of government.

Chapter Sixteen

VOYAGE IN THE CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSION

In 1992, I was sworn in as Commissioner, Civil Service Commission, where I spent five years. The appointment came as a relief after my non-success in winning positions as councillor in the 1989 elections, and chairmanship of the local council election in 1992.

I had also suffered some disappointment when I was first turned down for the position of Commissioner at the Civil Service Commission earlier in that same year 1992. Determined to have me as a Commissioner at the stated department, Sir Otedola sent my name a second time, perhaps after talking to the members of the House of Assembly. You could call me a greenhorn, as I was still new in all of this. I was naïve and did not know who to talk to. Fortunately, Sir Otedola had done all that for me, and by the time he submitted my name the second time and I appeared at the Assembly, I was approved for the role.

So it was that I became the Commissioner at the Civil Service Commission, and was allocated some ministries where I superintended over the appointment, promotion and discipline of staff. Though employment at the commission was the responsibility of the body of commissioners rather than that of a single commissioner, I was a major force in that department and could influence the employment of staff. Employment at the commission usually followed a strict process which involved approval from the governor that would then be passed through the Permanent Secretary to the Chairman of the Commission, Justice Hotonu.

Justice Hotonu was a retired judge from Badagry. An elderly man, Hotonu lived a quiet life and limited his interactions

with the public. There was also Mr. Joseph _____ and Mr. Adedeji, who was a highly cerebral lawyer from Mushin and could quote almost any constitution by heart. These were elderly men, and I was a young man, the youngest among them. So, they found me useful and would include me in any serious matter that needed to be addressed at the commission. I was a part of their discussions on official duties and assignments. Whenever I took a file from the Permanent Secretary's office, I would dig out its history and read through. While reading, I would be sure to take notes that would be relevant to the discussion we were having at that particular time. I would attempt to answer such questions as: "How is it done? What do the civil service rules say about it? What process does it have to go through? What are the precedents?"

I would spend time poring over the file and answering pertinent questions about it. I would then present my findings to the chairman before the next meeting of the body of commissioners.

"Sir, these are my findings on the issue that was brought to the commission," I would say to him respectfully as I handed over the file to him.
He would take a look at the file, and as a judge, would discern that my research was useful to the discussion at hand. Mrs. O.O.T. Benson also considered me to be unique and found me useful to the operations of the commission for two reasons. The first was that I was meticulous in my presentation of issues, and the second was that I did a thorough research, going back in history to find out how things were done in the past in order to give sound advice that would lead to the right decision. Thus, I was an invaluable member of the commission.

The approval from the governor to employ new staff usually came to us. Sometimes, there were approvals for large numbers of staff, perhaps up to 50 teachers, 30 doctors, 20 nurses, and 30 engineers at a time, and there was no interference from the governor. All Sir Otedola did was give his nod of approval, but it was our responsibility to screen the applicants and give jobs to those who were qualified. The governor allowed us to do our job. We used our judgment and discretion to give jobs. My constituency in the entire Ikorodu area benefited tremendously from this. I added value to the commission and cultivated a good relationship with all the elderly men who in turn came to me when they needed to dig out information. The five years I spent at the commission are worth looking back on.

Also, it was during my term in office that I was able to get back on my feet after the failure of my farming business and the huge bank debt I had incurred. I was finally able to repay the loan and become debt free. I got a brand new official car with a chauffeur, and I was not laden with the car's fuel bills. All I needed to do was fill the fuel tank, get a voucher at the filling station, which I would present for reimbursement. This was in addition to my salary. I was also given an official residence at Number 6, Glover Road, Ikoyi, which was a highbrow area in Lagos. I was in awe of it all, as I was coming from near poverty without a car or house to boast of.

Living in Ikoyi changed my status, and I was able to socialise a lot with people in the higher rungs of society. I joined the Island Club, where I made new friends. Things started to take shape, and I was so comfortable that I was able to afford the best schools for my children. I enrolled my son in St. Gregory's College, Obalende, after I brought him back from Kaduna. I enrolled another child in Home Science Primary School, a third in Queen's College, and two others in Model College, Igbogbo.

The significant role of my new-found faith in the restructuring of my life cannot be ignored. I would often say to myself in utter amazement of how my life had changed, "Look! Jesus Christ found me. I did not find Him. He found me." I was convinced that Jesus had looked upon me with pity and had given me a second chance. It was after my full conversion to Christianity that things started to change. For an entire year before my conversion, nothing meaningful was happening in my life, in spite of the fact that I had a Master's degree. It was within that year that someone that I was not related to by blood but regarded as a brother, a distant community brother, approached me after seeing my state of wretchedness.

"Baba Bola," he started carefully, his eyes looking at mine with concern, "there is a lot of trouble in your life, you are going through a lot of problems. Let us go to one church out there for help."

I was neither a Muslim nor a traditionalist then, and I had nothing to lose. So, I followed him to the church. It was a Celestial Church, a church where everyone was adorned in white flowing robes and was barefoot.

"Can I do this? Will I do this?" I questioned myself as soon as I observed the manner in which members of the congregation dressed.
But I could think of no other alternative and responded to my questions with a resounding, "Yes." I started attending the church, and in no time, I got my white garment and walked barefoot. I did this with no regret whatsoever and made no apologies to anyone. I was accountable to myself and not to anyone. After listening to the preaching and reading the Bible, I decided that this was the way I wanted to go. I became more convinced of the teaching at the church and quickly realised that I could talk to God directly. I got

into the church activities more with each passing day, and within six months, I observed that my life had changed. I got the appointment at the Civil Service Commission along with the perks that came with it – chauffeur driven brand new car, house etc. I became even more involved in the activities of the Celestial Church.

"If what I am doing in this church is responsible for the changes in my life, then this is where I belong," I said with determination to forge ahead.

Everyone at the Civil Service Commission knew me as a member of the Celestial Church. I made it obvious for all to see, and I would wear my white garment to the commission whenever I had a week day programme to attend at the church. Much later, Asiwaju Bola Tinubu, whom I worked with when he was Governor, knew of my church. Whenever my church prepared for its harvest, I would send him a card.

"Excuse me, sir!" I would say to him. "There is a harvest in my church."
I took all my children to the same church for baptism. Though they no longer worship at this church today, they have memories of their father walking barefoot.

"Baba is walking barefoot," they would tease pleasantly. I would then respond in a similar fashion, "Please let me be! Leave me to my faith."

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I was in charge of various ministries which I supervised in terms of the terms of reference of the commission. These included the Ministry of Education, where I met my wife, Ruth Olukemi; the Ministry of Physical Planning and Urban

Development, and the Ministry of Environment, which at an earlier time was a part of the Ministry of Physical Planning.

During my five-year term at the Civil Service Commission, I had the desire to bring in young, brilliant minds into the commission, and the people I brought in were largely from my constituency in Ikorodu. I was able to do this because each of the five divisions in Lagos State, including Eko, Ikeja, Badagry, Ikorodu, and Epe, had a representative candidate at the commission.

When an approval for employment came to us, we would divide it into these five divisions. For instance, if we required 20 doctors, we would split it among the five, which meant that there would be four candidates employed from each division. As a politician who knew who to turn to for help. I would call my supporters and say, "Go to Imota and get me someone. Go to Ikorodu and get me someone. Go to Igbogbo and get me someone." And so I would go on till I had filled all the positions. At the end of my tenure, I had brought in a huge number of Ikorodu people into the Lagos State civil service. Of course, these were all qualified candidates.

Many of those I brought in gradually moved up the ladder on merit, some rising to the positions of permanent secretaries and directors in the service. One of them subsequently occupied my position as commissioner in the Civil Service Commission. He had retired as a Permanent Secretary but was later recalled to serve in the commission.

The opportunity to help the people of Ikorodu get placements in the civil service greatly contributed to my sense of pride, satisfaction and fulfillment I had while serving. The fact that I neither received nor expected any favour, reward or money in return for the appointments that these people got further enhanced my pride. The four-way test which I had learnt at the Rotary Club was etched on my

mind and always came to the fore in all that I did while at the commission.

“Is it the truth?” I would often ask myself before taking any step or course of action. “Will this be beneficial to all concerned? Will it breed goodwill and better friendship?”

Indeed, I was guided by the principles of selfless service to the community, which I had gleaned from the Rotary Club. I put into practice all the precepts of selflessness at the commission. My tenure of five years was most fulfilling, and I was glad that I made my contribution to the development of the Ikorodu division and the entire state.

Chapter Seventeen

LIFE WITH A VIRTUOUS WOMAN

I met Ruth Olukemi in 1995 at a time when I had all but given up on love. After two failed marriages, my focus was on my children and career. I also wanted to improve myself. I was skeptical about getting into another relationship, as I did not want to experience what I had suffered in the past. But as soon as I began to know Kemi, my skepticism disappeared and I was ready to embrace love once again.

Beautiful, hardworking and pragmatic, she was everything that the other women in my life were not. Unlike the previous women who were light-skinned, Kemi was dark-skinned, with nice eyes, slim, and even taller than I was. I had always loved tall women, and meeting Kemi was like a dream come true.

But her physical features were not all that set this woman apart for me. There was so much more that I found intriguing about her. Later, I would learn from the way she spoke and communicated with me that what she wanted was a partner that was visionary and with whom she could share a vision and work as a team. She was anything but superficial, and thought far beyond her physical beauty. Her goal was to work hard to earn for herself a better status rather than live on someone else's.

She was as intelligent as she was knowledgeable and educated, and she was certainly not tired of acquiring more knowledge and developing her skills. She was a teacher with the NCE certificate and had also attended the University of Lagos for further studies. She later proceeded to America for

a course in Education, with focus on special children's needs. This also made her different from my previous wives, who showed no interest in pursuing their education beyond their school certificate level.

The first time I saw Kemi, I was struck by her awesome features. I was working at the Civil Service Commission when she came around in search of a job. I was immediately smitten, and we began courting almost as soon. Of course, after the initial coyness and she eventually said 'yes' to me. Our courtship lasted five years, which was proof that she was not about to rush into anything, especially not marriage. Her friends, family and people who came from Ikorodu but worked at Alausa with us attempted to dissuade her from pursuing a courtship with me.

"Ah! Don't go there!" some warned. "Don't you dare!"

"We know his wives. Don't do it," others said.

"Why do you want to marry someone with six children?" others queried, offering her a feeling of perplexity.

These warnings fed her fear, and she would later confess to me that she was afraid of getting married to me. Of course, her fears were not unfounded. She was a spinster, and I had been married twice before with six children from both women. But I was just as scared as she was. I was concerned about the fact that I had failed twice in marriage and I could fail yet again. I was worried that bringing her into my family might destroy the home I had worked so hard to build – my relationship with my children and the security I had provided for them. I was also afraid that she might accept me but not accept my children. Then, there was also the niggling fear of infidelity and distrust, which I had previously experienced.

In spite of our fears, we continued our courtship, which blossomed as the years progressed. She moved in with me in the government house in Ikoyi where I was living, and she came with me when I moved to my house in Ibeshe. My house was incomplete when we moved, with no windows, no toilets, or just laterite on the ground of the compound. There was probably no electricity then. It was mostly uninhabitable, but she stayed with me. The living condition there was different from that which I had experienced in the government house in Ikoyi. My children would later tell me that they had cried often because of the stark difference that came with our condition of living.

I did not dwell on the state of the house. Rather, I thought about how much I had achieved by building it, and I was proud of myself. We lived there in that state and continued to work on improving the condition of the house. It was in 1997, after I finished my tenure in the Civil Service Commission that we made the move. Kemi had by that time started working at the Ministry of Education as Inspector, and she would often leave for work and return home. Most of the dishes we enjoyed at home were prepared by her. She would bring foodstuff with her whenever she was visiting. I also regularly brought food home from my sister's canteen in Surulere each time I stopped by to visit her.

Kemi complemented me in the sense that she wanted what was best for me. We would often discuss our goals and aspirations as well as issues that were mentally stimulating and refreshing. After I left the service, she sat me down and asked, "What will you do next?" I was not a contractor and had no interest in pursuing that. I could not return to poultry farming, since I had failed at it. And I most certainly did not want to return to the bank to apply for loans, as my last experience which had lasted almost three years left a sore taste in my mouth.

“Why not start a school?” she asked suddenly, one day. Then she paused, as if waiting for the impact of her question to hit me before she explained, “You love children. I see how you teach your children. It is one of the reasons why I love you, why I want to have children for you, and why I want to marry you.”

Kemi was impressed with how I taught my children. She was also taken by how I often went to Isura market to buy foodstuff for the children to eat. There were times when she came home and met me in the kitchen preparing food for the household. The children, in turn, helped in the kitchen, set the table and washed the dishes. She had seen first-hand how much I loved children and how I interacted with them. Thus, she thought it would be a good idea to put that energy into starting a school.

“Okay. We will start a school,” I agreed, and we started working towards it together.

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It was not until 1999 that I told my family about Kemi and persuaded them to follow me to Ibadan for a formal family introduction. My family obliged and went with me to her family house in Bodija, Ibadan. They were the humble Lawrence family from Ilesha, and they were strong members of The Apostolic Faith. In fact, her parents were elders in the church. Thus, they were not immediately receptive to the idea of their daughter getting married to a divorcee. But Kemi had made up her mind about getting married to me. Along with one or two of her relatives, she went to her parents with the intent of persuading them to change their mind. They caved in eventually after much persuasion from relatives, and that was how we got married.

Of course, we could not have a church wedding. It was impossible to, since The Apostolic Church would not encourage a union with a divorcee. So, we exchanged our vows and rings at the Ikoyi registry. It was my first legal marriage, as I had married the first two women by other means. Kemi gave birth to a baby boy on 17 April 2020, and we named him Samuel Ayowole.

I can always count on my wife's support in all that I do. She joined me in the Celestial Church of Christ which I had begun to attend, even before we got married. She became a full-fledged member of the Celestial Church, and together, we would go to church regularly in spite of her Apostolic background. My wife's behaviour was indeed different from anything I had known before; she was at home with the idea of going with me to the Celestial Church. In my previous experiences, my wives gave excuses for their actions: "Your pastor is picking on me;" "He is using my situation as an example." They felt attacked by the pastor's words and insisted that the sermon was always about them. I knew what was actually happening. They were uncomfortable with the truth, and rather than check themselves and correct their mistakes, they complained.

"Are you saying that what you are hearing is not the truth?" I would ask them, surprised at their behaviour. "Are you saying that you are the only one in the church who is being targeted?"

They had no response to these questions. Yet, they remained adamant that they would not follow me to the church. My wife, on the other hand, joined the Celestial Church without any form of persuasion from me. She could have remained in The Apostolic Church, an idea that I would most certainly not have opposed. But she chose to worship with me. Her behaviour was reminiscent of Ruth's in the Bible, who

decided to stay with her mother-in-law after the death of her husband on the battlefield.

“Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you sleep, I will sleep,” Ruth had said to her mother-in-law, Naomi, after insisting that she would not return to her father’s house.

This was the same sense of loyalty that Kemi demonstrated, and it dawned on me that I had indeed found my wife. She would do anything for me; I was convinced. Then I began to tease her that she would go to lengths, even if it meant going all the way to Alaska, which is completely covered with snow, or the extreme north of Russia, to save me.

“If there is something important that I needed for my survival, and it can only be found in Alaska or Russia, I know you will go there to get it for me,” I would say to her, laughing.

She would respond with a hearty laugh, but we both knew this to be true. Her complete trust in me, lack of apprehension towards me, and her confidence in me also bolstered the feeling that she was the one for me. This was so because the other women lacked confidence in me and my capabilities; they had no trust in me and were often apprehensive. The fact that Kemi did not keep friends within the community was endearing, as she did not spend time engaging in frivolities with friends. Her husband and the children were her friends, and she had enough time for her family and the school. This was unlike my previous wives, who partied so often with friends that they spent little time at home. Today, my wife does not have any reason to come to me and say, “Ehn, my friend is coming to the house.” “My friend is coming to visit me.” She does not engage in endless chatter with friends.

Now, she is the Executive Director of Kith and Kin. Not only does her hard work make her suitable for this role, she also has the knowledge, qualification, passion, and love for children required for this position. Some common interests I share with her are education, children, family, the fear of God and cultivating a relationship with Him as well as building a Christian home.

We have succeeded in building a Christian home, where love presides and there are no altercations or abusive language. We have been together for 22 years now, and I have neither reported her to anybody nor called anyone to settle an issue between us. She has not done that either. Through regular early morning fellowship, reading the Bible and praying, we have been able to talk things out and settle any difference we may have amicably. Some Bible verses adequately depict a situation or challenge we may be facing, so we take them as prophecy. That is how I have always received my prophecy, and I let my wife know this.

“I am not waiting for any prophet to reveal a prophecy to me,” I would tell her.

There are prophets in the Celestial Church, but I do not have to present myself before anybody to prophesy to me. In the same vein, we do not have to go and present ourselves to anybody to settle any issues between us. We do this with prayer, Bible reading and meditation.

The differences between us come once in a while, but my wife does not go to bed without settling it. If she notices that I am silent or in a world of my own, she will come to me and ask, with concern in her voice, “What is it? Have I offended you? What has happened? What happened today?”

