

My Home Town

By Bukar Usman*

My home town is Biu. I was born there. Biu is the plateau among the plain lands of Borno *en route* to the Sahara Desert. From this tableland of some 2500 feet above sea level, you could survey the abode of the Kanuri and the Fulani, Biu's northward and southward neighbours. The latter's territory almost extended to the point where, as a child, I dreamily watched the sun set on many evenings. I particularly found the sun's mysterious orange display at that exit point very captivating.

Biu is the capital of an administrative unit named after it in the southern part of Borno state. Its capital advantage is its outstanding topography: it is hilly, unlike most parts of the state which are flat and sandy. Its climate reminds you of the Jos plateau, except that the characteristic cacti of the Jos area are replaced by Biu's less thorny shrubs.

Biu local government area, as should be obvious from the topographic outlay, has a good climate. Its regional neighbours, Maiduguri and Yola, are by comparison hot and humid; the possible exception being Jalingo which, because of the foggy hills of the Mambilla plateau, is cooler than these two. But Biu has a very clement weather: it is generally cool, a gift to anyone looking for an amiable weather to convalesce in. Like the rest of Nigeria, Biu has two climatic seasons, the rainy and dry seasons. The rains begin around April and last till October. In November, the harmattan sets in and lasts up to January. Hence, in the Gregorian calendar year, only roughly three months are left for the hotter times of the dry season. Even this hot period

is tempered by Biu's nearly year-round breeze.

In the past, I sometimes wondered if the breeze came from the few trees around or maybe partly from somewhere else. Being a town on the Savannah belt of Nigeria, very close to the Sudan belt, Biu is normally short on bush. Yet, it is very breezy; thanks, partly, to winds from far-flung trees and expanses. On certain breezy occasions, I perceived what could well be the desert scent of the Sahara but such experiences were few and far between. Otherwise, the Biu breeze of my childhood was blissful and clean and hardly ever blew sand all over your body.

What Biu lacks in wild bush it makes up for in agricultural vegetation. During the rainy season, thick columns of luxuriant sorghum plants greet the visitor. Evidence of mixed-farming could be seen in the two or more forms of legumes growing beneath the sorghum plants. Felled sorghum stalks carpet several farms during much of the dry season: those are once proud tall plants, green with life before greying with maturity and bowing to the harvester's sickle.

When I was a child, much of the Biu sorghum was of the red variety highly priced for making the mildly intoxicating *burukutu* drink. During the colonial days, British agriculturalists were said to have introduced the white variety. In my school days, the white variety was already supplanting the good old red type and by the late 1950s it had substantially reduced the dominance of red sorghum in the area.

I'm not sure if the hyenas my townsmen occasionally combated found cover in the grain farms. It was a nocturnal affair. But from the plateau where we lived, you could hear the hyenas laughing wildly in the surrounding hills where they had holed up during the day. So loud and clear were their growls and hoots that you were sometimes sure they were around the corner. In reality, they were often not less than three miles away. This was a safe distance by village

standards. Hyenas, however, being long-distance runners, occasionally wobbled across the wild to raid animals when people had succumbed to sleep. If they could not kill and drag them away at once, they usually savaged their victims so viciously that few of them survived such attacks.

Clumsy and lacking the agility of most carnivores, hyenas sometimes managed to make lucky raids. On bad days, they simply made do with scavenging around the neighbourhood before staggering back to the valleys.

The valleys, and the hillsides too – dotted with farmlands – generally harboured harmless animals. One day my mother picked up a snake from our farm by the hillside and placed it in her calabash. She covered the calabash with firewood and placed it on her shoulder. When she returned to the house with the snake, we were all excited at this special visitor from the farm. One mischief against it from us, the children, gave way to another until it finally died. The snake she brought home could easily have been one of the few harmful ones. What a risk she had taken! Thank God it was the type people said slept most of the time.

One thing I can never have too much of is the sheer pleasure of beholding the Bui landscape, especially the rock formations and the beautiful escarpments arising from the contrasting heights and surfaces of the plateau and plains. The landscape always has something new to offer to the viewer. It is not unusual for one piece of rock to call up different images at different times in the mind of the same onlooker. The landscape has an endless power of providing fresh viewing pleasure.

