



## Yahoo Boys (Tales of Kuru Plateau)

July 14, 2014, Abuja

I have never been to Nigeria and I don't really know what to expect. I meet Olawale and we head north to the town of Jos and after that to the Kuru Plateau, the luxury of a four-hour long drive. We need to get to know and get used to each other before we can give a four-day training together.

My first impression is excellent. There is probably a 30-years big age difference between us. To balance this out, he starts acting like a 50-year-old and I try to act like a 20-year-old. This works well as he will be the more responsible and reliable one, and I can be the authentic one. Olawale is a young man in late twenties, his skin is dark black, only his eyeballs are snow-white. He was born with a congenital spine disorder and lived in Nigeria for eleven years. After that, his parents decided for him to undergo a series of complicated spine operations in the USA. He, therefore, experienced America only from the walls of the hospital. His twin-brother stayed in Nigeria so they did not see each other for seven years. During these years in America, Olawale underwent 15 operations, got his back fixed, got his shorter leg's length fixed nearly to the length of the healthy one. Olawale finished the last years of elementary school, high school, and his university studies in the USA and stayed there. He has almost become a true American. He does not speak with that incomprehensible Nigerian accent, though he speaks so fast that I can barely catch up with him. When he read about Malawi's HIV crisis at high school, he burst into tears and decided that health education for Malawi people will be his personal mission. At that time, it started to be obvious that while interventions based on pure abstinence resulted in a rapid increase of HIV victims, provision of education and preservatives led to a decline in the number of victims. Olawale is a person of strong faith and a son of a very conservative pastor who was first absolutely against preservatives and against giving them out in churches and schools. However, this was a turning point to determine if populations survive, or pure-abstinence programmes would lead to so many victims that it would disrupt the whole society (as it happened in African states with the most rigid policy-makers). Olawale would argue with his father. They used to shout at each other in the kitchen so much that the rest of the family would leave the room. The debate arguments were based on numbers from medical statistics, bible verses, or tragic stories of their friends. Olawale's father has never changed his opinion to an extent that he would directly encourage using preservatives, however,

he has finally agreed to have preservatives in a basket next to a container with sacred water during service. Therefore, together with blessings, believers can take home preservatives for the following week. This is also to prevent a gradual decline in the service attendance. The HIV pandemic has been put under control. The church discourse has moved away from HIV to homosexuals. A law that has made homosexuality illegal was passed in Nigeria this year. People who do not lie about their sexual orientation will be sent to prison or will be publicly declared to be pederasts and public attacks on homosexuals by outraged crowds will go unnoticed. Olawale explains how he planned to include the topic of homosexuality in his health education in Rwanda. The school principal stopped him from doing so and said there is no need for such talks as there are no homosexuals in Rwanda. Olawale asked students if they had really never met a homosexual and one of the students wanted to nod. The school principal turned directly to that student and asked him if he was trying to say that he himself is that disgusting sodomist and pedophile. The student turned his head down and everyone went silent. "As you can see, I am right", said the principal like a winner. For Olawale, an article about a story of another Nigerian pastor proved to be the most effective tool during his arguments with his father about the homosexuality topic. That pastor was all against homosexuals delinquents and invited believers to exclude them from their circles. However, when it came to light that his own son is homosexual, the pastor experienced the biggest existential and value crisis of his life. His love for his son stood in opposition to his love for the dogma and bishops. After many sleepless nights spent in despair, the pastor from the article stepped out from the church and married his son and his boyfriend. Olawale cut this article out and said, that it made him uneasy. He did not know how he would act in the pastor's place.

## **July 15, Kuru Plateau**

At the NIPPS campus, we were allocated a small house with huge kitchen, two rooms and two servants on top of that, namely Jumma and Monika. Jumma means Friday. If parents lack creativity, they name their children after the day on which they were born. It wasn't just Robinson's way; in Ghana, they have a male name Kofi – which means „Friday" and female name Kwame (Saturday), Jumane means „Tuesday" in Swahili and there is a female name Tanisha (Tuesday) in the Hausa language.