She will wait until she gets an answer, then she will make

sure to talk it out with me before she leaves me alone. She is that kind of person. The other women, though, did not care, and they would sleep to their satisfaction and go out the next day, even when it was obvious that I was angry or hurt. I am grateful for the Bible, which has changed my party-going and alcohol-drinking ways. This might have also affected my previous marriages, where I partied, clubbed and drank a lot. I felt like the boss in my house and did not need anyone to tell me what to do. I had made up my mind that I could not be challenged, even when I returned from a party the following morning and one of the previous wives asked me where I had been.

"You dare to ask me where I am coming from? Why must you ask me?" I often thundered angrily.

But my attitude has changed, and I live peacefully with my wife. She is loving and loves all the children equally. Of course, she met them in Ikoyi in 1995 before we even got married in 1999, and she built a relationship with each of them. There has never been any indication of bad blood between her and my children, neither has there been any show of malice or distrust from her or the children. She would always say to me, "Aye omoni mo wa!" When translated to English, this means, "I came to this world for children."

She loves children - mine, hers, and the students of Kith and Kin. Not one to keep anything from me, she would tell me when someone says something about me. This further builds the trust between us. We share everything, from the vision we have for our school to a common purse and the school accounts, which we are both signatories to. Though she can make withdrawals with her signature alone, she will never take money without talking about it to me first. Her lifestyle

is so different from those before her, who would empty my bank accounts and use the money for no good.

I recall that one of my previous wife took half of the money I was saving to start building my house. That day, I paid N15,000 to the draftsman who would draw my plan from the significant sum of N150,000. I hid the rest of the money inside the compartment of my Volkswagen for safety. But by the time I returned the following morning, there was only half of the money left. My wife had taken the money, and she felt no remorse during the bitter argument that ensued. It was the rest of the money that I used to lay the foundation of my house. I did that on my birthday, the day I turned 40.

When I look back at my previous marriages, I realise that there is a glaring difference between the other women and my current wife. My wife started from scratch with me, in a sense, as she moved into my house which was not conducive for us. She never once complained about the incomplete state. Instead, she stayed with me. She stayed when she was the one providing food and when there were only my children and she had not yet had hers. We worked together to build everything we now possess.

We discuss everything that goes on in the school, and we have made it a habit to keep a diary of things to do each day. It was something I started doing, and I have trained her to do the same. This way, we avoid any form of distraction. I write about what I will do that will affect my life, or that of my family, or the school, Kith and Kin, or politics, or the community. These are things I have to accomplish each day or week and I write them down. If I do not get to tick something off my list in a day, I will carry it over till the next day when I complete it. This habit encourages progress and makes us diligent with our passion. We are also able to judiciously use resources rather than waste as a result of this

habit. If my wife is abroad and she wants to buy anything, even if it is gold, she will take a picture of it and send it to me first.

She will say fondly, “Ashipa!” This is what she calls me all the time, whether we are at home or outside the house. It is my chieftaincy title, and it demonstrates the level of respect she has for me, her husband. I, on the other hand, call her by her middle name, as with my previous wives.

Then she will go on to ask, “Look at this. Do you like it? Is it good?” She accounts for every spending.

My faith is an integral part of my life. I cannot separate one from the other, because the Bible says that whatever you want to do, seek the face of the Lord. I do not seek the face of the Lord by going to any prophet to ask, “What did the Lord say?” Instead, I pray, read the Bible and listen to every sermon, then I pick what is relevant to my situation and I try to follow the precepts one after the other as it is written in the Bible. When I went to the Celestial Church convention ground at Imeko, I did not go to any prophet. I read and understood the word of God.

Through my worship, I have discovered that God’s promises are conditional. If you do this, this is what you will get, and that is what I cling to and put into practice. I am a practical Christian. I apply what I read, what I understand, and what is interpreted. I try to make the preaching I listen to practical and it happens just that way. That is my faith in Christianity. I do not go to anybody to tell me what to do.

I have also discovered that, in most cases, when I sit down to pray with my wife, our faith is strengthened and our prayers answered. My wife is a prayer warrior. She prays a lot and is always at one prayer vigil or the other. I have told her to relax, at least for the sake of her health, for whatever it is we

present to God, believing we have it, we will get it. There was a time my wife's sister, who was already 40 years old, lived with us. We became worried that she was not married, for siblings empathize with one of their own if they are not doing well. So, we interceded on her behalf and prayed. By the time God answered our prayers, it was an American citizen living in Nigeria that He provided. They got married and went to Dubai for their honeymoon. She now has children and has become a citizen of America.

Kith and Kin has also had its fair share of upheavals, but with prayers and the belief that what is established on the rock cannot be moved, we have overcome these challenges. No matter what issues we have with any member of staff, the vision remains constant and our faith continue to grow together.

Chapter Eighteen
BIRTH OF AN EDUCATIONAL LEGACY

I had always taken an interest in children's education. It was perhaps why I was a peer teacher who taught children in the neighbourhood while growing up. My children were also not neglected, as I taught them every chance I got. Teaching at the Lagos State Polytechnic for years had further fueled my passion for education. So, when I completed my term at the Civil Service Commission, children's education seemed like the next thing to do, as my wife suggested.

Since it was something I loved doing, I put my soul into it. I started not for the money or material rewards, but rather as a means of social service. Though I was aware of the fact that it was a private enterprise that would have to be sustainable, I wanted my school to impact the society, contribute to the environment, and give hope to the hopeless. I had observed the poor state of school infrastructure and the deplorable condition of public schools within my community in Ibeshe and environs. The teachers were handicapped by the lack of teaching aids; the school buildings were nothing to write home about; and there was little or no learning done in such places. So, I was determined to do things differently in order to develop society.

A famous Nelson Mandela quote was my mantra. I chose education as a means to empower people. I was reading a lot of books at that time and had learnt some lessons from Lee Kuan Yew whose greatest tool for change was education. He sent the best brains to America, London, and Canada on

scholarships. I had also read about Chief Obafemi Awolowo and what he did in the western region with free education, which I had also benefitted from. Within the short period of 1960 to 1975, it was hard to miss the growth and development in the western region. There was an advancement in technology with the first television, the first cocoa house, the first stadium. You could also observe the development in other areas, including the University of Nsukka. All these things were influenced by education and the minds of the educated. I decided that education would be my investment in human capital development. This was my motivation.

I was no longer in the Civil Service Commission and I could not return to poultry farming. I did not want to be dependent on anyone, and I wanted something that would give me fulfillment. I had the support of my wife, whose knowledge in education would be invaluable to me. Above all, I had the education I had always desired and wanted to give it back to society. And so it was that I started my school, which I called Kith and Kin.

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Kith and Kin started as a school for my children and the children in the neighbourhood. I spoke about the school to my friends and invited them to bring their children.

“I am starting a school. Bring your children here. I will train them for their GCE,” I would urge them, as I went around the neighbourhood.

“I will train your toddlers for free,” I vowed as I encouraged my friends and neighbours.

So, from July 1997 when we started, till September, I taught these children for free. In September, we went on a break and shortly thereafter started charging fees for the children. I was charging as little as N2,000 just so that I could put food on my table.

We started small, because I wanted to make learning at my school easily accessible, available and affordable. I did not want people to be discouraged by the high cost of education. I shared the responsibility of teaching with my first child, Bukola, who was in her early twenties and had just graduated from the University of Lagos. Her siblings were also supportive in many ways. My house was the school location when we started, and it was still not completed. I made blinds on the windows and dug a pit at the back of the house for toilet. Electricity had not been connected and there was no running water. I had to dig a well in the compound. I also painted the walls black in some of the rooms so that they could function as blackboards.

We kept the three bedrooms on the ground floor for my family and myself, while the rest of the building was dedicated to the school. We had almost all the classes, including a kindergarten, as we accepted children of all ages from three years and above. At that time, we taught any child that was brought to us. There were children in primary school and there were those going to secondary school. We appropriated each child into classes which we arranged for them.

I subsequently assigned the teaching of each class to myself, my wife and all my children when they were on holiday. So, everyone had a teaching role. Though my wife at the time was still a civil servant, she would spend as much time as she could at the school. Whenever she returned from work, she wasted no time in joining us to teach the children. This was how the school began to grow. Determined to succeed and to

have no regrets, I put in my best the first year, then the second, and the third until what started small grew in leaps and bounds.

My goal was to impact society, and the joy I got from doing that was unquantifiable. It did not matter that there were no immediate financial benefits. Of course, I realised that I had to charge a little fee from the parents who brought their children to the school to make it a sustainable business. As the years passed, and we began to employ teachers and increase the value of our services, we started to charge some more.

We gained the trust of people and they appreciated the value we provided. So, as we expanded, more parents brought their children to the school and were willing to pay what we charged.

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Running a school without financial assistance from anyone was no mean feat. But I was also able to save some money on house rent and employing teachers at the beginning. Using my house as the school meant that I did not have to worry about rent, and my wife, children and myself did all the teaching. I taught all the subjects except French and Yoruba. Even till today, I go into the classrooms to the delight of the children. I walk around the school, and when there is a need to intervene when a teacher is in class, I do that. I step into that classroom briefly and teach, supporting the teacher.

I also often organised essay competitions where children win prizes. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I organised an essay competition for SS3 students. The essays were to be assessed by experts and the best would win a laptop which was about N250,000. The competition was held

virtually like their classes at that time, because of the global pandemic. Though they were at home, we wanted to engage the students and motivate them to work rather than simply relaxing. Of course, the trick worked, for the students participated and on the day of their valedictory service, the winner received a laptop.

Education is a process that helps to develop the human mind, and this development is the best thing one can ever offer to humanity. The chaos and insecurity we experience in the society in which we live are a result of the snowball of negligence, dilapidation, the reluctance of government to invest adequately in education, and poor infrastructure. There is a way we can change all that, and that is through education. The greatest tool in education is technology, and when you have a school that does not even have electricity let alone computers or WI-FI, it is hard to raise children that will be able to compete with their contemporaries in other parts of the world.

This is why I am devoted to education. I want to right the wrongs. Education is my passion, and in every home that I have lived, my blackboard is always more conspicuous than my television set. If there was ever anything that would be as conspicuous as the blackboard, it was my bookshelf. In addition to the notebooks and writing materials on my shelves, there were books. I invested in a lot of books and made my children fall in love with reading, as they say it is what children see, hear and read that will form who they are. It is not by beating that children learn. Rather it is by teaching and telling stories. I used the whip on my first two children, but as I had more children, I learnt to stop flogging them. Flogging can only harden their hearts and make them rebellious. After I did away with flogging, I learnt the beauty of corrections, monitoring and discussions with my children. When they get something right, they are rewarded. During

festivities, like Christmas, I also buy things for them which makes them appreciate me even more.

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The best way to get people out of poverty is to give them education. I had experienced abject poverty while growing up in Isale-Eko, and education was my means of escape. Thus, I try to help people in a similar way through my school. I help them imagine what their life will look like if they choose to follow the path of knowledge and education. Then I show them the other side of self-destruction and illiteracy and let them make a choice. That was in effect what my father did when he brought us from Ikorodu to Isale-Eko.

“Look at this! If you follow this life, this is what you will end up with. If you follow that other life, that is what you are going to end up with,” he made it clear to us. But to get the kind of education that will save them from poverty, people must be willing to learn. It is the only foundation for honest work, not what they call "yahoo" or any other corrupt or greedy practices that the society is fraught with these days. When I come across policemen, I do not become fidgety or anxious and I am certainly not afraid to talk to them because I know that I have a legitimate business. This is a result of my education. Though I am a politician, I have my school, which is a legitimate business. It is my passion, and I have worked so hard at building it for 25 good years.

The love my parents had for education greatly influenced my desire to reach the peak of education, and to help children and improve their lives. Not only has Kith and Kin Schools provided for my children, they have lso provided and continues to provide for the neighbourhood children. It is

why I named the school Kith and Kin, which implies that it is for my biological children, my extended family's children and the neighbourhood children. This is my way of saying to people, "Let's get out of poverty. Let's get out of penury. Let's improve the wellbeing of the family, the wellbeing of society."

The wellbeing of society will ultimately improve the circumstance and situation of its members. It will improve the environment and add value to the community. Well-educated people who have resources and means of livelihood to sustain themselves, can support the community. If, on the other hand, people don't have the foundation of education, they have nothing to offer.

Some children desire education for themselves, but because they do not have anyone to care for them and their parents do not have the means to send them to school, they remain illiterates. So, if I have the means to help these ones, I make sure that I do. I provide them with the education they need. This is what I do today.

"Bring your children here," I would say to the less-privileged parents. "Bring your children here."

Then I would put the children in the hostel. Feed them, clothe them, and do everything for them. It does cost me a lot. My prayer is that they make good use of the opportunities I have given to them. So, I call them regularly to ask, "Do you know the cost of this education you have? Do you know the cost of the boarding house? Do you know what it costs per year? It costs over a million per year to be in this school, but I am giving you that free of charge. It is an investment in your life, make the best use of it. If you have been in the college for instance for six years, that means I have invested six million naira in your life, plus the rising cost of inflation. It is like getting the money, the physical cash, and giving it to

you. So, if I have invested that in your life, you should ask yourself when you come out of the school, 'What have I done with it?'"

Many of them are doing well, and this is a source of perpetual joy to me, and to their families. But there are others who are still struggling to catch up. We continue to pray for them and support them in every way we can.

Chapter Nineteen
BACK IN POLITICS

A close ally of mine in my earlier days of electoral contests was Chief Mufutau Ajisebutu. He stood by me and believed in my vision. He was bold, courageous, and pragmatic. He was an ever-active politician. His work ethics and politics endeared him to me. I said to myself, "This is someone I'd love to follow." Though he was from the Awolowo stock, he strategically distanced himself from their pool and established a personable disposition in the community. He sturdily supported me in my campaign for chairmanship. We rallied across communities, having meetings with CDA representatives and explaining my manifesto to them. Because he knew my father, he would sometimes present me to people as the young graduate son of Alabaja Itunmoja, a name that reminded people of what my father stood for in the community. I was elated to be introduced to people across the whole range of Ikorodu. I conversed with indigenes and formed relationships as we combed the area. These moves were hardly made by the then opposition party. They mostly relied on existing political structures to secure wins for any candidate they presented.

My political journey would have been incomplete without Chief Ajisebutu. It was with him that I shared my interest in politics before I first contested any position. He was someone everyone considered to be a rugged, practical politician, and we were from the same town of Itunmoja.

He was like our back-bone. He sponsored most of our rallies, and held us accountable. Each time we had issues or

problems that were beyond us, we would run to his home, and then give a report of what we were doing, after which he would encourage us to go ahead, or consider some other lines. He was the opposite of the Awoists and the Jakande people, and largely influenced my not joining them. I also wanted to do things differently. Notably, I had literally read the books of Awolowo when I doing my national youth service. I admire him, but the people that were claiming to be his followers didn't exhibit the four way test of the Rotary Club.

At the time I was contesting for the local government chairmanship, there were established political structures in Lagos, and these preceded the arrangements that Asiwaju Bola Tinubu later developed. Up until 1998, Tinubu was living outside the country on exile. The politicians who were on ground at the time were posed to take over Lagos State under the Network Alliance. Their candidate was Engr. Funsho Williams who, at the time, had sold himself to various groups and traditional institutions in the state.

When the election by party system was to take place, Chief Abraham Adesanya led the Afenifere to establish the Alliance for Democracy with Funsho Williams as their choice candidate. After Abacha's death in 1998, Tinubu returned to Lagos to resume his political career. He started making efforts to build his own political structure. It is in the context of those efforts that I came in contact with him. At the time, Chief Ajisebutu and I were influential politicians in Ikorodu. Ajisebutu saw me as his right-hand man, so he was constantly letting me in on his plans.

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The year was 1998, and I had only recently moved to my house in Owode-Ibeshe in Ikorodu after serving as commissioner in the civil service commission. Moving from the government house in Ikoyi, where I lived as a commissioner for five years, to my personal house which was incomplete and lacked most of the basic facilities needed to make life comfortable was certainly not an easy task. But I had to make the move, and I quickly settled into my new routine in Ibeshe with my children and wife.

I had established my school the previous year after some encouragement from my wife, who was the pillar of support I needed at the time. So, Kith and Kin was still in its early stages of operation. It was while I was engrossed with work at the school that my political godfather, Alhaji Ajisebutu, asked that we meet with Asiwaju Bola Tinubu.

“Kaoli, we need to meet with Asiwaju,” he said to me, his lips set in determination. He seemed confident that the meeting with Asiwaju would engender my political growth.

“Okay, sir,” I responded rather reluctantly. After my failed attempts at politics, I was not sure that I wanted to try again. I considered the amount of time I had spent on campaigning for votes which had ultimately ruined my farming business, and I was not convinced that politics was worth giving another try. I did not want to embark on another fruitless journey when I had my school to keep me busy. I expressed my concerns to my godfather, who assuaged my fears and assured me that Asiwaju would be a source of help.

“Don’t worry, Kaoli,” he said, patting my back in a most assuring manner. “This time will be different, you’ll see.”

“Yes, sir,” I nodded, wishing I possessed as much confidence as he did.

“You’ll see. This will be different,” he repeated.

