

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

This Is Nigeria

Feyisayo Anjorin · Tuesday, November 28th, 2023

I had deleted your mail before I realized how important it is to know if you are on your way to this place or if you are already here.

I read the mail in a hurry. I do delete my mails sometimes because my wife would without fail suspect anybody that sends me mails with many smileys like you do.

She has heard so much about romantic affairs that start online; she goes through my mails and my chats once in a while. She's a bit paranoid, and I don't blame her.

Let me respond to your observations about our freedom.

I will like to make one thing very clear though, before I go to the details. I am not a pickpocket; I really don't appreciate the name-calling.

We have been free for a long time in this place; that I can confidently tell you; even if you are one of the arrogant types that would think everybody should be stuck in their understanding of freedom.

This is one of the freest places in the world.

I've been to London, I've been to Melbourne, I was in New York for a week last year, and two years ago I was in the holy city of Jerusalem as a pilgrim.

They are free. Free in their own ways, from their peculiar perspective they are; you can't expect a white man's city to be like a black man's city.

I hope you are not the kind with too many books in the head, who would call me a racist or think I am too racially conscious. I'm sorry if I sound harsh, but I don't know you quite well.

I know you have a PhD, I know you've done a lot of fieldwork, and you've been to many places on this continent. I wouldn't mind your visit to this place. It would be quite revealing, for you, and for me; that I'm sure of.

You may be the kind that would say we should all just be citizens of the world. I wonder if you are the kind that would be looking for London in Lagos, or for Hamburg in Johannesburg, or Wyoming in Nairobi.

Dude, you can't even find Kampala in Katanga, so what are you on about?

This place, as far as you are concerned, may be primitive, exotic, strange, organized chaos, not developed. Or uncivilized.

You may be one of the self-acclaimed custodians of freedom, the custodian of twenty-first-century-savvy ideals. I will never agree with those ones who think our salvation is in their methods. We are free in our own ways; we have always been free in our own ways.

Freedom is about power! If you are not afraid to be yourself, if you are not ashamed of your choices, if you are able to pursue the objects of your desire without hindrances to your natural abilities; then you are free.

Why don't you just say freedom is about your power of choice? Freedom is about living your dream, isn't it?

It is about just being yourself, no matter what that self is. It is about asserting or flaunting your private universe, isn't it?

Sometimes I feel like shouting, so I shout. I have my ready-made tantrums for the annoying things; I think out loud. I let it all out like scream-therapy, like the famous guy in that Edvard Munch painting; and I don't judge others. If I can shout, so can everybody else.

Even that 'shithole thing' says a lot about our freedom, so I hate it when you talk all that shit. Sometimes it catches me inside my air-conditioned car, in the traffic, when the sun is bright or at night. Sometimes it gets to me as I walk on, on the streets, or in the market.

Sometimes you feel that weight on your stomach in the car on the highway as you journey; you would have to stop or park by the roadside and help yourself out in the bush.

It's not as if I go about shitting and pissing. There are just those days.

Here we have something similar to the American dream but not quite like it. Big car, big house, agbadas, big chains, big stomach. You would have these women, smiling to seduce you,

That would cost you a lot. You would not mind the time because of the pleasure; and you would have your way. You would not mind the money. Big man can spend money the way big man likes even if it is not his own.

Being boss comes with big perks in this place; you would think perks do not need 'big' to make them good enough. One word is enough as far as you are concerned, but that thinking is from the place of ignorance too.

The English of England is not like the English of Nigeria.

There are many bosses in this place; but I get to be boss under my own roof, flaunting my bad attitude like a medal.

I could be an army general under my own roof, I could be like the sit-tight dictator of my dysfunctional African nation. My Mrs could remind me of her degree in Industrial chemistry and her masters in petrochemical engineering. I would stifle a yawn and ask her to bring my food; hot,

fresh and delicious.

I could tell you Nigeria is the real giant of Africa and still make you look like a fool with that look on my face when I hear someone say something really dumb. You would make me snort and stare as you talk about your assurance that even if Africa had a giant it would not be Nigeria.

Here, you are free to party, you are free to set up your canopies in the middle of the road, you would rent about a thousand plastic chairs, plastic round tables, and family members, friends, dressed in their uniform-like colourful attire, music in the air like an order to party. The air is not anybody's personal property for God sakes! You are free.