Jumma and Monika only take care of the two of us. Meals are prepared in the dining room so their around-the-clock concern is to bring food in a thermos, serve us breakfast and dinner (lunch is served elsewhere), clean up and generally make sure that me and Olawale don't have to lift a finger around here. Basically, they just sit around in the kitchen the whole day, Monika sings, Jumma naps and when I walk out of my room they both jump out and rush towards me, bowing and asking me what I need. After indicating I just want some water, they wouldn't allow me to go get it myself. In no time, they're back with a glass of water together with a saucer, of

course, rubbing their palms, bowing while handing it to me, pulling out a chair so I can sit, bowing some more when turning the TV on so I can watch it, sit 10 metres away and watch me from the distance, checking whether I watch TV and drink my water, if I don't need to switch channels or do something equally demanding that they could do for me. They're both in their middle age, have three children each and when I send them home in the evening, explaining they can just leave us the thermoses with food; that they don't have to wait for us, they bow, nod saying yes-yes, but don't leave. I guess they have orders not to leave. I fail at holding a meaningful conversation with them every time because their answer to my questions is a bow, a nod and a one-word sentence summing up what they think we want to hear. I can see that each of my questions torment them as they try to answer in a right way so they don't get fired. I don't want to cause them such misery, so I let them sit aloof and watch my every move so they don't miss anything. I have the same problem outside our little house too. It's not more than 500 metres from the house to the training facility, but organisers insist that a car would drive us there. I don't really understand why, in case of a bomb attack no car would protect us, but they're not even willing to discuss the possibility of us walking there. After getting out of the car, a porter in a uniform leaves his lodge and runs towards me with a wide smile and his hand stretched out. So I take the hand and shake it, only to realize he's all terrified. The reason he stretched his hand out was to take my backpack and carry it from the car to the door, which are about 15 metres apart. In the past two days, I managed to accidentally shake hands of about 10 porters, assistants, a cook, security service. I just don't have the right colonial reflex. What we're experiencing here is a mutual cultural shock of passing each other by. Since I wouldn't give them my backpack to carry, they obviously understand that it's full of gold and diamonds, and so they guard up, stand at attention and at least provide me with an armed escort.

The training begins; there are about 25 older experts from the National centre for development of democracy and political parties, mostly men in fluffy colourful togas with little caps with tips leaning to one side on their heads. We're discussing fundraising. When I mention online donation, people in the room start to wriggle and Tanko interrupts me: "There's no need to talk about anything that has something to do with online payments. Just forget it all. There are only two groups of people here: those who have no access to the internet whatsoever and those who do, but they belong to the elite of notorious cheats. If anyone goes bonkers enough to send money online, not only they lose the money they want to donate, but all the money they have on their account. Not a cent would remain there. Haven't you heard about the "Yahoo Boys"?"

Treacherous Nigerian mafia was popular in Slovakia in the late 90s. Back then, even I would get weekly email offers to take care of some late grandpa-general's heritage or announcement about lottery winning in Nigeria; all you had to do was to provide an account number to send the money to. Those crooks didn't die out, they were just replaced by a generation of younger, more computer-skilled hackers, whose

operations go by the name "419 scams" (scams and trickeries under the „§ 419"). Nigerian penal code had to respond to an infinite number of modern humbugs and a separate paragraph was introduced to deal with such crimes. Here, they call these crooks the "Yahoo Boys". Most of them pretend to represent huge institutions while operating from a yahoo account. Most of them are youngsters in their 20s, outstandingly computer illiterate, usually studying IT, economy and law; they have luxury cars, love decibels, and exclusive clothes. Yahoo Boys managed to bribe banks, post offices, couriers and government officials from the ministry of defence to the extent that their mail scams continue to flourish. They can detect PIN code of a card that was used at an ATM. In most cases, they can re-identify steps of an electronic payment back to getting your electronic account password. The government declared that a radically different approach is necessary in this case. To combat the crimes of the "419" type, they set up an incorruptible government office: Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC). However, after a relatively short period of time it was revealed that Yahoo Boys managed to corrupt even those incorruptible members of this commission and as it seems, some of Yahoo Boys even get employed there. Unidentified Yahoo Boys appear on television and with a straight face announce that "419 crimes" must be uncompromisingly eradicated, but it will be a long and difficult process. They must be having so much fun while saying that. I bet they enjoy it a great deal (on live television)! Sociologist Joshua Aransiola Oyeniya Obafemi Awolowo from the University in Ile-Ife devoted an entire scientific article just to them. He managed to interview 40 Yahoo Boys and found out that in addition to excellent hacking skills, these guys also relish wealth and voodoo.