It was when I went with him shortly after to meet with Tinubu at Alausa that I realised why my Ajisebutu was so optimistic. Tinubu exuded confidence like no other, and his word was his bond. It would be tough not to be self-assured around him. I found this quality of his particularly endearing, but nothing put me more at ease than the fact that he called me by my first name only a day after I met him.

"Kaoli," he called me as he gave me my assignment, which was to help him win the 1999 gubernatorial election in the Ikorodu area. I was amazed because in my experience, people tend to forget the name Kaoli. But there was Tinubu, a man I had just met, who remembered and pronounced it with ease. That simple act was the beginning of my endearment to him. I said to myself, "This is my person. This is my man. He remembered my name. I will believe in this man."

He then asked for my CV, and as he looked through, he seemed impressed with what he saw. I had an MSc. in Agricultural Economics and I had experience as an agricultural officer.

Ajisebutu later informed me that we would begin to actively support Tinubu in Ikorodu, under the same Alliance for Democracy party which Engr. Funsho Williams was in. The news came as no surprise to me. I had known Chief Ajisebutu to be a non-conformist. For reasons best known to him, he never aligned with the predominant political structure that Funsho Williams represented. So, when Tinubu came, he embraced Tinubu's movement and brought me in. That was how we began to set the groundwork and structure for Tinubu in Ikorodu.

Happy with my assignment from Asiwaju, I set to work in earnest. I went about canvassing for him in Ikorodu, and I gave it my all. This exposed me to the political field all over

again, and I began to reconsider playing in it. So, after my meeting with Tinubu, I returned to politics with as much vigour as I could muster.

On the day of the primary election, an interesting strategy was used for Tinubu to achieve the winning position. Through political smartness, the votes that were cast in the ward that Chief Ajisebutu was operating in were all cancelled. They were not added to the overall votes in Lagos. The elections in that ward were considered inconclusive because of a crisis that had ensued there. Truthfully, if they had been counted, it was very likely that Funsho Williams would have won that election. But Tinubu eventually carried the day.

In that same election period, Ajisebutu nominated me to run for the state house of assembly primary against Funsho Willams' anointed candidate. Fearing that they might lose again, Williams' supporters in Ikorodu – the Network Alliance – went to the Oba of Ikorodu to pressurise him to convince me to step down. Accordingly, Oba Oyefusi invited me for a political meeting at his palace. But Ajisebutu strongly advised me not to go for the meeting. He believed I was rightly positioned to win, and backing out would amount to a loss.

Meanwhile, Ogbeni Rauf Aregbesola, who was the Director General of Tinubu's campaign and later became the Osun State Governor, invited me to Sunday Adigun's office in Alausa, Ikeja.

"Your name has been penciled down on the list of Senator Tinubu's commissioners," Aregbesola whispered to me.

I was as surprised as I was elated by this revelation. He was not sure of his own fate in the new government, but he gave

me the assurance that I would be made a member of Tinubu's cabinet.

He stated that he could confirm this to be true from discussions he had had with Bola Tinubu. I could hold on to Tinubu's promise, he stated, and forgo the race for the state parliament. Since Tinubu already had the party's governorship ticket, it would be fair to allow the other faction of the party to take the state assembly ticket.

But Ajisebutu was not interested in any of that. He repeatedly told me to ignore both Rauf and the Oba. It was at this point that I had to make a decision for myself.

I resolved to meet the Oba because I didn't see how I, an indigene of the town, could blatantly stand the Oba up. That would be disrespectful on many fronts and could smear my family's name eventually. So, in defiance to Ajisebutu's advice, I honoured the Oba's appointment.

When I got to the palace, I was welcomed by leaders of the Network Alliance. I remember the meeting involved some notable figures in the party such as Adeseye Ogunlewe, Waidi Gbadamosi, Alhaji Awo Kazeem, Alhaji Salisi Alogba, and the other candidate – Barrister Ola Animashaun. After a series of deliberations, the Oba instructed me to step down for Animashaun. Without waiting for my response, he prayed for me and ended the discussion. In a short while, the news flew across town; Kaoli had stepped down!

Ajisebutu was furious. My decision caused a strain in our relationship, but that dissipated within a few days. I gave up my ambition for the unity of the party, then I began to work in electoral committees to ensure Animashaun's victory.

During the primary election, we prepared for the contest within the party and got the ticket Tinubu needed to run for the office of governor. When he was confirmed as the

candidate of the party, we moved on to the gubernatorial election, with Tinubu and a PDP candidate, Senator Wahab Dosunmu, competing for the office of the governor.

At this point, I did a lot of running around, making sure that everything was in place and all was going smoothly. In the end, the election was fair, and Tinubu emerged winner. He was sworn in as the Governor of Lagos State on May 29, 1999, which was within a month of winning the election.

As fate would have it, Animashaun eventually won the parliamentary seat. We were all present at the inauguration ceremony. Usually, that was the day when the leaders of the house were elected. We got to learn that the Network Alliance leaders were rooting to make Animashaun the speaker, so that they could, through his influence, impeach Tinubu from his position as governor.

In response, we selected our own man, Dr. Adeleke Mamora, and pushed him for the same position. This resulted into a turbulent scuffle in the house that day. The fight got physical. Chairs were weaponised and flung across the room. Politicians were wrestling and exchanging fists. It was a chaotic situation. In the end, we won the battle and were able to ensure Mamora's position as Speaker of the House. The whole experience left a root of bitterness in the hearts of the Network Alliance leaders. So, it wasn't surprising to see that within the space of four years, some of them decamped to the People's Democratic Party. In 2003, they returned to contest against Tinubu through the PDP. It was a wrong move for them, because they ended up losing all the offices, governorship and parliamentary.

The truth about politics is that conflicts are inevitable, mostly because a wide range of people are entitled to the few available offices. However, if the common purpose is to serve the community, then the onus falls on the leaders to

reconcile the different approaches that each party to a conflict might decide to follow. Afterall, even the losing candidates must have recorded some votes, implying that some people believed in their ability to effect positive change in the community. Thus, we must begin to look into ways of building up ideas from all parties, irrespective of the outcomes of elections. This will lead to the formulation of larger-scope programmes that will be of greater benefit to society. If we maintain the status quo of "winner takes all," the society suffers and less impact is recorded.

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Soon after Tinubu was sworn in as Governor of Lagos State, the list of the proposed members of his cabinet was sent to the House of Assembly, and my name was there. Indeed, Tinubu was a man of his word.

Before then, some of his friends had invited me on one occasion to Crystal Laurel at Maryland, which was owned by Gbenga Daniels. We just sat and enjoyed the cool, serene atmosphere of the place while we talked. It was there that I met with Chief Pius Akinyelure, Prince Iludoyin, and Engineer Afolabi Salami. An informal gathering, it was a meeting where we did not talk about anything serious. It was about three weeks after that meeting that the names of members of the cabinet were released.

Perhaps the meeting that I was invited to was a part of my assessment for the post of a commissioner. I could not be so sure, but Tinubu was not at this meeting and I never had any direct contact with him after those first few occasions until

after he won the election. After my name appeared on the list, I went to the Lagos House of Assembly for a compulsory screening exercise. It was not as strenuous as one would imagine. I was academically qualified, I had the political experience, and I was an active member of my political party, which were requirements for me to fill the position of a commissioner. It was also important that I was not an ex-convict, not bankrupt and had evidence of a police screening to confirm that I was being truthful. There was nothing to disqualify me at that point.

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After the screening exercise, I was confirmed a commissioner. My appointment might have seemed strange to many, as I had only met with Tinubu twice. The first time was when I went with my godfather and the second was when he assigned to me the task of canvassing for him and asked for my CV.

My CV obviously created quite the impression on him. Perhaps the fact that I had a background in Economics sparked his interest in me, as he also has a similar background in Economics and is known as a "finance" man. My experience as a lecturer at the polytechnic might also have caught his attention, and he was so satisfied with my CV that he could indeed have had discussions with Aregbesola about me, as the latter hinted. After the gubernatorial election, I did not have any interaction with him before my appointment.

There were other people who vehemently contended for the slot I got as commissioner. Some of them made so much effort and went through all the eminent personalities anyone

could think of. Unfortunately, there could only be a few appointed members of the cabinet out of hundreds or thousands struggling to get in. The Lagos cabinet had an overabundance of qualified members, and if you are fortunate to be appointed as a member, you should consider yourself one of the best. This was how I viewed myself, and I considered myself lucky that Tinubu decided to pick me out of the many candidates struggling for the position. He also picked a second person to represent Ikorodu, Architect Kayode Anibaba, who was a nominee of Engineer Gbenga Daniels. It was just both of us that made the cabinet representing Ikorodu.

Chapter Twenty
Directing Agricultural Development in Lagos

On a wet cold day in June 1999, while the rain fell in heavy drops on the Alausa Secretariat grounds, I stood waiting for the commencement of the swearing-in ceremony where I was to be appointed as the Commissioner of Agriculture. Years after I was appointed as Commissioner, Civil Service Commission, I was returning to the Lagos State Government to be a commissioner yet again. So, as the rain fell, I could think of only one thing - my appointment, and the thought pleased me to no end.

Indeed, I was excited; so were the others who stood at what was then the open parking lot of the Ministry of Education, waiting eagerly to be sworn in and to hear their cabinet positions. The heavy downpour of rain could not dampen our spirits. But it was a relief that we were moved to the Adeyemi Bero Hall, where we took shelter from the rain and proceeded with the ceremony. And on that day, 29 June 1999, when the announcement of everyone's cabinet portfolio was made, I was appointed Commissioner of Agriculture. Thus began my tenure in the Ministry of Agriculture as Commissioner.

I had guessed that my portfolio would be agriculture, especially with my qualifications and career. It came as no surprise when it was announced, and I wasted no time in undertaking my new role and settling into my position. I assumed office the following Monday morning. On that same day, the Governor held a meeting with all the new commissioners. That was when the executive council was

inaugurated, with the Governor as Chairman. The Secretary to the State Government (SSG) was Mr. Dasilva, and the Chief of Staff to the Governor was Alhaji Lai Muhammed. Alhaja Titilayo Agbalajobi, wife of the famous Professor Femi Agbalajobi, was the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture. Years earlier as a young officer, I had known Mrs. Agbalajobi as a senior officer in the Ministry of Agriculture. She was the Permanent Secretary when I assumed office, and all the Permanent Secretaries of the ministries were invited for the inauguration of the cabinet.

Soon after I assumed office, I had a meeting with Mrs. Agbalajobi and the senior management team of the ministry, which included all directors and heads of departments of the ministry. The structure of the ministry was such that the Commissioner was the political head and was in charge of policy, while the Permanent Secretary was in charge of administration and execution of programmes, supported by all the directors. There were about eight departments – planning, research and statistics, forestry, fisheries, crop production, animal production, mechanical engineering and construction, and extension services, which provided services to farmers. There were also some agencies under the ministry and their heads were part of the management team. These agencies included the Lagos State Agricultural Input Supply Authority (LAISA), Lagos State Agricultural Development Authority (LADA), Lagos State Agricultural Land Holding Authority, and the Coconut Development Authority.

I knew many of the officers who were invited to attend the introductory meeting, as I had met them at the time I started my career in the ministry many years earlier. The Permanent Secretary handed a report to me at the end of the meeting. It contained a synopsis of each department and agency, and projects of the ministry. I worked on what I found to be

pending and took off from the different stages of project completion that were recorded. There had just been a change of government from military to civilian, and the new civilian government came with programmes different from those of the previous government. Thus, when I took over from the previous Commissioner, I had to study the state of affairs in the ministry; that was the starting point for me.

One of the greatest tasks before me was learning how to harmonise the projects on ground with new projects. The projects were in different stages of completion, and I had to start from those stages along with the new projects. Since it was a new government, the new projects were much different from some of the old projects of the previous government, as the priorities of the former were not the same as those of the latter. So, I had to find a way to align them. But with my experience as an agricultural officer in the ministry, a lecturer at the polytechnic and an agricultural entrepreneur who knew the ins and outs of agriculture, I was able to handle it all just fine. My past experience guided me in piloting the affairs of the ministry. I was there for two terms, which meant eight years, and my position was not changed at any time.

After the introductory meeting, I decided to have another closed-door meeting with the Permanent Secretary and some selected senior officers of the ministry. It was at the meeting that I introduced the new policy directives that the civilian government wanted to achieve. But I asked to be taken round the field first before we finally decided on the directives and new projects. Agriculture is usually done on the field, so I wanted to be out there rather than simply stay indoors making policies.

I was taken to the divisions in Lagos State, from Badagry, Oko-Oba, and Agege to Ikorodu, Epe, and Eti-Osa. We went

everywhere, and the first thing that struck me was the poor condition of the farm settlements. I had started my career as a farm settlement officer in Imota, and I immediately took an interest in the farm settlements we went to. I soon realised that most of the facilities built to support farm families were in a state of disrepair. They were in the same poor state everywhere we went, and the settlements in Badagry were just as bad as those in Ikorodu. These structures, which included houses for the families to live in, pen houses for their broilers and layers, and piggeries obviously needed rehabilitation. We proceeded to Araga Agricultural Institute in Epe, which was in the same state of disrepair as all the places we had previously visited.

Two things became evident to me during the tour. The first was that the farm settlements had been neglected and had not received the attention they deserved from the government. The second was that the mechanical slaughter lands reserved for the mechanised cattle meat production at the abattoir in Oko-Oba, Agege, were not in use. I was fascinated with the project, especially as it was commissioned by Sir Micheal Otedola. I found laudable the objective for the creation of the abattoir, which was to mechanise meat production. This system of meat production would get rid of unhygienic handling, slaughtering and processing of meat for the public.

It was sad that the lands were not in use, and the operators preferred the old customary way of dragging the cattle to the slaughter slab which they would then open up before dusting the floor. This was most unhygienic, and the situation was made worse by the fact that there were no provisions to collect the intestines and all the mess made during manual meat production. There was no facility to separately collect the blood, hovers and all. These were things that had been provided at the mechanical lab that lay

fallow. It was worrisome that there were many people who lived around and walked barefoot, without any form of protective gears on their feet or other body parts.

It was clear to me that the operations needed to be reformed. I could not vouch for the hygiene of the meat that went out of there to the public because of the way it was processed. It was unacceptable for such processed meat to be displayed at either the super malls or at the market stalls. It was also unlikely that big hotels, super malls or even clients at that level would patronise that place or buy their meat from that source.

This was a huge disadvantage to the services being offered as the manner in which the meat was processed did not meet the requirements of the markets. One of the eventual consequences was shortage in capital inflow into the process. This was what I observed before proceeding to the poultry houses and checking out the smaller animals.

We also visited Oke-Aro, the largest piggery settlement in West Africa with about 5,000 heads of pigs and 150 piggery farmers at that time. There was another piggery settlement in Badagry and a big one in Ojo, which is still there today. But Oke-Aro was by far the largest. We visited other pig farms, which were small holdings by farm settlements. Then we proceeded to the big one in Ikorodu Farm Settlement, which was under the management of the School of Agriculture, Lagos State Polytechnic. Afterwards, we visited a big broiler station at Ijede and the various fisheries with jetties, from Victoria Island to Ibeju Lekki. There was one at Bayeku and another at Epe. We also visited the forestry units at Majidun and Ibeju Lekki.

Our next stop was the feed processing centre at Agege, which was our main feed processing centre. This was where all the foods were kept in portions and bags, packaged and

distributed to all the government production centres in Lagos State. Individual farmers also went there to buy. We stopped at the tractor hiring unit which provided services of hiring tractors to farmers and distributed tractors among the five divisions of Lagos State. The unit was headed by the Chief Mechanical Engineer. These were the main formations. Of course, there were also the extension services that existed between farmers and the different departments in agriculture.

After the tour, we included the field information in the report handed over to us and created a new policy. I observed that agriculture did not have enough funding, as the government placed more emphasis on the health and education sectors. I had to change this and make an impact within my first four-year tenure.

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The first thing I did was to determine areas of priority where I could make an impact within the time I was to spend in office. Rehabilitation of farm settlements was my greatest priority. This was so because farm families were already there with their production units. The facilities were in a poor state, and I thought that it was better to rehabilitate them than to start new projects. So, I requested for the fund requirements for the rehabilitation of the farm settlements from the Permanent Secretary. There were about five farm settlements, which included one at Badagry, another at Ojo, a third at Ikorodu, a fourth at Imota, and the last at Epe.

My next point of focus was the abattoir at Agege. After my first visit to the abattoir, I had given a report to the Governor so that he could have an understanding of the state of the

abattoir and better appreciate the need to upgrade it to the required standard where the products could be accepted by modern markets. Thus, I put some pressure on the Governor and asked that he visit to see the condition of the place himself. He agreed, and we both went along with all the members of the Executive Council of Lagos State in a bus to visit the Oko-Oba Abattoir at Agege.

The Governor saw the dirty, messy, and unhygienic state of the place. He observed the large number of people roaming around and the neglect of the mechanised slaughter lab. He saw that the holding bay where animals were kept when they were just brought in, had been divided among the workers there and had been taken over by them. The bay was not being used according to its structural design. The state of the abattoir was completely disgusting, and it was hard for any responsible government to look the other way. Looking the other way would mean putting people's lives in danger, as the source of meat that went out to the public left much to be desired. It was obvious that meat produced in such an unhygienic place found its way into the market and endangered public health.