With a couple of associates we would turn any place to a market and make some noise. We would have our own market officials, an *iyalaje* or *iyaloja*, or whatever it is called in the over-a-hundred languages spoken here. Isn't that another way for making bosses?

I am free, even if not like a white man. Not like in London that I remember for that one dark, cold, wet December. My worst Christmas.

Then I was alone in the room I rented, down with flu, feeling blue. I was warned, but I just wanted to see the London derby live on Boxing Day. I'm a Chelsea fan.

It was so cold and I was told to be grateful for my afro; the cold would have felt worse with a shaved head.

There—in the UK—you are allowed your time of wildness during the league games and after it if your team wins; and after then you have to be normal or normal-looking. You call that freedom?

Now you mentioned wildlife in your last mail: there is nothing wrong with wildlife in Africa, in fact, Africa is the real wildlife; this place makes beautiful television whether you see it on National Geography or on CNN.

For some reason, wildlife and British just seem strange together.

In Nigeria you don't have to look for games to show your wildness; for your wildness, no matter how weird it is, is natural. You would be free here, free without anyone comparing you to a zoo creature, and without anyone saying things about mental health and all the nice or polite ways of calling you insane.

If you really think about it, freedom is a close friend with many faces. Your freedom is not my freedom, even though it would seem one word should have the same meaning all over the world.

I love that phrase you use repeatedly in our chats, but it would depend on what you mean when you see us as citizens of the world. You think we should not talk about our differences because it would divide us?

Don't think you can tell me about freedom because you came from a land where people delight in repeating fancy phrases like human rights, like right to self-determination, like freedom of speech. Bill of Rights my foot!

Do you need a document to know you are free? You need someone's word to affirm your freedom? You need someone to tell you where you can take a dump?

We know what freedom is. It is about power, about choices; it is also about your dreams and your worldview. It is not about morals.

Why are you making somebody feel like a criminal for getting money through some online persuasion? You wrote that you don't know what that is?

It is simple English or are you don't united? Online persuasion is just like any form of persuasion; I don't want to explain it to you, but I can draw a parallel. That is how far I would go.

It is something along the lines of seduction. What would you feel if someone called seduction exploitation of women? These guys are simply trying to connect by encouraging the dying art of letter writing, reading the well-written ones as far as I'm concerned is your way of receiving the hand of fellowship that is being extended.

Forgive them if they just love that story about a dead dictator with a secret account that could be yours in part. They know the bait, they make you move closer and closer, with desire, with glee, they know a lot about human greed. They've done their research. The telecoms companies operating in our country have learned a lot from these guys.

Do you know how many texts messages come alive on my phone everyday? These SMSs that tell of a chance for a grand prize of ten million? If you can just text WIN to 777 you could be a millionaire. Just dial 37894 or whatever number, maybe a simple one like 666.

No; they wouldn't do that. Six hundred and sixty six would not be a hit with millions of churchgoers. Just dial 874 for an instant airtime bonus.

I know you would call that ethical persuasion.

The churches learn from these so-called scam mails; so they adopted that for a hit gospel. Like the American Jesus, the Nigerian Jesus wants you fat and sated; he wants you to pay your tithe, he wants you to give a fat offering to his servants.

The Nigerian Jesus wants his servants to possess their possession, to eat the good of the land; they should ride in the best cars, there is need for a private jet, or private jets. He wants his servants to take this thing all over the world, this God is so twenty-first-century-savvy, so how else will he do it if ambassadors of his kingdom have no jets?

You cannot know about the Nigerian Jesus without the awareness of covenant wealth. That is why the richest pastors are from here.

Like the American Jesus, our Jesus so loves that he gets all the toys for his children.

The churches would love to print the story of your healing in their glossy magazines; they would make a documentary of your healing process. They have their own TV station; they are even developing their own social media site.

You would think Jesus was some media mogul, traveling around, putting out super-charged shows that would make good television.

Did you hear the pop star say the revolution will be televised?

There is a lot to learn from this so-called 419 thing if you can just be humble enough.