It may seem surprising, but I'm not actually that surprised. Several times before, I've noticed that exceptionally rational people who follow highly logical arguments in their specialization tend to have sort of a blind spot. They easily believe the biggest of absurdities: black magic, numerology, enneagrams and similar profligacies. And since these Yahoo Boys are Western Africans, they indulge in voodoo. They collect pictures of their potential victims and then "torture" them. They burn finger nails of people who can possibly be somehow connected to their targets... Voodoo is still the real deal here. Or once again. When I read about what a rampage some of the local priests are on I begin to feel like voodoo, magic, subjection to dark forces and believing in the devil are no retro here, they're still a trend. Body fascination and animistic voodoo practises can be found in the most unexpected places, in the everyday life of pastors and religious ceremonies. I guess also normal pastors exist, those who actually tend to the spiritual needs of the faithful and not just filling their pockets, but what is described in the daily newspaper articles closely resembles a parade of psychopathology. Their spiritual service looks like a hobby consisting of exorcism and torture accompanied by other violent rituals. Human organs are even required for some of the rituals. Two weeks ago, priest Abimbola was arrested in Ogun state. He lured his friend Yusuf Kamilu out on a visit. Yusuf's body was found near the road, missing his eyes and tongue. Right before this incident, a nest of

another pastor – Ernest Nwankwo from the church of the Holy Family was discovered in Ikorodu in Lagos State. He set up a hiding place and kept several abducted people there for years. They found the spot by accident when a mother lost sight of her 7-year-old son. She noticed that another woman in front of her is pulling an absurdly heavy suitcase. She went after her, but the woman dropped the suitcase and attempted to flee. A half-dead body of her son fell out the suitcase and the kidnapper admitted that this was her way of delivering bodies to the pastor for his ritual ceremonies. In his hideout, they later found more people in chains; one of them confessed to being held there for 11 years. Nigerian pastors (mainly from the Pentecostal church and from the charismatic movement) focus especially on sadism against children. In two Nigerian states alone – Aqwa Ibon and Cross River – the number of children who have been marked as the devil's nest reached 15 000. Under false pretences of exorcism and black magic, most of those kids end up being tortured, mutilated and murdered. Parents are usually deluded and they bring the children to pastors themselves, even pay for their own children to be tortured. What I like the most are the arguments of those self-appointed priests – they can banish the devil from souls of their children, but only if the parents pay for it. Otherwise, it doesn't work. Anyone with some common sense would already figure out at this moment that it's nothing more than a stupid manipulation, wouldn't they? Blind faith can be devastating. It can disrupt even the most genuine of structures; such as parental love or the sense of self-preservation.

## July 16, Jos

I open my doors and smoke comes out of the room. I start coughing. Monika stands next to the doors and looking really excited, holds on to some kind of spray. I ask her what's up. "Mosquitoessss, s'rríí...". Even the most resistant mosquito doesn't stand a chance against this insecticide. The question is, however, if I can stand a chance. I packed some charcoal, a magnifier, however, I did not think of bringing along a gas mask.