The Governor soon sent a memoir to me, asking about the contract situation with the operator of the abattoir. According to a report I received, the operator at that time had about six months to complete his contract. I then met with the Governor and advised him to allow the previous contractor to at least finish his contract.

"Your Excellency, the house you see has been there for so many years. Because it's a legal document, we cannot terminate the contract. Just allow him complete his contract in another six months. Thereafter, the government will decide the next steps," I said to him.

The Governor listened and agreed that we should not disregard or tamper with the contract that we met on ground to avoid any legal issues. Within the next six months, we started to prepare for a takeover of the abattoir. We invited interested operators or investors to present their proposals. These interested investors were to visit the abattoir before they made a proposal that would detail how the place would be managed the way it was intended and with the mechanised slaughter lab. They were expected to give us their programme of how to improve and enhance the place. We received a lot of proposals, and within those six months while we waited, we processed each of them before moving ahead with our plan.

In terms of food production, Lagos State had a comparative advantage over many states in the country in the areas of poultry, piggery, fisheries, and crops. This was what determined my decision to prioritise this aspects of agriculture. They were low hanging fruits. While we worked on the rehabilitation programme of the Oke-Aro abattoir, we also explored the field of piggery. We reviewed the use of government lands through the Agricultural Land Holding Authority. Every agricultural land in the state was under the ownership of the land authorities, and so I ask for their master survey which indicated where their lands were and what they were being used for at the time.

“What are these lands used for?” was the question I sought answers to.
There were some lands that lay fallow and idle, and if they remained that way for a long time, there was the possibility of people encroaching on them. These lands could also become lost if the government did not have the necessary information on them. I picked some areas with such lands to focus on. I converted a piece of land at Gberigbe to a specialised piggery estate and one at Epe to a farm

settlement. I established a fish farm estate at Ikorodu, which is still there today. So, I established three new estates within my first four years in office.

The Ikorodu Fish Farm Estate had 250 farm family plots with a capacity to produce about seventy-five tons of fish per annum. The estate created jobs and provided families with residential facilities. The input market also benefitted from the farm estate. So did those who offered services at the production centre. It was the same thing that applied to Gberigbe, where there were 150 fish farmers. I knew that it was necessary for the government to increase the number of farm estates in the state. If more lands could be allocated to support farmers and their families, it would serve as an incentive for further agricultural development in the state.

We had a government approved master plan for the fish farm in Ikorodu. The farm was on a large expanse of land, and the family that originally owned the land had started to encroach on it for other purposes. What we then did was to invite representatives of the family to Alausa, and had a meeting with them.

"Look, we have noticed the encroachment from your family members, and government will not tolerate it," I said to them.

The land had been deserted for a long time, and there was compensation paid by some previous government to the family. But the family blamed the encroachment on population increase and a need to support their relatives. "We have to support our family," they argued.

It became apparent that the land was going to be completely encroached upon if it was left vacant for much longer. I stated this in a proposal and presented it to the government. The government approved my proposal, and that was how we demarcated the land and established the fish farm estate

there. Today, the fish farm is still running and has become a model in the entire south-west Nigeria, to the extent that the World Bank has supported it in significant ways over the years. They ultimately added value to the farm and it has continued to thrive till today.

I set new targets and priorities different from what had been set before, and I endeavoured to meet them all. I made it a point of duty, from my first tour of the field, to go out for inspection regularly. Agriculture is known to be on the field, and I was out every week to ensure that everything was going smoothly and to interact with the farmers. My visits to the field also helped facilitate the private farmers' agricultural production. We gave these farmers the support they needed, from education and credit to advice and services. These were the things I focused on while in office.

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Six months after I assumed office as the Commissioner for Agriculture, a new Permanent Secretary was brought in to succeeded Mrs. Agbalajobi. He was Alhaji Bode Oyedele, who was before then the General Manager of Lagos State Agriculture Development Authority (LADA). He was a young chartered accountant, with a good understanding of the terrain. His finance background came in handy at the ministry, as he had developed a good relationship with the World Bank, and other finance and international development partners. We worked well together during the four years that he was in office, and his advice on how to implement policies was always invaluable.

I worked with three Permanent Secretaries while I was the Commissioner for Agriculture. The first was Agbalajobi, the

second was Oyedele, and the third was Wale Raji, whom I worked with during the last two years of my second term. He had also been in the ministry and had functioned in different agencies. He evidently had good knowledge of the ministry and was thus adequately equipped to run it. I enjoyed working with these three Permanent Secretaries. They had a wealth of experience and good knowledge of agriculture as well as its formations, the ministry, government and the civil service. They understood their subject areas and responsibilities. The appointment of a new political head usually depended on the amount of knowledge the person possessed and their background. It was easy to work with them, as I had been in the ministry before and nothing was strange to me. But for a novice, learning and adjusting might be a difficult curve.

There was mutual respect between each Permanent Secretary and my good self. Whatever I wanted to do, I always made sure to go through the due process and through the Permanent Secretary. I accorded them the respect they deserved, though I was firm and assertive. That was how I got things done.

Though I was able to successfully carry out projects, there was always the challenge of funding. I proposed more projects in addition to the three major ones I embarked on, but the government at the time focused more on education, health and environment than agriculture. The environment sector was a priority of the Bola Ahmed Tinubu administration, as it was a big challenge then. The environment across the state was filthy, and there were heaps of refuse on the roads.

This issue was addressed at our first cabinet meeting. Members were given the responsibility of organising party members, politicians, and others who could help, to clean all

the roads in Lagos State within 30 days. My responsibility was to clean up the state from Ojota to Fadeyi. I had to rally some of our political supporters that worked with me at that time as well as local contractors for the job. The filth around Lagos was giving the government a bad name, and we had to get rid of it.

Our concern as cabinet members was to clean the major roads. The community and inner roads were given to different people. We got to work immediately, raising people for the job and equipping them with vehicles and cleaning materials. We did the cleaning at night. But we soon realised that after cleaning at night, there would be more refuse heaps within the next 24 hours. When this continued for a while, we became suspicious and wondered if this was the handiwork of people who were trying to sabotage the government.

Working all night to ensure that the refuse heaps were cleared took time, energy, and resources. So, when the refuse heaps returned to the roads within 24 hours after cleaning, we were shocked. This was the first thing we battled with, and we asked ourselves questions such as, "Should we continue doing it this way? Is it sustainable?"

The situation brought about the establishment of High Way Managers. The Lagos State Waste Management Authority (LAWMA) had been established before we came into office. So, with the establishment of the High Way Managers, we were able to create new jobs. It was no longer the duty of the cabinet members, but that of the new employees to rid the roads of filth. They carried out their duty diligently and regularly. After two years, we established Private Sector Participation scheme (PSP). The combination of the High Way Managers, LAWMA and PSP proved effective in combating the issue of indiscriminate refuse dumping in Lagos. There were also many job opportunities as a result.

The PSP had the support of the government, which encouraged the public to patronise them rather than use cart pushers to dump refuse everywhere. The introduction of High Way Managers and PSP changed the status of Lagos State from the dirtiest city in the world to a clean state.

I spent a lot of time on the streets. It was not just me. All the members of the cabinet were on the streets, because we desired a change from the bad image that the Lagos filth gave us. It was a struggle to clean the state, but it became possible with these three - LAWMA, High Way Managers and PSP.

At the time I assumed office, the capacity of the ministry to provide funds compared with the required funds needed for the execution of projects was probably less than 20% or a little more. This meant that we generated far less than what was required to fund the ministry. The ministry's major source of revenue was the abattoir, which generated very little. It was pittance compared to what it had the potential to generate and what was intended. The abattoir generated just about N200,000 to N300,000 per month. However, by the time I left, it was generating more than 1,000% of what we started with. It was probably even more than that, because the ministry was making up to N4.5 million per month, which was a huge difference from what it used to generate.

A second source of income for the ministry was forestry, and some money was generated from timber and wood. A third was the tractor hiring unit, which provided the service of tractor hiring to farmers. It was subsidised because the farmers could not afford to pay for the tractors. The government bought the tractors then collected a token from the farmers. Not only was this a source of income, but it also provided support to the farmers as it helped enhance

production. Land was also a source of revenue. The Agricultural Land Muting Authority was responsible for the allocation of lands to farmers, and the allocation involved the farmers' annual payment to the government, besides the initial cost for processing. These were the government's four major sources of revenue at that time.

The agencies were supposed to be self-sustaining through grants from development partners and the services they provided. For instance, LAISA was supposed to be a quasi-commercial entity that would take commodities and products from manufacturing companies - feed, fisheries equipment, boats, engines, nets, hooks, among others – and put a little margin on them while selling them to farmers. The agency had international partners who supported them. They were their only support at the time. These were government employees and civil servants. The government paid their salaries, and by the time their salaries were added to the cost of operations, compared with what was generated, the difference was glaring. Thus, it could be said that the capacity of the ministry to generate revenue was small indeed compared to the running of the ministry. But I was able to improve the situation, and by the time I was leaving, our revenue generation had increased to about 35%. It is a whole lot better today. At least, we laid the foundation for tremendous improvement.

The area with the greatest potential to improve the generation of revenue is the abattoir in Lagos State. There are perhaps about 22 million people in the state, and the quantity of red meat consumed by them is huge. An abattoir that is regulated by the government and is monitored and inspected regularly should be a great source of revenue for the government. However, that is not the case even today, as it is still a battle. There are so many illegal abattoirs that spring up everywhere, and the government does not have

the capacity in terms of human resources to monitor and oversee them. Even when they have that capacity, the enforcement of rules and regulations to control the establishment and operations of abattoirs could be a struggle. But these are the areas that have the potential to generate revenue for the Lagos State Ministry of Agriculture.

Chapter Twenty-One

Agricultural Development and Landmarks

There were only a few people that could be considered Governor Tinubu's favourites, and I was one of them. When I wanted to return to office for a second term, I did not have to struggle or go through anybody, as I was one of those that returned to the same ministry. The Governor had confidence in my abilities, and during the two terms that I was in office, I had nothing to fear. There were neither threats from anyone nor changes to my position.

I earned the Governor's trust and confidence right from my first assignment in the ministry and when I assumed office. My activities were clear, transparent, and open to the Chief Executive, Bola Ahmed Tinubu. I was open about what I saw, what I met on ground, my intentions and the programmes I executed. And I did this through a written report which I presented to the Governor each time I visited one formation or the other. For instance, when I visited the Oko-Oba Abattoir, Agege, I wrote a report and implored him thus: "Sir, you have to see this place." When he observed my passion, he obliged and went to see the place himself.

The contractor and operator of the abattoir at that time tried to compromise me because he wanted his contract to continue, but after observing the poor state of the abattoir, I said to him, "No, you cannot continue this way. You cannot. With this system, this is manslaughter. This is Lagos. This is our Lagos. I am from Lagos. You can't run this place like this."

It seemed that all that the contractor was interested in was the money he was making from the place. He made no attempt to improve the facilities or invest his energy in the

work. The holding bay had been occupied by workers, and this could have not have happened without his knowledge. After the Governor saw the state that the abattoir was in, he was satisfied that I was doing a good job. He then started the process of replacing the contractor. I gave the proposals of everyone who applied to the Governor so that he could decide on which to pick, and I did not have any illicit dealings with anybody.

My job was to take charge of and monitor the activities in the ministry and on the field so that everything ran smoothly. So, it was whatever the Governor directed me to do that I did. I was the eyes and ears of the Governor in the ministry, and I did not take that for granted, as I made sure that I updated him on the goings-on at the ministry. Today, I still enjoy a great relationship with him, which he has proven with his remarks about me on two different occasions, openly and in writing.

My relationship with the Governor was good, but it did not mean that we did not have a few issues. There was a time when he would have given me a black eye. This happened when I went to his round house. The driveway to his round house was surrounded by overgrown trees, which needed to be trimmed and manicured. As the person in charge of forestry, I was responsible for the environment and I told the Permanent Secretary that the trees should be trimmed. I did not ask for the trees to be cut down. It was improper to go directly to the next authority without going through the Permanent Secretary first. And that was what I did; I went through the Permanent Secretary, who in turn gave instructions to the forestry department. But to my utter shock, the workers started cutting down the trees.

“What! Kaoli, what are you doing there?” the dismayed Governor asked, when he saw the workers cutting down the trees. “Come and see! They are cutting down the trees.”

He thought that I had given the directive to cut the trees. But that was not the case, as I had only asked for the trees to be trimmed. He was angry, but it took his confidence in me to prevent a terrible outrage from him. I had to quickly call the Permanent Secretary.

“Permanent Secretary, what are you doing? That’s not the directive I gave to you, I said trim the trees but you’re cutting them down.”

The Permanent Secretary also refuted giving an order for the trees to be cut. But the deed had been done. Some of the trees had already been cut down. I felt horrible about this and showed remorse to the Governor. I apologised to him, as I tried to explain myself, letting him know that it was a result of some miscommunication, and he accepted my apology and explanations.

Of course, he was not pleased about the whole situation, but he let it go after I apologised to him. There was no other incident like this, as I made it a habit to always check in with him first before I took any major actions in the ministry. If a proposal was submitted, I would show him. If there was something to be done, I would call his attention to it before giving him my recommendation. He would either ask me to go ahead with my plan, or suggest ways to go about it. Such was my relationship with Governor Tinubu. I was privy to information that was not public and was certainly not known to many. His break time, for instance, was only known to a few of us that were close to him, and I enjoyed the privilege of being around him during this time. When it was time for his lunch break, which was usually around 1 pm, we would sit with him. He could not finish his lunch alone, so I would

eat with him along with a handful of other people. Usually, after thirty minutes of sitting, eating and talking, he would snooze while still seated on his chair.

“Go and rest, sir,” we would often say to him, but he was already resting on his chair.

A people’s man, the Governor could not live an isolated life; he loved having people around him all the time. When we were together eating during his lunch break, we would discuss burning and contemporary issues. Those who were often present at the meetings included the current Vice President of Nigeria, Yemi Osinbajo, Muiz Banire, Rauf Aregbesola, Dele Alake, Opeyemi Bamidele, Wale Edun, Yemi Cardoso, and Kemi Nelson.

The Governor’s lunch break was neither the time nor the avenue to discuss people’s files, as there were other general matters to talk about. Sometimes, the issue centred around the relationship between the state government and the federal government. Court cases were also brought up by Osinbajo, and we would talk about how he was handling a particular case or the other. When Lai Muhammed went to Kwara State to contest the gubernatorial elections and Raji Fashola came in as Chief of Staff, we talked a lot about legal matters.

So, the Governor’s lunch break helped us bond together as a team in a relaxed atmosphere; it was always more than having a meal together. The Chief Executive was as approachable as he was accommodating. He listened to everyone and was always open to discussions, without judging whether one was wrong or right. At the executive council meetings, he was the same, always listening and never judging. He would allow you argue without enforcing or dictating his thoughts, ideas and perception on a matter.

There was a time when we were in council and he stated that he wanted to remove a first-class traditional ruler in Lagos. He came into the meeting enraged.

“I am going to remove this man,” he bellowed, heaving and panting, with a deep frown on his brows.

“Your Excellency, don’t do that,” we responded in unison.

Though his mind was made up and he was bent on seeing his decision through, Governor Tinubu listened to reason and agreed with us after we argued against it.

“Okay,” he conceded in a much calmer tone. “Let us leave it. We’ll come back to that later.”

On another occasion, we met at his private residence to discuss the same matter of the Oba. A third time, he was with members of the executive council, and while we discussed the matters arising, the issue of the Oba’s removal came up again. But this time, the Governor gave up and decided against the removal. Today, the Oba still reigns. Removing him would have given the government a bad image, and many communities would not want to see their Oba removed.

Usually, when presenting a report, file or proposal to the Governor, we had to make our case. We could not just present something to him and tell him what we wanted to do, expecting him to accept it. We would have to argue our case and explain why our proposed project would be good for the state. Sometimes, he would collect the file and ask you to go, but then call you back when he was ready for you. Before calling you back into his office, you must have gone to arm yourself with information about your proposal. I had seen him shred the files presented to him by Commissioners. But that never happened to me. I had free, easy access to him, even at his home. I was one of the few who had that privilege.

Within two to three months of joining the Ministry of Agriculture, I was well on my way to improving not just the agricultural sector, but my skills. I was motivated by the Governor's emphasis on the self-improvement and high competency of the executive council members.

"I will require the high competency of members of the cabinet to be able to help government attain its goals," the Governor had insisted, as he addressed the executive council. He added that anyone who did not adhere to his advice might be removed from the council.

I was a member of the executive council, and I did not want anything to jeopardize my position. Moreover, I was aware that I needed help in the IT department, as I was not competent in this field. I thought of it as a great opportunity for self-improvement and enrolled at NIIT at Maryland, Lagos.For several times every week, I left office for Maryland for my diploma classes. I attended lectures every evening until I completed the six-month training in Information Technology. The training helped in different areas of my work, including presentation, sourcing for information, accessing government information on the internet, etc. During my third year in office, I was again on a journey to self-improvement at the Lagos Business School where I enrolled for a management programme.