The Nigerian Jesus trumps the American Jesus in this fund-raising thing. If there was no bible you would have thought Jesus was this potbellied man that could still carry himself with graceful ease; Jesus in his chariot, a beautiful one, just like the one used by Pontius Pilate; quite distinct from the ones used by his disciples. You would have thought Jesus and his disciples were so good at raising offerings.

Capitalism, democracy, seduction, when you really think about it you could figure out the workings; so far it is the best of human reasoning. It is about numbers, it is about strengthening hope in the system.

You should learn a thing or two about persuasion.

We are brothers and sisters here; there are many brothers, many sisters, many mothers, many fathers, many uncles; you could be anything if someone comes with a smile and needs your help.

One day it could be your turn.

Okay, now, another form of persuasion.

What if I prefer to sneakily, surreptitiously help a brother with his purse on a crowded street? I'm sure that is why you called me a pickpocket. Yes, sure, I simply pick someone's pocket; nothing more.

The owner of the purse could be stopped by those hungry scruffy-looking police officers who could ask for your ID or whatever they know you don't have with you. A bribe would save you, but would you want to be milked as such daily? He could get to an ATM, hoping to make a withdrawal; he would then feel the pocket and be reminded of where he is.

Naturally I just like taking what I want. I was born this way. What do you want me to do? Do I have to change to be human? If those people – you know them – justify their difference with a song about being born this way, why cant I?

What right do you have to impose your views on us? Indeed, it is your right to try to impose; it is your right to be persuasive. As long as you are not forceful, isn't that okay?

A wise man once told me you will learn a lot more by listening to someone than by formulating a response in your head while they speak. You told me of your PhD in African Studies, but indeed Africa has its surprises and it is above your degrees.

Africa is what happens here while you are still there waiting for another Oshun Osogbo festival before you would write your next paper. It is not something you can understand with your cameras hanging from your neck and that silly-looking sunhat that makes you look out of place.

Africa is not just grass skirts; it is not just about dances round the fire.

This place is not just about rock paintings, not just about bronze art works and drums and drumbeats. Those pictures of stick-thin Biafran children don't say it all.

Gowon was not like Murtala, Obasanjo was not like Shagari, Shagari was a far cry from Buhari as

Babangida was a far cry from Abacha.

Mobutu, Idi Amin, Doe, Mugabe; you call them dictators too. If you really think about all the names I have mentioned you would get my point; some dictators make some dictators unlike dictators.

You don't understand that?

My dear, don't be so certain about this place. You usually visit as an observer, reacting to things, trying to understand, and drawing conclusions in simplicity.

Our people concluded on this freedom thing years ago; so we don't even give a damn.

We are ourselves; we are not trying to be like you. Even if we try, even if our women wish to be thin (or should I say slim?) like the white women in the movies, even if our women hate their hair and want to cook or fry it to submission; we are already ourselves because our deviation born of the imitation is now something beautiful.

You would want to use that word that rhymes with chief for these government officials. Indeed some of them are chiefs. Isn't it human to take too much when there is so much to be taken?

You wanted to know what could happen to that hungry one who tries to get away with a piece of fried fish in the market, the poor thief? I get the feeling you already know the answer to this, but I will still help you.

Big thieves are given chieftaincy titles here, they are hailed as their new clean cars pass by, they get the high tables in social events, they get the front seats in churches, and they are on the podium in agbadas in the political rallies. They have enough money to hire a crowd of about a million; you would think they would easily win a free and fair election.

Poor thieves? The lucky ones are caught, beaten, taken to the police station, charged to court and would end up in prisons where they would eat cold watery beans for a long time. The unfortunate ones are set alight on the street by a mob.

If you can't be a big thief then don't steal at all. The Yoruba say atari ajanaku kii seeru omode. The head of an elephant is not a child's load.

What if you have feelings for me and you want me to do the things you might have been dreaming about? Aren't you free?

Well, I have to scratch my beard on that one. I want you to understand this place, or at least try to understand it. It is not that you are not free; it is just that this freedom thing has its boundaries.

So this is the part where you may narrow your eyes and snort incredulously and ask me what kind of freedom lives here.

That takes us back to that phrase I must have used about a dozen times in my argumentative chats with you: 'this is Africa'

Well, here is a different way of saying the same thing: "This is Nigeria".

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