We are locked away on campus. There is enough space, though. The campus area is approximately one square kilometer large and more than 600 employees of NIPPS, a think-tank institution we run the training for, live here in uniform huts. The families of these employees live here too. The area is guarded and fenced around with barbed wire. When I leave my hut, crowds of children watch me with bean shooters. They never met a fat albino who regularly waves at them. I am also watched by somewhat scruffy men of unidentifiable age probably members of the security. We have been closed away on campus for the second day and I ask Olawale if he fancies going out to see the town. Olawale says that last time they did not let him go, but we ask anyway. "Where do people usually go out in the town? Could we go and take a look?" They look at us in a weird way and first they don't reply. Then, they say that people do go out. "And where?" To different places. Then they ask a few times why we want to go out and we explain, that we just want to look around and take a walk. We were

no able to explain the reason for a walk and therefore we said that we might grab a cup of coffee or get some beer. The discussion gets more and more absurd because we can tell that they don't like our idea, but don't know why. They don't reject the idea directly, although if they had said that it was dangerous to go out, we would not have insisted on a walk. At the end, they said that they would find out where we could go and disappeared for two hours. After two hours, they come with great news that we can go. Hooray...

I imagined they would take us somewhere around the town, that I would take pictures of historic buildings, and interesting people who let me do so... I thought they would show us some safe streets, we would walk around for an hour and then come back on campus. We were seated in a car with a 100-kilogram heavy driver in a uniform. Next to him sat Ayuba – equally wide and heavy. Me and Olawale sat on the back seats. I took out my camera but with no use. The car drove off at top speed and was speeding up in narrow streets. The driver was driving as if we were on an open front. He was speeding up and slowing down, shaking us from one side to the other. Good that we had those two bulletproof airbags (Idena and Ayuba) in front of us. I could not see anything through them and at that speed, the pictures would be very blurry. The car drove away from the main roads and we started circling around smaller roads with more and more bumps. We were getting further and further away from the civilisation, heading towards some absurd villages. "Where are we going?" we ask our "airbags" and they just point ahead: over there... and there...It took us almost an hour. The car finally gets into some abandoned village and from a totally abandoned street turns into the most abandoned yard with high walls fenced around with barbed wire. After we enter the yard, the fences close behind us. It is clear that this is the destination of our trip – we will have some beer here. I search for an interesting and catching point in the yard that I could take a picture of. I take a picture of the yard, barbed wire, and a table with chairs. They bring us beer. I ask Ayuba if these people who own this yard are his friends or people he knows. Ayuba nods his head in a vague way. We talk to Ibem and Ayuba about the pre-election atmosphere in Jos and I try to understand what this absurd trip is about.

The election date is getting closer, and therefore the number of attacks in Jos and mainly in Bromo is increasing. This region, the Plateau is a belt that divides the Muslim North and Christian South. Therefore, all the fights over control over the key meeting points are focused here. Since we are next to Jos, it's like having the best view possible, like one from a theater lodge. We don't need binoculars, we can see clearly but a plexiglass would be useful. Explosions happen equally in churches and mosques, and bombs do not discriminate between civils, children, Christians, Muslims, and everyone who have not yet understood that there will be a caliphate and Jos, the single Christian island in the Muslim north, will become Muslim. Muslims build up only 15% of the population here (despite the fact that everywhere else in northern Nigeria they form the majority), therefore elections are not a good way to win control over the area. Since 2006, religious adherence has not been included in

IDs anymore and have not been included as a characteristic in population enumerations, therefore 15% is only an estimate from the past. If the explosions continued, their proportion might increase to 51%. 51% is good enough for a win-lose politics. The winner takes it all. Boko Haram is responsible for almost 10,000 victims of the attacks and this is clearly not the final number. Two months ago, on May 18, 2014, Jos experienced the bloodiest attack in the last period. Boko Haram radicals parked cars loaded with bombs next to a market and waited until the market gets crowded. During our road trip, Ajuba pointed to the place of the former market with burnt wrecks that were left behind. At first, only one car exploded and when the whole market lapsed into the chaos of medics and people running around, the second car exploded in the direction of their escape. The series of deadly attacks continues after this incident. Boko Haram is no longer focusing on the north only but is also organising a few deadly attacks in the south to Lagos and Abuje. It seemed like the period of Ramadan would be peaceful, however, on July 1 a Borno market was attacked, and yesterday there were 24 fatalities in the village of Dille in Borno. The villagers were woken up early in the morning by loud calls of Allah Akbar, after which they could hear revolver sounds. Today in the morning they left behind 9 victims in the village of Huyim.