The programme taught me how to run government services like a business. There are some attributes of the private sector that must be brought into the government, as it would improve business and encourage progress. I paid for the programme from my own pocket, not through any form of sponsorship from the government. In the first year of my second term in office, I went again to the Lagos Business School where I enrolled for the Chief Executive programme. I met and interacted extensively with chief executives who

were running topflight businesses in various sectors of the national economy. I wanted to challenge myself in order to scale up my competency and be able to deliver good results in Lagos State. These three programmes empowered me in no small measure. They made it possible for me to access resources, listen to seminars, read a variety of development books, set goals and achieve them, as well as get feedback, reevaluate myself, and get back to the ministry to effectively run an organization that could deliver its promises to the people and improve the quality of living in society. These were things I was able to do in the aspect of self-improvement while in the ministry.

But my ultimate goal was to improve the ministry and government, and I am glad that I was able to make critical contributions to the development of the state.

Chapter Twenty-Two

BEING A GOOD TEAM PLAYER

When we came into government in Lagos, we saw the state of things and the need for monumental changes. We had series of in-house brainstorming sessions, gave out lots of consultancy jobs, and received reports on what and how to design a new master plan for Lagos State. That was also how the Ehingbeti Summit started. Most of the programmes and policies of government were products of the summit. The first Ehingbeti Summit was held at Akodo, Ibeju Lekki Local Government Area, and many consultants were invited to the programme. Governor Tinubu too was also present. It was a residential summit which lasted for a week.

The summit laid out so many policies. The first was on keeping Lagos clean, that was when the private sector partnership (PSP) was established. Therefore, several policies, programmes and projects of government were products of the summit, which held on an annual basis. The projects were tailored to meet specific needs in the state. A primary goal was for Lagos State to be financially self-sustaining and independent. And Tinubu always buttressed this to us.

Lagos State is not rich in terms of land. But its economy is bigger than the economies of some African countries. It is also surrounded by water, which warrants the high concentration of businesses in it. Thus the prospect of being financially self-sustaining as a Nigerian state is huge.

The first three to six months in office were usually about learning. We learned the rules, explored the hand-over notes, and inducted new policies and programmes. Also, we learned to strategise on how to bring the politicians and

bureaucrats together when we executed any programmes. We held summits and retreats together, so that there was an understanding between the two categories of public servants.

When it was mid-term, we did a supplementary budget, so we were able to have the funds to implement our manifestoes and projects. In the second and third year, we delivered to impress the electorates on what had been promised. Oregun Road was one of the project done, alongside many others. The heaps of refuse all over the state were cleared. We created PSP operators, and supported them to take off effectively. Public millennium schools were also established in various parts of the state. With the increase in the capacity of available classrooms, we were able to impact on education in Lagos State.

In addition, free health centres were created. We had organised free medical checkups, like the eye-test, antenatal sessions and many others. Affordable surgeries were also included. The people of the state appreciated our work and acknowledged that they had been impacted positively.

The second-term election was a smooth and easy ride. Even the presidency's power did not stop us. There were problems between the Obasanjo-led Federal Government and the Lagos State Government, the peak of it being the denial of statutory federal allocations to the state. It was also at this time that all other five states of the southwest, hitherto AD states, were taken over by the PDP. But Lagos could not be moved. It survived the federal onslaught.

We had survived due to the robust structure we had, even though we had exhausted our funds in creating more local government areas. The people trusted us because we had been doing well. That was why at the end of Tinubu's second term, his successor Fashola received an unprecedented 1.5

million votes to become governor. It was as a result of the performance exhibited by the Tinubu's government.

The fourth year, which was the final year, was not an easy one. It was always the year for another election. The opposing party, wanting to take over, embarked on a ride of false propaganda against the government. It always took a lot of energy and effort to convince the people and re-direct them to the truth. Tinubu always used the strategy of the commissioning of all projects completed and delivered to tell the administration's story. When the opposing party started to speak ill of us, we showed the people all we had achieved for the state and the evidences of our promises. And with that, the people were convinced and continued to vote for us.

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Towards the end of Bola Tinubu's second term in office, I was one of the political leaders in the state who had shown strong interest in succeeding him as governor. I told Tinubu my intention and he was very supportive. He encouraged me along with my peers who nursed the same ambition. I could not predict what he thought about or what he planned, and he was not an emotional person. But at a time at the executive council, he directed that those who were interested in running for elective offices should resign their appointments as commissioners.

I took it as a clear directive to send in a resignation letter, which was submitted to the Chief of Staff to the Governor, Mr. Babatunde Raji Fashola. A few days later, Fashola asked that I take back the letter that I had sent. That act proved to me that the Governor did not accept it because he did not want me to leave the executive council. He did the same with some

other commissioners who had sent in their resignations. Quite a number of us wanted to leave to vie for the office of governor. So, nobody resigned. The only person who did was Fashola. It had become clear just before that time that he was the anointed successor to Tinubu. It was not a choice that needed to be contested, so I voluntarily withdrew my quest for the governorship of the state.

I surmised that the Governor's reason for returning my resignation letter was that he did not want to lose his good friends and allies. I accepted this with an open mind. Apparently, he had already decided on the person he wanted to succeed him as governor. He did not want us to lose on both ends – lose our positions in government and also not actualised our ambition to be governor. He also didn't want to lose on both ends – lose the capable persons he had on the executive council and also lose his friends. He wanted to save and maintain his relationships.

This, to me, was a wise gesture. We did not discuss any of these personally or at council. Of course, we threw some banters and side jokes, and then went along with what had been decided. The people in the state exco were competent professionals of significant accomplishments, which meant that any of us was capable of running the business of the state. But only one person could be governor at a time; it had to be just one person. We were ambitious, but we were not desperate. We would all eventually queue behind Raji Fashola and give him our support to become governor. On the eve of his exit from the council, we organised a valedictory session for him. Immediately he left, he opened a campaign office in Surulere.

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The Governor encouraged all of us at the executive council to work together as one big political family. We promoted various activities for the party followers, because they were hyperactive and did not want a docile environment. They wanted to feel energised, to attend meetings, receive relevant information, and be involved in everything relating to the party. Thus, we engaged them regularly.

The executive council was well structured into the party. Each commissioner had a body of political organisers who covered their constituencies and guided the growth of every campaign in the state. Having this structure in our communities meant that we could effectively mobilise facilitators, powerful people and the grassroots to make things happen as we wish. Our coordinators were the ones who could strategise the course of winning any elections in the state. They had clear strategies on how to engage the grassroots on the happenings of the party and enlighten them on the party's visions and goals.

When Fashola began his governorship campaign, I was appointed the Deputy Director-General of his campaign organisation. In that position, I organised 57 rallies across Lagos State with my team. Since there were 57 local government and development areas, we had rallies in each of them. We had begun at Amuwo -Odofin and ended at the constituency of Fashola, which was at Shitta, Surulere. It was an interesting rally. The people were energised and motivated. Tinubu and his notable associates were present, and we also brought in a live-band to perform at the various locations.

The Lagos State party structure was such that the Governor's Advisory Council (GAC), made up of elderly statesmen in the party, played a leading role in providing critical directions for the party. They came up with structures for the campaign

and nominated whoever they thought was eligible to be the chairman of campaign. They nominated people to other positions as well. Whoever was nominated was chosen based on merit. They examined balancing in terms of geographical spread; they looked out for loyalty. They also looked out for the experiences one had in politics.

So, it was the GAC that decided on the composition of Fashola's campaign organisation. They advised the governor, before the message was passed down. Even Fashola had no say. He could not unilaterally take major decisions because he was a property of the party, since he was already a party candidate. Perhaps when he was an aspirant, he could have had his campaign committee. That way, he could have decided. Therefore, when the structure was set out, it was made inclusive so that it was not dominated by the organisation of the candidate. This way, they got the buy-in of everyone.

The Chairman for the 2007 campaign was Cardinal James Odunbaku and I was the deputy. We worked well together and delivered the state. Since then, I had been nominated, and had led other campaigns. I was a critical stakeholder during the second term campaign for Fashola, although it was led by Tunji Bello. I gave him all the support he needed when he declared at the Mobolaji Johnson Stadium. I nominated him as a candidate for the party, giving adequate and logical reasons to the people, on why he was suitable for the position.

This happened after I had left the government, and I was no longer interested in running for governor. This was because I had to weigh the opportunities given to me. There was no point trying to contest all the time. I also needed to face the development of my school. I had always believed that giving opportunities to younger competent people was the best. At

my own age even at that time, I had served, participated, and offered myself, to the government. So, I thought it was best I gave the younger ones the opportunity.

For example, Fashola became governor when he was in his 40s. Ambode and Sanwo-olu were also examples of young candidates. So, I did not feel the need to compete with them. Rather, I preferred to play an elder's role in the party and the community at large. As long as the younger ones were competent, had the experience and capacity, they were perfect to compete since they had more to deliver in terms of age. They had the passion and burning desire to create a better society than the elderly ones who had had the best of the good old days in Lagos. Tomorrow belongs to the younger ones more than it belongs to me and my contemporaries.

The relationship I had with Fashola was an excellent one. He often called me Egbon, which means uncle or big brother. He was a good man and devoted his time to serving the people of Lagos. He was the one who rehabilitated the Ibeshe Road. It used to be so terrible that a lot of people avoided that route. But what could someone like me have done, being one of the property owners in that area? Of course, there were others who could not manage the situation, so they sold off their properties and relocated to other places. That was a choice I was not going to make.

The road was in a deplorable condition. Perhaps it was almost the same with the sea level, or below the sea level, which made the environment always flooded. Even when they had put asphalt, it took only three months for everything to wash away, revealing muddy soil. So, I complained to Fashola.

I told him to come to where I lived and to where my school was, just as I had called in Tinubu, and he obliged. Tinubu

took pictures with my school students and he established Tinubu Estate just by the end of the road. Three fishing jetties were also created there through the Ministry of Agriculture. But we were unable to repair the road during our term. So, when Fashola took over, I mentioned it to him because I had the urge to make an impact in my community. Since I was a leader, and the governor's representative, sort of, in the Ibeshe community, the people needed to see the benefits of my being there. I thus had to pressure the Governor. But I wasn't the only one doing that.

Another person who pressured him was the first President of the Nigerian Bar Association, Chief B.O Benson. He was a resident in the area too. He was like a father figure to Fashola. One of his children was born at the Mercy Children Hospital, the same hospital where Fashola was born. He also had gained recognition even before Fashola had been born, earned so many positions and titles, and perhaps when Fashola was in secondary school, he was already a Senior Advocate.

After the consistent pressures by the leaders of Ibeshe community, Fashola eventually accepted my invitation. He and his executives came in a coaster bus to my school's hostel. He was the one who had commissioned the hostel earlier in 2007, but he was represented then by his wife. So, when he alighted from the vehicle, he had a warm welcome from my students. He greeted them, and they were happy to see him.

He and his executives surveyed the road, after which we had a brief discussion. I told him about the difficulties the community had suffered on the road. And he assured me that he was going to repair it.

"Egbon, I will do this road," he promised.

He could not repair the road until he was in his second term in office. The people were happy, and till this day, the road functions well. Whenever I had any complaint about the community, he always came through. If I called and there was no response, I would send a text. Even with his busy schedule, he made sure he responded before the day ended. He was a great man.

We were in office together during the Tinubu administration, so they knew that my passion and interest was in my school. I had established my school even before I joined politics. And I invited them a couple of times to the school. When Fashola was in office, he appointed a visitation panel for the Lagos State University (LASU), and I was a member of that panel. That was the only appointment he assigned to me as Governor.

I never complained for not getting compensated or for not being given any other appointments within the time I left government till the year 2018. But I remained a loyal party leader who played frontline roles in sustaining the party in office. In 2018, I was appointed as the Vice Chairman of Lagos East Senatorial District in the party. In Ikorodu especially, I was always an instrument to the success of the party. Whoever was the candidate of the party, I gave my support. That was why I enjoyed and still enjoy my relationship with party hierarchy.

Chapter Twenty-Three

DIMENSIONS OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

My role as Vice Chairman of the Lagos East Senatorial District of the APC began in 2018 when an election was held during the state congress. The election into the office of state executive council members held as stipulated by the party's constitution, and I contested in this particular election at the time.

I had initially wanted to be the chairman of the party in the state, since I was eligible to run. In a democracy, anybody can declare their intention to run for an office, but an individual's ambition for a political seat was nothing compared to the decisions of the party leaders. A political party has a goal that is bigger and broader than that of an individual who wants to contest. So, the leaders consider the objectives of a party, then think of the criteria or strategy that will make winning possible, before they determine how to fly their flag.

In each state of the federation, there are three senatorial districts. The governor, deputy governor, and party chairman are always distributed evenly across the three senatorial districts. For example, if the governor is from Lagos central, his deputy has to come from Lagos East, and the party chairman from Lagos West. This is an important factor that the party considers when choosing officers. It is not that the people in a specific area are not qualified, but there has to be an even distribution of offices across the senatorial districts in the state.

However, there are a few exceptions where this is not the case. For instance, in the current dispensation in Lagos State for example, especially as it relates to the APC, the Governor, Babajide Sanwo-Olu, comes from Lagos central, his deputy, Dr. Hamzat, comes from Lagos East, but the party chairman, Ojo Cornelius Ojelabi, comes from Lagos central, which is the same district as the governor. When such happens, party members do not hide their displeasure. It seems unfair that the candidates are not chosen from and do not represent the three senatorial districts. What the party wants is an equitable spread so that everybody has a stake. But because there cannot always be a perfect situation, there are times when the candidates are not evenly distributed and do not represent the three senatorial districts. This is the case with the governor and the party chairman who come from the same senatorial district. Though it is not ideal, everyone adjusts to the situation and accepts it. The party leaders note this 'less than ideal' situation and make an effort to prevent a reoccurrence.

After some consultations with party leaders, I decided against my initial plan to run for chairman and chose to run for the office of the Vice Chairman, East Senatorial District, instead. This position requires loyalty and consistency, and anyone who wants to occupy the office must have great administrative, financial management and conflict resolution skills. A role of a party executive is to be able to reconcile and unite contending groups.

As someone who had contested for the office of councillor, for a seat in the state house of assembly, who was a commissioner in the civil service commission for five years and a commissioner of agriculture for eight years, I was highly qualified for the role of Vice Chairman. I knew much about managing resources, as I owned a private business and had been in and out of government. Indeed, I was up to

the challenge of the new role. I won the election and was sworn into office.

My immediate jurisdiction while in office was the Lagos East Senatorial District. The district included Shomolu local government, which has now been split into Shomolu local government and Bariga local development area; Kosofe local government, which has now been split into Kosofe local government area, Agboyi Ketu local development area and Ikosi Isheri development area; Ikorodu local government, now split into Ikorodu local government, Ikorodu West LCDA, Ikorodu North LCDA, Imota LCDA, Ijede LCDA, and Igbogbo LCDA; Epe local government, now split into Epe local government, Eredo LCDA and Ikosi general LCDA; and Ibeju Lekki local government, now split into Ibeju LCDA and Lekki local government. There are five local governments and 11 LCDAs that make up the east senatorial district. My jurisdiction included all these local governments and LCDAs.

I worked with the party's executive, and the party's role entailed managing the electoral processes of primaries and other elections. I worked at the state level through the state executive to the local government level. There were sixteen council areas within the senatorial district, which meant that I had to work with sixteen local government party excos. Each party exco was made up of 37 officers, from the chairman and deputy chairman to the secretary and deputy secretary. There were 97 wards in the district, and each of them had about 11 officers. There were also various officers at the state level, which I assisted the chairman to coordinate.

The structure of the party was such that there was a large number of party officers who held offices and stood for the party, right from the state to the local government to the wards and below the wards. Each ward was in turn broken down to seven to nine zones. Each zone was split into polling

units. The structure followed from the state to the local government to the ward to the zone and to the polling unit with polling unit officers.

The structure of the APC is robust, and this makes elections easy, as instructions could be passed from the top down to the bottom to ensure that the goal of the election is upheld or a candidate in an election is well represented at all levels. Once a goal is accepted, it is passed down to each polling unit until there is a representative among the seven officers in each polling unit who can stand as party agents – three party agents and four other officials would stand as mobilization officers who would call people for the elections. This was one of the strategies that the APC used to win elections in Lagos State.

The state executive is usually responsible for settling conflicts and reconciling contending interests and groups. This occurs quite often, and understandably so, as there is usually a struggle to acquire the ticket to vie for a position, and that process often comes with disagreements among party members. There are times when such disharmony exists in the party to the extent that after the issue has been resolved, some still disagree on various matters and end up in court.

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The administration of the party in Lagos State is made up of the Governor's Advisory Council (GAC) which consists of elder statesmen. Most of these statesmen are above 80 years old, so they are experienced and have worked with several administrations in the state. It is from this body of elder statesmen, who have probably been in politics since the 1950s and 1960s that many glean wisdom.

