

A Midnight Experience with the Nigerian Police

During a recent visit to Nigeria, I had a midnight experience on a lonely road, which left a strong impression on me about the Nigerian police.

Late one evening, I found myself compelled to travel from the city of Enugu to my hometown in south eastern part of Nigeria. On a good day, the journey should take no more than two and half hours. However, since parts of the road are currently in a state of disrepair, uncertainties surround a traveler's estimated time of arrival.

We left Enugu at about half past 7:00 p.m. and I, in my naiveté as to the true state of the roads, assumed that we will get to Onitsha around 9:00 p.m. from where I will hire a vehicle home. About half an hour into our journey, the young man besides me who had earlier said a loud and long prayer for divine speed and divine protection, went on to voice his regret over embarking on the journey.

"I should have stayed back comfortably in Enugu. Now I will sleep on the road this night." He spoke loud enough for the entire bus to hear. After a brief pause he lamented further, "Why did I come out this night, self?"

A sigh followed a pause before the young man spoke again. "You should have taken Old Road." He admonished the bus driver. "It is in a worse shape, but it is a shorter distance."

As we dragged the vehicle through humongous pothole after pothole, I shuddered to think of what the Old Road experience would have been like.

At about a little past midnight, we arrived at Nkpor which is closer to my hometown, but less densely populated than

Onitsha. Not a soul could be seen on the dark road. We reached a police checkpoint and I wondered aloud if I should drop and try to find my way home. A passenger advised that I do so, saying that it was the safest decision at that time rather than getting to Onitsha first. I alighted.

It was a T junction and I noticed two sets of police officers, one at the head of the T and the other set closer to the tail of the T. I alighted and moved past the set of officers at the head of the T, towards the officers closer to the tail of the T, the road that leads to my hometown.

As I walked towards the team of police officers, one officer extricated himself and walked towards me. He asked what I was doing outside at such an hour. I explained my predicament, and how I needed to get a car to my hometown.

“I will get a car for you.” The standalone officer assured me.

The officer asked a few questions about my business in the South East, he appeared a little tipsy, but I chose not to believe my suspicions. The officer asked me what I did for a living and I told him that I teach, without revealing my place of residence. As we chatted, a car approached the set of officers at the head of the T junction. The policeman with me sprinted up to that team and appeared to be forcefully trying to get the driver of that car to turn my way. His colleagues shooed him away most disrespectfully. He did not seem to have a good reputation among his peers, I reasoned.

He returned to my side of the road and his questions soon took a more personal angle. Was I married? Do I have children? The next thing I saw was the flicker of a phone in his hand, my eyes went to the screen and it was set ready to store a contact. “Give me your number.” He demanded. I generated my sweetest smile and said of course, I wouldn't have minded doing so; only I was not sure how my husband will react should

he be around when he, the police officer, calls me. He quickly put the phone back in his pocket, apologized profusely, and muttered something about it being difficult to get me a vehicle but how he will keep trying. The next I knew, he was crossing the road to rejoin his other colleagues. I was left to my faith.

I decided to walk back towards the officers at the head of the T junction. It seemed wiser to get to Onitsha and hire a car. I greeted the officers and was rewarded with a collectively jovial and respectful response.

“Madam, well done. What are you doing outside at this time.” One of the four officers asked me.

I explained my predicament.

“It is very difficult to get a car here o!” Another officer said.

A third officer pointed at a dark space farther away from the tarred road. “One pregnant woman slept there last night.” He said.

I peered closely at what might be my bed for the night and could make out stacks of tables – a makeshift market.

“I have to get home this night, please.” I addressed all four officers.

One responded with, “With God all things are possible.”

Another repeated the fact that a pregnant woman spent the previous night at the market, as if to say that if a pregnant woman could not be helped, who am I, an “unpregnant” or “non-pregnant” woman to expect to be helped.

“But people’s luck are different.” Another officer said, challenging the ‘Pregnant Woman Theory’ officer.

"It depends on her faith." Repeated the officer who had said that all things were possible with God.

"Officer, I believe I will get home this night." I professed my faith.

We then waited for the miracle of a ride to my hometown.

Respectful, light-hearted banter continued among the officers in a clear spirit of amity.

I felt so comfortable around those gentlemen. My only fear being that some robbers would chance upon us and I could be hit in the ensuing gun battle. Beyond the fears of that moment, however, I sensed a newly developed fear for the lives of the four officers. How long will they last before being shot to death by armed robbers? I wondered why someone would wish to take on a job that exposed one to the worst of man and weather.

I spoke in a low tone to the officer who stood close to me.

"Oga Officer, you no dey fear so as you stand here in the middle of the night?"

He concealed a triumphant smile and pointed at a gun swung across his shoulders "Once you are carrying this," he said, "and you done train well, well on how to use it, nothing like fear exists."

My eyes were fixated on the gun that held the fears of the officer in check. I might not have fought the Biafran War, nor received any noteworthy military training in my life, but surely, the gun bore a striking resemblance to my father's Dane gun. I could not place it side by side the sophisticated looking machine guns often recovered from armed robbers and displayed on national television. My heart was moved.

"Madam, you no wan go again?" I heard an officer shout. I had gotten carried away and did not notice when the other officers

stopped a large lorry fully loaded with what appears to be agricultural produce. Using their clout, they negotiated with the very elderly gentleman driver to drop me off, free of charge, at the ever busy Upper Iweka motor park in Onitsha. I jumped on the lorry and waved the officers goodbye.

At Upper Iweka, I hired a vehicle around 1:00 a.m. to take me to my hometown. Surprisingly, the driver took a route that brought me face to face again with the officers. I asked the driver to slow down so I could say thank you. On sighting me, the officers showed so much excitement.

“Driver, wait let us get your license plate!” They shined a torch light on the license plate of the car and took a picture before wishing me well. Not once did any one of them make any allusion to needing anything from me other than my safety and safe arrival home. It did not occur to me, neither was it in any way implied, that I should give money in exchange for the officers’ protection. And perhaps I should add that not one of them was of my ethnicity. I just met a bunch of good human beings wearing police uniform who felt obliged to help a stranded Nigerian woman. Thank you so much, Nigerian police.