The Bui plateau touches ground in a rather steep precipitous fashion at the southern end of the “table”. Its opposite end evens out less sloping manner. The wider ends of the plateau, to the east and west, possess escarpments naturally calibrated in steps. Several feet beneath, as you climb down the steps over the long stretch of land, you emerge into a sub-plateau many miles wide, a western

“footstool” to the main Biu plateau.

Stretching further along basins and hills, the plateau merges sublimely into the Hawal river which itself empties into the Gongola, and then on to the Benue river, the main tributary of River Niger. Viewed aerially and against the background of the surrounding grandeur of the Adamawa environment and the watery expanse of the river Gongola, Biu lures every visitor with its somewhat Edenic appeal.

Though classified as volcanic, the Biu plateau, about 50% of which is made up of basalt, has not erupted in recent times. Evidence of past eruptions is provided by the surrounding conical hills and craters. Tilla, probably the most enchanting of the craters, attracted many tourists when we were young. Beautifully rimmed and steeped in wonder, its lake was famous for its numerous crocodiles, noted for their colourful skin.

Climatic change in Biu has been rather dramatic since the 1950s. There has been a transformation in degrees from wetness to dryness. During my childhood days there were marshy areas. They are no longer there. And the streams which used to traverse the town have largely dried up: what was once a river bed and a marshy ground has been turned into residential quarters. In general, the water table has gone down, and gone with it were the brooks of my early days which used to harbour interesting reptiles. We also found in those brooks ready swimming pools in which my friends and I shared many delightful youthful pastimes.

Whenever I hear of the greenhouse effect, I remember the pastoral Biu of my childhood now supplanted by urban concrete layout. The new concrete buildings are not in themselves bad: they solved accommodation problems and, indeed, provided new comforts. But should they have been built at the expense of the healthy, if sparse, green vegetation of my youth – at the expense of the brooks, and

the pools, and the cooler climate? Nature may be blamed somehow here but I think human beings have contributed most to the degradation of the environment. For instance, for many years, there was hardly a coordinated drainage system in Biu town in spite of demographic pressures.

Increases in population density resulting from the continuous urbanisation of the Biu area have contributed to such pressures. Biu was one of the former divisions of the former Borno Province, the precursor of Borno State. Then there were four divisions and an emirate in the province. These were Biu, Fika, Bede, Bama divisions and Borno Emirate.(Fika and Bede are now in Yobe state.) Since the creation of local governments, Biu Division has been split into five: Biu, Kwaya Kusar, Hawal, Shani and Bayo local governments. The fourth was created earlier while the last was carved out from the second in 1996. Biu still remains the capital of new Biu local government.

While I may state, with dates, the brief history of Biu local government, I'm afraid I cannot be exact about my birthday. I do have some record of birth but whether I was born that day, that month or even that year remains a matter for conjecture. As no birth certificate was issued when I was born because of the low-level of literacy prevailing at the time, it was with difficulty that I later arrived at what now stands as my date of birth.

In certain communities, a baby's date of birth was determined by reference to, say, the rainy or dry season, the new yam festival, the year or season of an outstanding epidemic, the death or coronation of a prominent monarch and such other notable or historical events. Reference could even be made to some number of years before or after the coming of the white man or the conscription of able-bodied members of the community to work with the imperial army during World Wars I and II.

In determining your date of birth in those days, easy recourse to some historical events was not enough. You were not there when those events took place, so you dutifully cross-checked with elderly relations whose memories of such events might usually come in handy to feel the gaps. If you were born, for instance, about the time the great hunter strangled a lioness with his bare hands, an uncle could recall that seven market days after the event, your maternal grandfather (who was very fond of your mother) had died - and that that sad news came the day the good news of your birth was announced. Once you got to know the probable year and month when the great hunter killed the lioness, you worked out seven market days after that event and, wao! your date of birth had emerged!

From such deductions, I have, in accordance with the statutory regulations in the public service, declared my date of birth to be December 10,1942. This is, therefore, my date of birth.