These elder statesmen would sit to discuss issues within the party, then they would decide on what to do and how to solve the issues. They also make plans for the next election and review those who show interest in contesting an election before they give their advice to the party. So, the choice of party chairman is often made by these experienced and old men of integrity. The party accepts whatever decision they make. It is not the decision of one person, but of various elders of the party, taking into due cognizance the overriding interests of the party vis-à-vis the dominant sentiments of its supporters. Because of their age and wisdom, everyone respects them, including the serving governor, right from the time of Bola Tinubu who instituted the structure.

This removes the possibility of a laissez-faire system where anything and everything goes. The pieces of advice and suggestions offered by the council of the elders have yielded great results in Lagos State. When the governor has an idea, he can only present it to them for debate. He then respects whatever decision they make as supreme. Whenever he makes a pronouncement or gives a directive, especially in direct relation to the party, it is often not an individual position, but a representation of what the council of elders had deliberated upon. Thus, Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu as the governor then did not rely on his power but made his decisions based on the suggestions and advice of the elder statesmen.

The GAC decided that I could go for the position of the Vice Chairman of the party. It is a body with parts spread across the various senatorial districts in Lagos. The members of the body that are in one's local government or division would often attend a meeting and present pressing matters for deliberation. Even after they have reached a conclusion in respect of electoral matters especially, they always say that

anyone is free to disagree and proceed as a candidate in an election. But their decision is passed from the top to the bottom then to the polling units and finally to the voters. The party supporters often vote based on the decision of the body. It is possible for anyone to vote against their decision, but almost always an individual's strength cannot be compared to that of the party.

There is only so much mobilisation one can do that can challenge that of the party, as evidenced by the failure of some members who attempted to do this in the past. Senator Musiliu Obanikoro, for instance, was a member of the APC but he defected to the PDP. He knew the structure and strength of APC, but he wanted to test his popularity and he proceeded to stand for the governorship election against his former party. We grew up together, and we had remained good friends. So, I approached him and asked, "Koro, who are the people that will stand for you there? Who are those people? Where is your structure? Where are your people there?"

Perhaps he had succeeded in gaining some popularity within the Lagos Island community, but his chances of winning could only be determined by the total number of votes by voters across the state and not within just one or two of numerous communities. In the end, that was what happened. While Babatunde Fashola had 1.5 million votes, Obanikoro could only garner 300,000. This is proof that the strength of the party from the top to the zonal level is bigger than that of an individual. However, not all parties have this structure.

Indeed, a candidate's popularity does not mean that he will win an election, neither does it determine his worth. What matters is the leadership within the party. It is not a one-man rule, where one person dictates what decisions should be made. With nothing to lose, the elder statesmen stand

their ground. They relate examples from the past, while giving advice or making a decision, and they can tell you the likely outcome of an event or decision from their experiences.

GAC was not established by the party, as it only exists in Lagos and not in other parts of the country. Bola Tinubu as Governor had argued: "We cannot leave the chairmanship and leadership of the party to any governor that just comes in." So, he went ahead to establish the GAC when he was the governor of the state. The current chairman of the GAC, Prince Tajudeen Oluyole Olusi, was a former councillor in the Lagos City Council and a member of the House of Representatives during the First Republic. His deputy is Otunba Bushura Alebiosu.

Alebiosu and Alhaji Muftau Hamzat were both political followers of Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Lateef Jakande. Alebiosu was, in fact, a commissioner under Jakande. So was Muftau Hamzat, the father of the current deputy governor, Dr. Obafemi Hamzat. At their age, anyone could benefit from their vast experience in politics and governance.

When these elders offer advice and suggestions on what to do in relation to individual aspirations in the party, we work with them. We recognise that this is service to the party, regardless of personal interest or perspective. It is not the electoral position that one holds that determines the quality of contribution one can make to the party or the state.

As Vice Chairman of the party, I did not define myself just by my role. I functioned in different capacities beyond my office. I applied myself and stretched myself to the overall success of the party in Lagos State and that reflected in most of the assignments and projects I executed while I was in office. There were times when the party lost an election in an area or there was some form of conflict here and there.

Committees were formed to look into the matter and judge it. On at least three occasions, I was called upon to be the chairman and give a report on each case. I applied myself to the tasks, making sure people benefitted from my experience. I had political administrative experience, and I brought this to the fore in all my dealings for the benefit of the party.

Many of the elders in the GAC when it started are now late. Chief Badmus, who preceded Alhaji Hamzat, was the chairman of the GAC during the time of Bola Tinubu. After him was Alhaji Hamzat. The present chairman is Prince Olusi, and new faces have been added to the body. These new ones include Mrs. Kemi Nelson; Dr. Onabule, a former Deputy Governor of Lagos State; Mr. Wale Edun; and the current speaker, Mudashiru Obasa.

It is the council that adds members to the body of the elders. You must be ratified by the council before you are invited to be a member. Proposals could be made by either Tinubu or any other leader. But one has to be ratified before being invited. This is an informal component of the party because it is not recognised in the constitution.

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During my three-year term as Vice Chairman East Senatorial District, I focused on the sector of education for development. When I assumed office, I immediately called the people I worked with together so that I would not give them a wrong perception of a boss-servant relationship. I wanted them to know that we were equal in the business of providing service to the state. So, the first thing I did was to call a meeting of party officers that I worked with in the state. There were about 11 of us and 16 chairmen of the party in

the local governments. The first meeting was one of several meetings that we would later hold.

There was the chairman of the party, the deputy chairman, three vice chairmen, a legal adviser, a deputy legal adviser, a woman leader in the state, a financial secretary, and a treasurer, all in the state. But each senatorial district had the vice chairman as the head; then there were the youth leader, the deputy youth leader, the women leader, and the ex-officio members, among others.

As Vice Chairman I should know whatever happens in my district and everything that concerns the party passes through me. When we held the first meeting, we tried to appreciate one another's efforts that had got us to where we were. Then I wanted to know how we could impact our constituency.

"We are the party," I stated. "The party is an organ that exists between government and the people. It is the party that will go to the people and say vote for us. We can ask for votes, mobilise votes."

We were close to the grassroots. We felt the pains of the people because we lived among them. This did not mean that the executive did not live among them, but they lived at a higher level. When some of them were appointed, they moved from their locality to other places. We, on the other hand, remained where we were and held meetings every week. It was constitutional to hold meetings every week. You were required to attend your ward meetings, zone meetings, state meetings, and other statutory meetings. There were so many meetings we had to attend because it was through them that we got to know what happened on the streets and in the communities, and the complaints they had. It was important to have information and data about people's complaints and present them to government.

The executive must then listen to the party, which was the platform on which anybody contested and got to office. The party itself was supposed to be strong enough to influence the programmes of government. So, I called the people together and wasted no time in asking directly, "What should we bring to the government?" I then urged them to do some consultations on the needs of the people in their various communities. I suggested picking education from among the many needs of the people. This was because of the bias I had towards education.

"Let us go into the interior," I urged them.

I had watched documentaries on television where they showed schools in Ikeja, Surulere, and Victoria Island whenever they wanted to demonstrate the impact of government on education. But there were none of such documentaries on the schools located in the less privileged communities in the state.

So, I charged the 11 state officers and16 local government chairmen to go to the most interior areas in Lagos State to conduct their research. I urged them to take pictures and ask questions about the population of the school, what year it was established, and what year the facilities or infrastructures were acquired.

"Document it all, and let us go together from the Lagos senatorial district and pass it to the government," I said to them.

Our resolve was to seek government's solution to the problems being presented. We documented the problems in the public education sector in the district and took them to the state governor. In this document were strategies for the implementation and execution of school projects. There were also pictures that had been taken in this document.

Some of the pictures would fetch anyone pity as they revealed the deplorable conditions of the schools. The immediate aim was to table the matter before the governor in order to get his attention and necessary action.

I took the document to the chairman of the party, as I could not take it directly to the governor. Though I had direct access to the governor, I acknowledged that there was a hierarchy that I had to follow. So, I took it to the chairman of the party. I stated that this was our input from the Lagos East Senatorial District to the administration of Babajide Sanwo-Olu. It was our responsibility to tell the governor what needed attention in the state, and that would ultimately increase the fortune of the party. So, this was what we did.

"I will not take this immediately," the governor responded. "Let us ask the other two senatorial districts to go and do the same."

What I did at the east senatorial district prompted the other two districts to do the same. I continued to follow up with the governor. After I gave it to the chairman, I pursued it with the Chief of Staff, who asked if the governor was aware, to which I responded in the affirmative. Each time I went to the governor's office, I always took copies of the documents with me. I wanted to see my proposal through to the implementation stage, and liaised with the Chief of Staff and the Commissioner of Education as well.

The strategies and solutions we had proffered were properly documented by the government. The plan was to remove the rehabilitation of school infrastructures from the ministry's schedule of projects, and put another organisation, which will be directly responsible to the governor and have direct access to him, in charge. The purpose of this was to cut short the bureaucracy that cause undue delays and poor

performance in project delivery. An agency with direct access to the governor would make getting approval for funds faster. A special committee on Rehabilitation of Public Schools was thus set up, and we immediately got to work. This was outside the framework of the Ministry of Education. We shared ideas and passed information to one another. Once a piece of information got to the Ministry of Education, it received swift attention through script passing.

A vibrant partnership with the Ministry of Education soon ensued that ensured that schools were built and rehabilitated as quickly as was possible, and this resulted in the development of education in the east senatorial district. The government started to work on some of the schools that were identified for rehabilitation. They also built new ones. For instance, new structures were built at Ipakodo Grammar School and Majidun Grammar School. Before that happened, there were old buildings that were crumbling. Today, however, there are millennial schools with better structures in all these areas. There are now good schools in Ibeshe. Keme Balogun High School is the only secondary school in the area. They have a new block of classrooms, and some restructured classrooms in the primary section.

With the intervention of script rehabilitating, the government began to rebuild, rehabilitate and furnish schools. But there were still grounds to cover. The population of Lagos State is no small number, and the government did not have the most up-to-date data of the masses they were serving. Thus, planning for the execution of school projects was not without its problems. It would take gathering data and confirming the number of children that should be in school to plan adequately and provide infrastructures for education that will cater for the needs of all children of school age. The government was running against time, as they could not collect data showing how

many children there were, where they were located, among many other things.

Generating data was difficult because there were many Lagos residents that were not registered with the Lagos State Residents' Registration Agency (LASSRA). The law establishing LASSRA requires all residents within the state to register with the agency. Of course, many people come to live in Lagos without bothering to do so. Some of them come with their children, and on a daily basis too. This creates a problem for the government, because if these ones are not registered with LASSRA, it was difficult to have their data.

The percentage of uncaptured residents in the state is still so huge that not much significant development planning can be made. As at 2020, those registered with LASSRA are still less than half of the population. This is proof that the government does not have the data of more than half of the children that should be in school. The government has no idea that these children exist. Yet, they are in Lagos, and there is where the problem lies. People do not seem ready to respond to the government's orders and instructions. That is why they are not receptive to the idea of data inquiry or compilation of data. A similar thing occurred during the Coronavirus pandemic, when the government asked people to wear face masks. Many people just refused to comply. That is the nature of the frustration that one encountered, and many political leaders and government officials continue to endure this in their effort to make meaning contribution to state development.

Of course, there are many sectors that need government's intervention and direction, but the resources are limited. So, I chose to focus on just one – the education sector.

Chapter Twenty-Four

PURSUING DEVELOPMENT IN IKORODU

I had always wanted to be involved in the development of the Ikorodu community, even before I began my journey into politics. The urge to help the people was the most natural thing to me, as natural as breathing. This was not so much because I expected to be involved in shaping the direction of the community or in its decision-making process, but because I had seen my father's involvement in the community as a child. He was active in everything, especially when it came to traditional festivals. I observed how he played a significant role in the traditional governance and administration of the town. This was what informed my desire to do the same.

"I must be a part of what happens here. I should not stay away," I said to myself, determined to take ownership of the community and strive to make it better.

By providence, I always found my way back to Ikorodu. It was certainly through no deliberate effort of mine that I was often in the town. The first time it happened was when I was posted there for work after quitting my job at Cooper and Lybrand. I could have been posted to Badagry, Epe, Eko, or some other places, but I was not. I was posted to Ikorodu, and that gave me the opportunity to be more involved in the community.

I was able to learn of its festivals, royalty and chieftaincy practices, progress and development, among many other things during the Ibrahim Babangida administration in the 1980s. It was then that we came up with the idea of the community development associations. I was involved in the

activities of the community and continued long afterwards and on a grander scale when I proceeded to politics.

During my first term, nearly after two years in office as Commissioner, Tinubu brought the Independent Power Project (IPP) to Egbin Thermal Station in Ikorodu. This was part of the governor's vision to make Lagos independent and sustainable as well as generate electricity that would be dedicated to the state alone. Soon after, though, it was confiscated by the Federal Government because the national grid was a federal property and it was not possible for a state to appropriate it to itself. They insisted that whatever was generated in the national grid could not necessarily go to Lagos State alone, except the state was willing to facilitate and pay for the whole process.

Egbin Thermal Station was always there, but we brought the IPP into it. It could have been taken elsewhere, perhaps to Badagry. There is one in Ikeja, which was installed by the Lagos State Government to power government establishments and businesses in the area. Bringing it also to Ikorodu was an advantage to the community for two reasons. The first was that it would generate employment, because businesses would be run from the place and people would have to work there. The second was that the company would engage in some corporate social responsibilities in that environment.

In addition to completing the Ibeshe road project, we also constructed the Obafemi Awolowo Road. The long stretch of road was constructed by Governor Tinubu, who also built the Tinubu Estate and the LSDPC Estate in Ikorodu. Another residential estate was also put up by the government in Odunla. We constructed the TOS Benson Road, and rehabilitated the Ipakodo Road. In fact, on the day the former was being commissioned, Chief TOS Benson was

present to appreciate and commend Tinubu for the achievement. These were some of the projects that we started and completed. Tinubu supported my ideas when it came to the development of agriculture in Ikorodu as well. When I proposed starting a fish farm in Ikorodu, he approved it.

My position as Vice Chairman of the APC also came with responsibilities. One of those responsibilities was making sure that there were minimal issues that troubled the party in the district, and I did this to the best of my ability. I endeavoured to keep our active political supporters gainfully employed so that they did not engage in any form of misconduct. I did not abandon them or leave them to their devices. I attempted to find ways to help them reconstruct their lives and make opportunities available to them.

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In 2001, his Royal Majesty, Oba Salaudeen Oyefusi conferred on me the chieftaincy title of Asipa of Ikorodu. It was a high-ranking title in any Yoruba community, and ranks next to that of the Asiwaju. At first, I asked myself why I deserved such a prestigious title. It was a title that took me close to the royal palace, where the Oba would often give me instructions or directives, send me on errands, or ask about the happenings in government or the community. He was quick to call on me if there were any issues he wanted resolved, and I in turn demonstrated my loyalty and support for the royal palace. I represented and communicated information from the palace to the people.

There had been cases of misinterpretation of information disseminated from the palace to the community in the past.

Some would spread lies about what the palace did or how the palace was involved in some issues in the community. Others outside the town would sometimes say things that could put the Oba in a bad light. So, it was important for people like me to go out there and give members of the community the correct information. This was what I did often as a ranking chief in the palace.

The council of chiefs, which I belonged to, met regularly at the palace. I was secretary, and Chief T.O.S Benson was the chairman. It was during one of the meetings we held that it was decided that the Oba's 80th birthday celebration and the 40th anniversary of his reign should be commemorated with a book published in his honour. The book was to contain the Oba's story, his 40-year reign, his challenges, achievements, and a little history of Ikorodu, which I narrated. The book was produced by the council of chiefs, and edited by Dr. Kayode Bawala.

That was in 2011. I was the chairman of the committee that was set up to organize the Oba's double celebration. The Queen, Olori Muhibat Oyefusi, was the special adviser to the committee, which held meetings often before the scheduled date of the event. The Olori played hostess to us and told us what to do, how to do it, and at what cost, among other things. The event was a huge success. Barely four years later, in 2014, Oba Oyefusi passed on.

When he passed on, another committee was set up to organise his burial ceremony. I was again appointed as chairman. Though I was not involved in the traditional burial rites that were carried out, I was in charge of making the burial ceremony for the public a success. There was the Odofin who was also in charge of other aspects of the ceremony. Oba Oyefusi was finally laid to rest.

After the Oba's death, there began a tussle for the throne among the people in the ruling house. The late Oba was from Rademo ruling house, and the next ruling house to produce the Oba was the Lasunwon house. There were about 15 of them who contested for the throne, but the front runners were Prince Tajudeen Odofin, a chartered accountant, former Commissioner for Finance in Lagos State, and former President of Oriwu Club; and Chief Kabiru Adewale Sotobi, who was the Odofin of Ikorodu.

While they struggled for power, the Lasunwon family wrote a letter of intention to the government indicating their readiness to proceed with the screening process, and eventually submit the family's choice for the office of Oba. While that was going on, I met Odofin Sotobi, also a member of the Oriwu Club, at the club. The frontrunners were two members of the club who were from the same family, an older one and a younger one. They had different fathers, but they were from the same compound. I asked Odofin Sotobi directly if he wanted to be the Oba of Ikorodu.

"Who have you consulted with?" I asked. "It is the Oba of Ikorodu we are talking about here. I mean, you know the place of Ikorodu in Lagos State. Who have you consulted with politically? Because there is the role of politics in this matter."