We try to find out what Ibema and Ayuba think of the Chikbok happenings. The Boko Haram movement (literally "The sin of western doctrine") is basically a Nigerian version of Taliban. It was originally founded by Mohammad Yusuf and when he was blown off by the Nigerian government, Abubakar Shekau overtook the movement. He started off a much more aggressive campaign of enforcing caliphate and Sharia in Nigerian area. The one barrier to taking control over the society that they have correctly identified is education, especially the education of women. They know that once they manage to terrorise a critic mass of people, they will win. They are already controlling a big area of northern states of Nigeria, and have only acquired heavy weapons in the last few years. The attacks resulted in more than 10,000 victims. The government is pretending to be fighting them, however, I assume that they must have got into the government too. Otherwise, I cannot make sense of colonies of dozens of weapon loaded lorries getting to Abuja through all the highly guarded and airtight road controls without any notice. They enacted a series of attacks in the capital and disappeared unnoticed in the woods. Dozens of lorries are impossible to miss, how come they can go unnoticed so easily? The government has caught some "Bokoharams", however, they escaped the best-guarded prison in the country and no one knows how that is possible? On May 15, this year, a group of Boko Haram disguised in police uniforms entered a Chikbok high school during final exams and asked 300 girls to follow them because they need to save the school from Boko Haram attackers. The girls followed them and only after a few hours it turned out that the apparent safeguards are Boko Haram themselves. Since then, no one has seen them. About twenty girls managed to escape and said that they were regularly raped and forced to convert to Islam, "given out" to be wives of Boko Haram Judah fighters

Boko Haram to Nigeria or sold, one for 2,000 nairas (probably about 12 dollars) to Judah to Camerun. Despite Michelle Obama and Malala joining the worldwide movement "Bring back our girls", it has not brought any results yet. The Nigerian president with a misleading name Goodluck Jonathan did not help the situation either. After the first week, his wife announced that no abduction had happened and they later admitted that the abduction did happen, however, neither the army or the government knows where the abductors or the girls are. Since then, the president has made up different excuses for not meeting the parents of the abducted girls. Now he has announced that he needs to exclusively cut the state budget by an additional billion dollars for buying weapons and eradicating Boko Haram from Nigeria. Since the elections will be held next year, the opposition is suspicious that most of that money will be spent on his election campaign and vote rigging.

It is already dark on our way back. Ibema circles around small streets again. He never stops, it is impossible to take pictures. I can see from the car how two men in uniforms jump on some person and hit him with revolvers. He falls to the ground but they keep kicking him with their boots and gun stocks. We do not know who the men in uniforms or the paralysed person are. The passers-by escaped the scene and we speeded off without slowing down. Ibema and Ayuba are silent and look ahead. I will never find out what really happened there. We start to understand why Ibema and Ayuba acted so mysteriously. Going out for a beer is probably not a thing here. The day before yesterday Boko Haram acted out in Hisba Board in the neighbouring state of Kano. They caught 55 people drinking alcohol. At this time – during Ramadan. They caught them and put them in prison for four months. Saria will punish for drinking alcohol even outside the period of Ramadan. Ibema and Ayuba do not want to be impolite but did not need to beat around the bush. They could have directly told us that going out to get some beer is not a good idea. I have a feeling that they received two conflicting commands from their boss. I assume he asked them: not to discuss or protest and fulfill all our wishes. At the same time, they probably received another command: protect them because in case anything happens to them, something will happen to you too.