My family house is one of the houses between the Emir's palace and the prison yard. Between grace and grass, you might humourously say. When I was a child the two places were connected by an untarred road wide enough to be dualised into a motor carriageway. If you are coming from the Emir's palace towards the prison yard, our house could be found on the lane to the right of the dualisable road. I lived there with my parents and my elder sister. My elder brother and his family also lived there. We have lived there for as long as I can remember. It may be true to say that the interest I developed later in national security had its roots in this house positioned, as it were, to monitor the prisoners as they went daily to the Divisional Officer's house to work. Any way, it was from this house I started hatching my very first hopes.

When I was a child, the house was fenced with *zana* mats - neatly woven dried long grass - firmly tied to sticks fixed to the ground at a spacing of about one yard from each other. With time, when the men who had placed them had become too old or too short on funds to replace them, the old mats, weather-beaten, wore out and fell apart. The house thus exposed, hyenas easily gained entrance in the night to attack donkeys and goats.

The hyenas carried the prey to their den on the outskirts of the town. They particularly made surprise attacks when it rained in the night. That was when no one heard their noise. But they usually left behind their footprints and trails of the prey's blood. Horses and sheep were also vulnerable to such attacks. Livestock were generally molested: cats attacked fowls by day and night while hawks often descended on chickens. This made rearing poultry on open grounds a difficult venture.

Because I knew of no time when hyenas attacked anybody, I quickly concluded that wild animals must have some respect for human beings. This assumption turned out to be a childish illusion.

Her cry rang through the neighbourhood. It was loud and desperate.

"Somebody is being beaten," I said.

"No," my mother interjected, "This should be something more terrible."

"Scorpion sting, may be?"

"It should be something more terrible." And, dragging me by the hand, she said, "Let's go and know for sure."

The cry had sounded as coming from a far distance. I struggled out of my mother's hand and breezed out of our compound to rush to the scene. Then I noticed the wailing woman being brought to the nearby house, where the native doctor lived.

She had been attacked by a leopard from the forest of Biu. Not everybody could look at her twice. The two or three wounds on her body were very raw but the most serious was the one on the head: her scalp was torn from the nape of her head! She was in pains. I positioned myself beside an older boy. I needed to know how the treatment would proceed.

“So, what would the native doctor do to the head?”

The boy, rebuking me, looked and sneered, “Just watch and see.”

I watched as the native doctor placed the victim on a mat inside the house. He brought a black cloth and covered her before rushing into his room.

“He’s gone to recite incantations,” the boy whispered to me.

“The woman is yet to recover,” I observed.

“She will soon. Just watch.”

The native doctor emerged from his room carrying a calabash of what looked like water. He placed it beside the victim. Then his assistant started playing the local guitar while the native doctor nodded to its rhythm.

As the guitarist played on, something began to happen to the black cloth. It was heaving up and down, as if it was breathing of its accord. I looked at the boy beside me. His eyes popped out with amazement. Something was about to happen; I didn’t know what, but it was not time to disturb anybody.

The guitarist played on. The native doctor kept nodding his head but now he seemed to be muttering something as well. Then it began to come out from the black cloth, distinct, unmistakable - the hair of the leopard! Not a bunch of it but a few strands that appeared to matter a lot in the scheme of the native doctor’s therapy.

“May Allah be praised.”

“Allah be praised.”

I left the boy and shifted behind the two adults offering thanks to God. They must know better.

“The leopard’s hair is out. She shall be well.”

“If it had entered her blood stream...”

“Strange madness would have afflicted her even after her head was healed.”

“*Sai Hyel*,” the other man said, meaning, “Only God knows.”

Having driven away the evil spirit of the leopard, as it were, the woman stood up for a more clinical treatment of her head. As the small crowd dispersed, I heard that she would be subjected to regular doses of diverse herbs.

I kept wondering how the scalp would be restored. I asked anybody who might know. My mother’s answer made the best sense:

“*Drarmsheladiwa*,” she said, calling me by one of the Babur language pet names she gave me, “if we knew everything the native doctor knows, all of us would have become native doctors.”

The mystery evoked by this response heightened my sense of wonder when I saw the woman a few weeks later with her scalp back in place, although in a rather uneven way.

*** Excerpt from *Hatching Hopes*, Bukar Usman's autobiography.**