"No one," was his short response.

"Do you know Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu?"

Again, he responded in the negative. Of course he knew him as a public figure, but not in a personal way. He had followed the late Oba to pay Tinubu a visit once but he did not have a relationship with him.

"You must go there," I said seriously. "You know that he is my leader and I have a good relationship with him. So, let's make time to go and see him soon."

Odofin Sotobi agreed and stated that he would be pleased if I could make it happen.

"Alright," I said, promising to give him a date when we could go.

On the day we agreed to go, I called about four of our eminent Ikorodu people – Princess Adenrele Adeniran-Ogunsanya, Otunba Lamidi Gbadamosi (a former Permanent Secretary and Clerk of the Lagos State House of Assembly), Otunba Ayodele Elesho (a former Commissioner of Information and Strategy under Governor Buba Marwa), Chief Monsuru Alowoshago, publisher of Oriwu Sun' – who joined us. We proceeded together to Bourdillon Road to see Asiwaju Tinubu. Fortunately, he was available to see us on that day. He received us warmly, and without wasting time, ushered us into his office where I stated the reason for our visit.

"Your Excellency Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the Jagaban of Nigeria," I extolled as I started the discussion. "We have come to present to you our candidate for the Ayangbunren of Ikorodu. His name is Odofin Kabiru Adewale Sotobi. He has been the Odofin of Ikorodu for five years, working with the late Oba whom you have a lot of respect for in terms of integrity, Your Excellency."

I explained that Chief Sotobi had worked under the tutelage of the late Oba. So, he was not new to the culture and tradition we held in high esteem. I could thus vouch for him and trust his loyalty to and support for government. He would make a good partner with government and would certainly not go against it, I stated.

"Your Excellency," I further affirmed, "as a man of resources, he is a successful businessman and not somebody who will depend on the office for his sustenance. If he cannot support or sustain himself, he will lose all integrity. He is a professional, an electrical engineer, who rose from the rank of an engineer to deputy chief electrical engineer at Lafarge, where he worked."

Indeed, Chief Kabiru had worked with Lafarge Nigeria Plc for 30 years before he retired. So, he was not a man of little means. Asiwaju also knew and recognised the distinguished personalities who came with me – Ogunsanya, Gbadamosi, Elesho, and Alowoshago – as reputable woman and men.

And so it was that we presented our candidate to Tinubu. Asiwaju, however, wanted to know who else was in the race. Perhaps he knew before he asked but wanted us to mention the person he was competing against. We did, just as he wanted us to. Coincidentally, Odofin Kabiru's competition had also been presented to Asiwaju, but when he saw the five of us along with the aspirant, he said "Okay" and asked us to go. It was on Tuesday, 22 May 2015, that we visited Asiwaju. On Friday, he called me on the phone and said, "Go and prepare to install your candidate."

He gave specific details and assured me that the governor would make the installation happen. The governor then was Babatunde Fashola, and he was preparing to handover in a few days, which was on 29 May 2015. The installation of the new Oba had to be done before another government took over. If a new governor took over before the installation, he would take his time to settle down before thinking of a new Oba. The more time he took, the more problems would arise within the Ikorodu community, where an oba had not been installed. And we did not want that. So, we made plans to conclude all arrangements before Fashola's exit. I wasted no

time in getting in touch with the Governor and Chief Sotobi on that same day.

On Monday, I went along with two others, Olowoshago and Elesho, to the governor's office where we met with Fashola. Members of the Executive Council were there on that day. They were all leaving office with Fashola. We presented our case, and he listened. He also told us to go and he would call on us. But I insisted that if we did not do the installation then, since we were all there, there would be no more time to do it.

"You can go. I will come and do it," he assured us.

So, we left and went to make preparations. On Tuesday, the next day, we got dressed and ready for the installation, confident that Fashola would conduct the ceremony, as he had promised. We waited anxiously at the palace for a while, getting a little more agitated with each passing second. Nothing seemed to be happening, and there were no signs of Fashola anywhere. Suddenly, however, policemen were everywhere and the Commissioner of Police soon arrived and gave us the hope that the governor would come. People came around the palace even though we had not made an announcement. At about 2pm, a helicopter conveying the governor landed within the premises of the town hall, which was only five minutes away from the palace. True to his word, Fashola came to install the Oba. He presented the staff of office to Odofin Sotobi, thus demonstrating that the new Oba had been installed.

We were satisfied that there was once again leadership in Ikorodu, and we were spared any form of embarrassment. Chief Sotobi's contender went to court to challenge the installation, arguing that the Oba was appointed at a time when he was the Odofin of Ikorodu. He maintained that that should not have been so, as he could not hold the title of Odofin and that of Oba at the same time.

Chief Sotobi, on the other hand, argued that his case was not unique to him alone. He cited the example of one who was crowned as king almost 200 years ago in Ikorodu when he was an Odofin in Sagamu. There was precedence upon which his appointment could be established. This is the role we played in the installation of the Oba, and after he was crowned, a committee was set up for his coronation. His friends formed this committee, and I was made the chairman. The coronation was different from receiving the staff of office presented by the governor.

After that presentation, we made plans for a coronation. We created a programme for the new Oba. First, he would go into seclusion for three months and while in seclusion, there must be a programme of the coronation ceremony to present him to the public. He would be presented to visitors and other Obas. Friends and family of the Oba made up the committee, and we started having meetings regularly. The first thing we did as a committee was ask for his input into the ceremony. Next, we went round the Yoruba speaking towns and cities, particularly Ijebu, to tell them of the new Oba who had been installed by the governor in Ikorodu. We did not fail to inform them of the process of the seclusion that he was going through and all he had to do.

Together with Chief Sulaiman Ogidi and the four others with whom I had previously visited Asiwaju Tinubu, I visited the Awujale of Ijebu Ode, Oba Sikiru Adetona. We also visited Oba Adeniyi Shonariwo, who was Akarigbo of Remo; Oba Adesanya Alara of Ilara; Oba Rilwan Akinolu of Lagos; and Oba Akran of Badagry.

They counselled us, gave us advice, and shared their experiences with us. They also spoke of how to handle planning committees and how to bring everybody together since the Oba had assumed that position. They advised that

with that position, he should be father to all and should carry everyone along, particularly people from his ruling house. He should learn, they said, never to condemn anybody but should receive all his subjects.

"You should listen to the members of your committee. You should bring them closer to you and you should carry them along. No one is bad," the Awujale advised, adding that even a prostitute, the poorest in the society, the man everyone thinks of as mad all had roles to play.

He continued, "Listen to everybody. Don't judge people by the size of their purse or by the influence they have. They are all your subjects, and you should not treat them based on any religion or creed, not even those you consider non-indigenes. They are all a part of your domain."

When we returned to the Oba, we told him what the Obas had all said. It was for three calendar months that the Oba went into seclusion, and one calendar month was 20 days. So, he was in seclusion for 60 days. There was a place called Epebi, where the Oba performed one ritual after another. The traditional priests told him the dos and the don'ts of the office, as they tried to reinforce him spiritually. While he was in seclusion for 60 days, we acted as his ambassadors and went around the whole town and other places, making arrangements for his coronation.

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As soon as Chief Sotobi settled into the routine of the palace, he got to work. He sat with the five us who had become his ambassadors and were always with him – I, Otunba Gbadamosi, Otunba Elesho, Olowosago, and Ogida – to have a

discussion about his vision, goals and aspirations for the Ikorodu community.

We spoke to him about his manifesto which he had presented when he was not yet the Oba and how it could become a reality. We had discussions after discussions and came up with ideas that we would pursue for the development of Ikorodu. The first was to work in collaboration with the government of Lagos State and all levels of government - local, state and federal – in order to attract projects to Ikorodu, create opportunities for the large number of youths, and improve the agricultural sector.

So, we asked ourselves, "If this is the goal, what are the specific projects and strategies we would use to get there? How do we get there?" We decided that to get there, we would have to form a committee of technical and professional members. We called the committee the Ikorodu Model City Implementation Committee, which was headed by a reputable structural engineer, Sir R.O. Shoderu.

One of the members of the committee was the quantity surveyor, Professor Kunle Adewahab, who was also the pioneer Dean, Faculty of Environmental Sciences, Obafemi Awolowo University, and pioneer of the Due Process office under President Obasanjo. Other members of the committee were Otunba Elesho, Otunba Gbadamosi, Mr. Tunde Rotinwa, and me. I was named the Secretary and Coordinator of the Committee because of my close interactions with the Oba.

The other strategy was to attempt to attract our resourceful and eminent Ikorodu indigenes home and abroad to come to Ikorodu to partner with the community. We thought about projects that would encourage this, and we came up with five of them, which were divided into immediate, medium and long term.

The first project was a new palace. The Oba wanted to build a new palace, one that would be more befitting of the office. The second project was a structural transformation of the nucleus of the town, which would promote tourism and cultural festivals. The traditional institutions that formed the nucleus of the town included: the 200-year-old traditional palace called Awofin; the Osugbo, which handled the security of the town; the Awopa, which was the supreme court in the traditional setting; and the open theatre where the local festivals, dance, rituals, the crowning of the Oba or the crowning of a chief happened. These places are still there today. They are our cultural heritage and we did not tamper with them. The other projects we proposed were a stadium, followed by a king's library and a VIP government chalet.

The members of the implementation committee counselled the Oba during our meetings at the palace. As the coordinator, I often gave directives on what to do. We brought together some of the best architects who were respected nationally and who were from Ikorodu. The architects were Taiwo Kara, who belonged to the first architectural firm in Nigeria, the Onafowokan City Scape Town Planning Company; Shina Shonebo; and Kunle Ayokunle Onafowokan. We gave them a brief, which revealed that we wanted to create a theatre in Ikorodu with the traditional name *Ita Efulase*.

I suggested turning the theatre into a place where we could promote tourism. The architects got to work and designed the theatre. Then they presented it to the committee, which in turn critiqued and reviewed it over and over again until it was accepted. This came at the time when Lagos State was doing a review of the Ikorodu regional master plan. So, when we finished our design, we presented it to the Governor of Lagos State through the Oba. We presented another copy to the firm that was contracted to do the regional master plan

and gave yet another copy to the Commissioner of Physical Planning.

We wanted to be sure that this design would be integrated into the Lagos State Ikorodu regional master plan, which would be signed as law either then or in the future. When it becomes law, the Lagos State Government will execute the project. Another project we wanted to embark upon was the stadium. The Ikorodu youths had nowhere to expend their energy because there was no stadium in the community. We concluded that this was one of the reasons why there was so much youthful restiveness and cultism in Ikorodu. Since it was the Oba's vision to partner and collaborate with government, we decided to push it as one of the projects we wanted. We considered two possible locations for it, if it was accepted by the government. The first location was Igbogbo. The second location was either within or outside the campus of Lagos State Polytechnic.

The fourth project that we wanted to embark upon was a library, which would be funded through donations and support from international bodies or well-wishers. We also hoped for the support of the North Carolina A&T State University, an agricultural and technical institution. It was the school the Oba attended and graduated from.

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After Chief Sotobi was crowned, some of us joined him on a trip to North Carolina. We went through Dr. Robert Brown, the person who had adopted the Oba as a child and had taken him away from Nigeria.. We were taken round the school, and Chief Sotobi was well accepted and celebrated. In fact, a place in Greensborough, North Carolina, where the

black uprising started has now been converted to a museum, and artifacts as well as statues have been placed there to the Oba's honour.

The people at the university pledged their support to his reign. They asked, "What ideas do you have for your community?" Chief Sotobi responded that he wanted to build a king's library in order to develop the education sector in Ikorodu. They were ready to support him financially, and the committee worked to secure a land donated by the Lagos State Polytechnic. They sent from the US a model of what a king's library should look like, and our committee of architects looked at it critically in order to customise and modify it to our environment.

The fifth project was the government VIP chalet. Ikeja, Badagry and Epe all have government VIP chalets where all the executives of government can go for a retreat and stay two or more days. There were times when Bola Ahmed Tinubu and members of the cabinet would go to the chalet at Badagry and we would spend some days or weekends there. We do not have such facilities in Ikorodu, and that was part of the vision of the Kabiyesi. He told the then governor, Ambode, of his plans. Today, the government has approved about 17 acres of land on the coaster boundary in Ikorodu for the construction of this chalet. We have, in fact, taken it a step further by making a publication which lists all the facilities that will be in the chalet, and have invited possible investors.

Of the five projects proposed by the Oba, two have been approved by government and one has been fully delivered, which is the palace. During the first year of his reign, Oba Sotobi called the eminent people of Ikorodu to the palace. He read out his vision to the people and said what we wanted to start with was the construction of the palace. The day

coincided with the ceremony of the installation of the queen mother, Alhaja Mutihat Ogbara. A big title was conferred on her. On that day, the richest woman in Africa, Mrs. Folorunsho Alakija, was in attendance because she is also Ogbara. The name Ogbara is indigenous to Ikorodu.

The Oba stated that though the palace as it was then was built and donated by government, the people of Ikorodu could do better. Everyone bought into the Oba's idea and they started to make pledges. I was the secretary of the committee, and I noted the names of those who made pledges to get in touch with them later. We made a publication of the official account for the donation. Of course, it was not a personal account. We promised to give an account of everything, and that was what we did. The project cost N250 million. Within two years, we commenced building the palace and completed it, fully furnished.

Chapter Twenty-Five

LIFE AND LEGACIES

"If you become president, I want to be a minister."

These were my words to Asiwaju Tinubu sometime after both our terms in the Lagos State government ended, mine as Commissioner of Agriculture and his as Governor of Lagos State in 2007. He had shown interest in contesting for the position of the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and I wanted to continue to make an impact on society as I had done while I was a commissioner. Since I had no interest in returning to the government as a commissioner at my age, I thought I could make the impact I desired as a governor or minister. I worked hard towards the success of the party, but what I had hoped for did not happen.

"Would you like to return as a commissioner?" Tinubu asked, not oblivious of my desire.

When I responded in the negative, he asked, "So, what do you want?"

It was better for a young person who had fresh, new ideas and goals to fill this role, I thought. This was what I told him, and one of my children came to mind. It was my daughter, Abisola Olusanya, who had always shown interest in governance right from when she was a child. I presented her CV to him when I had the opportunity to. He accepted it, but I did not think much of it until word went around that her name was on the list of commissioners to be appointed. She was indeed, and after her appointment, she wasted no time in serving in the same capacity as I did.

Not only is she making an impact now, but she is also sustaining the legacy I left behind as the Commissioner of Agriculture. As a commissioner, she is doing so much better than I did when I was in office. She executes ideas, visions, policies and projects on a much higher level than I ever thought anyone could in the Lagos State Ministry of Agriculture. She always had it in her. When she was younger at the University of Lagos, she followed me around while I executed my projects. Every chance she got, whether it was break between lectures or holiday between sessions, she would keep up with all my projects, following me to the field and observing everything that was going on. If I said "I am working on something here", she would immediately follow me.

Though she studied Architecture then, she was as interested in agriculture as I was. When she later returned to pursue her interest in the field of agriculture, many of the things she came across were not strange to her.

Since she was already familiar with my projects, I put them in her care and talked to her about looking after them.

"Don't allow things to degenerate in terms of structure, in terms of infrastructure, in terms of meeting the need of the people," I said to her. "Try to rehabilitate things; try to bring things up; try to enhance the opportunities of the people you're there to serve."

She did just as I asked of her, and till today, she ensures that the projects I executed while in office are not neglected. But I do not interfere with her office, how she handles matters or executes projects. I do not dictate to her or tell her what to do. There are times when farmers in those areas run to me, pleading for my help to get her attention as the Commissioner of Agriculture. I tell them to go to her as a

corporate body with a letter stating what they want, whether complaints, proposals, or new ideas.

“Go to her. She’ll listen to you,” I tell them, adding that it is not my place to interfere.

Some other persons have come to me, also pleading for help to see my daughter.

“Excuse me, sir,” they would approach me. “We want to see your daughter.”

I would insist that they call her because, if anyone was willing and eager to help, it was my daughter. However, few of them believed me. They were of the opinion that I must intercede on their behalf to get her attention. They might suggest that I write a letter to her office on their behalf. I do not want to run her office, neither do I want to influence her decisions or mislead her. Besides, I would not want anyone to think that I have any say in the matters of my daughter’s office because I have occupied the same office before. Things have changed since I was in office, and I cannot afford to make decisions based on my past experiences. So, I stand my ground. In the end, they go to her and see for themselves that she can be of assistance. They return to me singing her praises. Even high political office holders or elders in the party have come to tell me the great experiences they have had with her.

My daughter is doing well at the Ministry of Agriculture, where she works hard to ensure that all new projects are executed and the existing ones are developed. Such was the training I gave all my children. I taught them hard work and discipline. Hard work is not something to be abhorred but something to be embraced. This is a lesson my children learnt early in life, and they take it wherever they go.

Another one of my children, Lukman Adebola Olusanya, is also doing well in his field. He is Vice President, FP&A & Strategic Finance at Google. He grew up with me in Ikorodu. When I started the school, we were teaching together here. When he returned from his national youth service, I asked him what his plans were since he had obtained a BSc in Metallurgical Engineering.