## **July 17, Kuru Plateau**

Current training topic is "networking". The most active participant is Tanko, about 50-year-old man in white tunic with shaped epaulets and with a little cap specially perched on his head. Tanko is a master of meaningless metaphors. We're not sure whether the point of his statements is very well hidden or it's just not there at all. Tanko usually takes the floor at the end of the discussion and kills it with something only he understands. We generally respond with "yes – it's complicated" and move on. "I'd put it like this..." Tanko breathes in, "... everything we say here, it's like when you have a monkey, which you carry on your back. You know, when you feed the monkey, other monkeys recognize the smell of food that was touched by humans,

and also the human recognizes the smell of that monkey. And when you all run into the woods and the monkey jumps on your back, you have the monkey on you, you cannot get rid of it ... so that's it... ". Me and Olawale look at each other, if, by any chance, one of us has any idea what Tanko talks about; then we look at the participants, if they got the point and then we turn to Tanko, if he doesn't want to add something that would clarify it a little, but he seems pretty content with himself, with no intention to continue speaking. We nod and agree that networking of organisations is, indeed, complex. Nigerian jokes are usually hard to get, but it's Tanko who also makes them pointless like this, not the cultural difference. On the other hand, each discussion group needs at least one person who is able to go beyond the usual and the logical and the correct. New ideas can sometimes come from exactly such absurd thinking and phrases.

I was going through some Nigerian jokes and quite a few of them had almost philosophical punch line. This one, for example: A man from Fulani tribe was extremely mean. He had very long hair and he used to hide his money under a pillow. He covered the pillow with his long hair, so that no one can get to it. But one night a burglar broke into his house. The burglar didn't want to wake him up, so he carefully cut his hair and took the money from under the pillow. The next morning when this man woke up, he wanted to check his money. He found nothing under the pillow but a little mirror. At first he panicked but then he looked in the mirror and saw a bald man. He felt greatly relieved: "Thank God, I almost thought it was me who got robbed". Our training group is fairly relaxed, we laugh a lot. We're usually able to detect what the trigger is, but sometimes opposite is true. But that's the charm of such intercultural situations.

## July 19, Abuja

After a five-hour long journey from north to south, we've arrived in Abuja and I feel like I can breathe a little easier. We check in to our hotel. The receptionist wouldn't even look at my passport and asks: "Are you Muslim or Christian?" I turn to Olawale for a hint as to the right answer. "It's because of Ramadan", Olawale replies, "he wants to know if you want your breakfast served at 4 am or as usual". Robson, our taxi driver, drives us around the city, searching for tourist attractions. After visiting some parks, we ask if there are any museums or galleries. At first, Robson is a hundred percent sure there are, but after few phone calls to various places, we discover that in the whole Abuja, a city with nearly million inhabitants, there is not one museum, not one gallery. Only the Directorate of museums, but the building itself is all the way in 5-million Lagos. Nevertheless, I can't get my mind around it. How can you evolve in a country that doesn't honour its history, nor does it mark what has already been achieved? If we live here and now, the next generation has to start all over again. Allegedly there was once a museum, but it was destroyed.

At the market, we look for fruit and vegetable section. We pass endless rows of market stands and tables piled with clothes, housewares or jewellery, but we cannot find the true essence of every market. No heaps of potatoes, no fish smell, no figs or nuts. We ask for the direction to vegetables and eventually find out that the government prohibited selling fruit and vegetable at markets in Abuja. During the last bomb explosion at the market, plotted by Boko Haram, the attackers transported bombs to the market hidden under a pile of oranges. And so they prohibited selling fruit and vegetable. That's a real ostrich policy. People need vegetables and bombs can still be hidden in any kind of goods – socks, fabrics, even devotionals. I believe that's actually what's going on here. Terrorist hiding behind religion and we are greatly mistaken if we do not make the distinction between these two things just because they don't make the distinction themselves.

I'm leaving Nigeria, saying goodbye to Olawale. He seems a bit worried and asks: "Dušan, your flight from Frankfurt to Vienna is not through the Ukrainian airspace, right? They shoot planes down there." Oh no, don't worry, I'd never dare to do that.

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Some names within the text have been changed.