“Bola, what do you want to do?” I asked, pressing him for an answer. “Tell me what you want to do.”

“I want to establish an ICT office,” he responded without hesitation.

So, I bought him a computer and we set up a place for operation. He later went to Abuja, where he worked with some people, before moving on to the U.S for his MBA, which I paid for. Thus, my son went from one level to the other until he got to Amazon, where he spent between five to eight years as a strategic manager. Then he decided that it was time to move on.

“Daddy, I am going to Google to work,” he said to me one day.

I responded with a question, “Why not stay here?”

“Daddy, I will be employed as Vice President at Google,” he said with a twinkle in his eye.

So it was that my son came to hold such high position at Google. Indeed, my children grew up with one goal in mind, to be hard working. My family is close-knit, just like my family was while I was growing up in Ikorodu. I also have a great relationship with my extended family, and some of their children have attended my school at some point. The school, like I always say, is named Kith and Kin because it is for family, the neighbhourhood and society.

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When I was Vice Chairman of the East Senatorial District, I focused my attention on education, and I saw to it that there was a great improvement in this sector, particularly within the Ikorodu community. By the end of my tenure, several schools in Ikorodu had been rebuilt, rehabilitated and furnished. Some old depreciated buildings were replaced. Indeed, with the intervention of the government, things changed in the education sector within the community.

The establishment of my school also contributed in no small measure to the development of education in Ikorodu. I started Kith and Kin in an incomplete building, which had none of the basic things you would expect to find, like toilet, windows, and running water. It was what I would call a carcass building, which was enough reason for me to give up even before starting. But I was determined to make it work because I was passionate about education, and I wanted everyone, including family, friends, neighbours and the Ikorodu community, to benefit from it. Starting Kith and Kin was not about the business or the financial rewards, it was about my passion for education and making it accessible to my community.

There was also the woman of my life, my wife, who gave me the support I needed to get started. She was the springboard for the establishment of my school. Besides the encouragement she gave me, she was a teacher whose passion for teaching complemented mine. The synergy between both of us and the unity in our thoughts, ideas, and purpose, as well as the support of the children made starting off the school in the direst of circumstances possible.

The ability of the people within the community to pay was what initially determined the school fees, which was little or nothing. With time, however, more people started to see the value we offered and they paid more fees. They could compare the value we offered to those of the best schools around in terms of performance. Such was the kind of education we made accessible to the Ikorodu community. Then came a time when we could employ professional teachers. This helped change the structure and organisation of the school.

When we started, there was no such thing as Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), and we certainly did not hold such meetings. Parents were able to judge students' performances through their results. But in time, we employed teachers and the PTA was formed. The teachers I employed were from well-established schools around, who could bring their skills, expertise and experience to Kith and Kin.

There was a time when we brought in a teacher, Mrs. Folorunsho Atilola, from Babington Macaulay, which was a big school around Ikorodu then. The English graduate became the first head of Kith and Kin Primary School. She immediately started to develop the school, bringing more teachers on board so that there was a professional teaching staff which attracted more students, and there was an increase in the population of the school. This led to an increase in school fees as well as teachers' salaries. With the increase in school population, I was able to build necessary structures and pay for the cost of operations. I could also improve the condition of my house, and within three to four years, I had enough money saved to buy a land, which I paid for over time. Every year, I conveniently paid for the operations of the school. I never borrowed at any time to pay for fuel, salary, or for the school's running cost.

I knew it would not be a good financial decision to borrow in order to fund school operations. This fact was reinforced by the training I had received at the Lagos Business School. I learnt at the school that the health of any business is determined by the ability of that business to generate enough money, more than enough to pay for the operational costs of running that business. If I have learnt anything from running the school, it is that you do not borrow to pay for operations. Any business that borrows to pay for operations is not sustainable. You can borrow to invest in fixed capital, in structures, in any asset that will be consumed over some time, but any service that will be consumed within the delivery of that service between the period of a year or less than a year is not sustainable. You cannot borrow to fund that type of operation, especially your salary, waste disposal, electricity, and even annual renewals. I realised that I was soon able to pay for operational costs and save a little.

I put my money into the school in its early stages. I invested my money, my personal savings as well as savings from my wife in Kith and Kin. Later, as the school became more established, I found out that any year I was able to pay salaries without hitches or pay easily for the operation of the school, I had enough funds to direct to the development of structures in the school or enough to make some deposit in the bank. The latter was to impress the bank officials that we would be able to repay any loans we took and to prove the viability of the business. Five years after starting the school, when I approached First Bank at Owode for a loan, they approved it after an initial hesitation. I took the loan while negotiating a land for the school, which was five million naira at the time. Since then, I have successfully built and expanded my school on loans and repaid at the appropriate time.

Each time I take a loan, I make sure that I have enough money in my account to repay immediately it is due. I do this in order to meet all the terms and conditions of the loans, which are known as terminal loans. Synchronising the repayment of my loans with the payment of school fees makes it easy for me to achieve this. School resumes in September and the students pay their fees then. That way, I have enough money to pay back my loans in October. When school resumes in January, I repay my loans in February after the students would have paid their fees. Again, when school resumes in April and students pay their fees, I am able to get some money to repay my loan by May. So, everything works out just as planned within the three terms. I never let my loan repayment interfere with paying salaries, and I do not compromise on salary payment. Since I started the school till date, I have always paid salaries at the end of each month, which could be between the 25th and 27th.

I love my peace of mind, and for that reason, I endeavour not to owe any staff or the bank. Trust is important, especially when you are running a business. Your stakeholders and staff should be able to trust you. When there is trust, business thrives. I have got quite some support from banks, , which have actually acted as the pillars that bear the weight of the school and propel its growth. Discipline is another important thing that helps me keep my resolve never to owe the bank or the staff. It takes a lot of discipline not to dip your hands in the money you have in your corporate account.

The school was fueled by nothing but passion at first, until my wife and I gained some perspective on the business management of the school. We did a management audit, which set us off on the right path. It was after that audit that my wife and I came to be on the salary roaster of the school staff, and I never touch anything besides my salary. This was one of the sacrifices I had to make for the school, especially

as I was underpaid as a staff. My salary was determined by the ability of the school to make money, and initially it was not making so much money.

Thankfully, when I returned to government service and my wife continued to run the school, I had an additional source of income. That was how I was able to pay my children's school fees and for other necessities. It would have been unwise to expose the school's business to an expenditure bill that could not be funded or generated from the school's activities. If I put the burden of paying for my children's expenses, perhaps abroad, on the school, it could collapse. Kith and Kin was not financially strong or healthy enough to carry that burden. I had to depend on other sources of income to take care of my family.

When running a business, it is important to do an evaluation, to check its ability to make money and how much it could make. Then weigh this against your expenditure and determine if the business can sustain it. What I have done is to separate personal and family expenditure from the school's bills. I am still engaged in so many other activities. The school is not the only business I run. I have properties in one or two places, where I make annual income. I am also engaged in politics, where I earn some income. I make sure that I do not depend on the school. In a sense, my other activities have contributed to the success of the school.

Diversification is important when running a business. You should be able to diversify your income, whether as an individual, a society, or even a nation. The school is a source of income, but I should not rely on it alone. I should be able to have other things that can fetch some resources and generate income. This is to enable the school run on its own even without me.

Seeking financial advice is also important when running a business. Start on a small scale and seek advice from professionals. Ensure that your business has a structure and purpose. You cannot run a business without a purpose. You must be able to answer such questions as, “What do I want to do? What am I bringing to those that will patronise me? What value do I want to offer?”

After you have answered these questions, find the resources to run your business. If you want to successfully run a business, you should be able to learn from others. For instance, if you want to run a good school, you should be willing to learn from the best schools around you. Perhaps you can ask yourself: “What is their story line? What have they done to be successful?”

Learn from these schools and pick things that you can replicate in your peculiar circumstances and according to your goals. That is why I want Kith and Kin to be modelled after Corona School over time. The names of the owners are not attached to this school. What everyone knows is that it has a board of trustees, and offices or positions are occupied. Once someone’s tenure is over, someone else replaces them. This is an established process, and it is under the direction of the trustees that the school runs successfully.

I want to be able to establish a board of trustees for Kith and Kin sometime in the future so that when I am gone, my wife, any of my children, and family who are still alive can only support the brief of the board of trustees, which would be documented. Any member of the family who wants to be part of the school and trustees should be qualified for that position. Qualifications must be a prerequisite before they can attain such position. Another person can replace them when their tenure ends. In addition to the qualifications they must possess, they should also be passionate about

education and should be available to attend meetings. They have to occupy a non-executive position, so that they do not have any ideas about bossing anyone around because it is "my father's property."

I want to leave a legacy behind, one that my children can continue long after I am gone. I have seen how many big African businesses collapse after the death of their proprietors. These businesses were big when they were alive, but the moment their proprietors died, they went extinct. A classic example is M.K.O Abiola. He established different businesses in his lifetime, but after his death, many of the businesses collapsed. I do not want mine to be like that. I want it to continue when I am no more. I want it to be my contribution to society. It is the same way I want my children to contribute their own quota to society.

They have all acquired education, which I made sure to provide them. It is now time for them to establish their world. I did not inherit Kith and Kin from my parents, so they should not expect to inherit it, at least not in the manner you inherit a house. They should support it, perhaps start a foundation to do that. If, for instance, I have eight children and all of them descend on the school and take pieces of it, there would be no legacy left to help develop society. So, rather than take, they should add to it. Except they are members of the board, they cannot lay claim to the school even though they are my children. The board will probably have only one seat reserved for a member of the family, and even that should have its tenure. This is the kind of discussion I will like to have with my children before I am gone.

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The first club I joined besides those I belonged to as a child at Isale-Eko and my days at the university was Rotary Club. It was around 1977, and I found out that the members of the club were not only professionals but were accomplished professionals. It was what I would describe as a club for professionals. Many of them were elderly people, who were above my status, and to say I gained a lot from them is an understatement. The club strengthened my belief that I must not only watch out for the quality of men but look out for the objectives of a club before joining one. I came to associate with people that I could learn from rather than questionable characters who could rob me of my dignity. I made sure that I participated in the Rotary Club activities, like I did when I was a child as an active member of clubs where I was often the secretary. This ultimately impacted my life.

Some two to four years after joining the Rotary Club, I joined the Island Club. That was when Chief Babs Akerele was the chairman of the club. He was then a chieftain of the National Republic of Convention, which I had joined in Ikorodu. A leader who had so much wisdom to share, I was constantly in awe of him. If we did not meet at the club, I would be sure to visit him at his home on Obafemi Awolowo Road in Ikoyi. The club provided a great environment for socialisation with an atmosphere of conviviality. Most of the members were within my age group. They were young executives in the public sector. A good number of them were self-employed, too. They were warm and friendly, and I could bring my family there every once in a while, especially when we held events on holidays – Christmas party, New Year party, Ileya party, among others. At such times, we were thrilled to life performances by great music bands. There were also times when we had lectures delivered to us by one prominent person or the other – the head of state, head of government,

head of private corporate organisations, and generally high-class people.

Associating with people of such high calibre helped boost my self-esteem and confidence. These people were a source of motivation, and they pushed me to achieve my goals and reach for a status beyond the one I had attained at the time. Between 1995 and 1996, the Island club broke into different sub-groups of people who shared a common interest. One of the groups was the chancellor's group. The chancellor's group was made up of young executives, who were generally younger than the average members of the Island club, and we held business meetings every week.

We invited someone to deliver a lecture at every business meeting each week. These were usually life impacting lectures on our business, health, family, the economy, and politics. We dressed formally to these lectures and called ourselves chancellors. I was elected the head of the chancellor's group at a time. I enjoyed the professional setting of the group, which greatly impacted the lives of members, as it influenced how they dressed, how they talked, how they carried themselves, and how they comported themselves.

In 1997, I also joined the Oriwu club, the premier social club in Ikorodu which was established in 1993. It was the club for the professionals in Ikorodu, and when I joined, Chief Rasheed Gbadamosi was the president of the club. Like the Island club, the environment of the Oriwu club was professional, decent, and warm. There were so many similarities between the two clubs, one of which was our formal dressing to meetings once a month. As a member of the club, we swore an oath not to seek the downfall of our brethren but to support one another in order to improve our wellbeing and to make a contribution to society. We sought

ways to improve the lives of ordinary people in society. The club was built on the premise that members would give back to, protect and improve the society. This resonated with my personal belief and conviction.

In spite of the growth and association I enjoyed at the Oriwu club, I soon found myself in another club, this time the Ikeja Country Club. I joined this club when I became the Commissioner of Agriculture. But I quickly realised that I could not joggle Island Club, Oriwu Club, and Ikeja Country Club all at once. Many other people were doing it, but I could not succeed in doing so as hard as I tried. I made the tough decision to drop out of the Ikeja Country club.

At the end of my term as Commissioner of Agriculture, I returned to Ikorodu permanently to be with my family and to be closer to my school, Kith and Kin. It was difficult to go to Island club at Onikan from Ikorodu, especially as I often had to arrive at meetings late and return home late. I began to wonder if it was worth it, and I would ask myself these questions, “Why should I do this? Why do I need it?”

Though I retained my position as a club member, I stopped being a regular participant. I would sometimes go to the club in the afternoon for lunch or whenever I had any business around there. I remained an active financial member of the club and continued with my obligations. When it was time to vote, too, I went there to vote, but I stopped my regular meeting attendance.

Also, I attended Oriwu club only once a month. Moreover, I had quit drinking alcohol, and it was time to limit my socialising at clubs. I did not miss important club functions, though. The AGM of Oriwu Club was held recently, and I did not miss it. Oriwu Club in Ikorodu was more close-knit than other clubs I had been a part of. The members were somebody’s uncle, cousin or nephew. We were related one

way or another, and this helped check our behaviour. No one wanted to be dismissed from the club for any acts of misconduct.

These were the clubs that I belonged to, and they each afforded me the opportunity to socialise with friends as well as interact with people of my status and like minds in an environment where I could relax and benefit from others. Also, social clubs helped increase my exposure to more people. These were people of class that I could benefit from through my discussions and interactions. They helped improve my knowledge and helped me have a better vision for myself and society.

I am a patron of so many other clubs. Some of the members of these clubs are young graduates who come together to socialise and inspire one another. They often send letters of request to make me their patron and mentor. For instance, members of the Igbogbo Students' Union, from Igbogbo in Ikorodu, come to me every year to invite me to their activities. They honoured me with the "Igbogbo Man of the Year" award in a bid to recognise my contribution to them.

I can relate with this particular club. This is perhaps because my mother was from Igbogbo. The current president of the union, Clinton, was a senior prefect in my school, Kith and Kin. I sponsor and attend their activities as well as give them lectures. Using myself as an example, I tell them not to allow any situation hinder their success.

"Don't say because you have a problem or a background inadequacy or because you come from a poor home or because you don't have parents, you cannot succeed in life. No! You can succeed. It depends on your perception and why you drive yourself," I would often say to them.

“You can get anywhere, but drive yourself first. Don’t let anybody define you by their perception. Don’t allow somebody tell you who you are. No, don’t allow it. Nobody should define you. Define yourself; tell people who you are, what you stand for, what you can achieve, and what your vision is. Write your own story.”

“Don’t let anybody tell you who you are. Don’t conform to the definition they have given you. Let them know that this is who you are, and live by that. The more you portray yourself by how you define yourself, the more people will take you for who you say you are.”

These are the messages I pass to the young people. I show them that I am a fine example, because I come from a humble background and yet I have been able to achieve a lot. My son, Lukman, did not only spend years occupying a senior position at Amazon, he became the Vice President at Google. It makes me happy that my little boy from Ikorodu holds such big position at an impressive firm today. It is the kind of inspiration that young people need. The key is not to stop but to keep pushing forward till you achieve your goals. This is how I talk to children. I talk to them from my experience. I share with people my belief that everybody can achieve what I have achieved. I tell people not to let their problems weigh them down, because everyone has one problem or another, but God has created human beings with the power to overcome them.

The fact that one does not have money, cannot pay house rent, or pay hospital bills should not keep one from working. Rather than seeing excuses, see an opportunity to change your situation. And this is where the mindset comes in. The mindset is an important tool in creating a vision for yourself. I often engaged in building construction in the past, and my son would ask, “Daddy won’t you stop? Just enjoy yourself,

go on holiday." Then I would respond with a smile, "Bola, if I come to you to stay with you on holiday, what will I do? Sleep, wake, sleep, wake? What will drive me?"

Going after something is what drives me. It makes me want to live for something. I will continue to run after something till the day I die. I do not want to retire. I want to go on working. When I observe the life of Pastor Enoch Adeboye, I see how he is dedicated to work and growth. He never rests. Though I am a Celestial Church man, I go to the Redemption camp every now and then. Any time I do, I see that there is always a more recent development than the one I witnessed on my last visit. That is the sign of a leader who is driven by a vision. That is the nature and strength of character that spurs me on. I have decided to forge on, because it gives me energy and it gives me reason to live, especially as I know that what I am doing would add value to humanity; it is not for my personal gain. Whatever it is that I find to do, I don't do it for myself; I do it for others, to create better lives for people.