

A Road Journey to and from Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso: How Wonderful!

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National Leaders of Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU) in West and Central Africa Region were invited to participate in an International Leadership Conference (ILC) held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 8 – 10 August 2016, during which the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP) was to be launched on the Regional level.

The opening ceremony was scheduled to begin at 3pm on August 8. Expected to be in attendance were the President of the Republic of Burkina Faso, the President of the Burkina Faso National Assembly, distinguished and honorable members of the National Assembly of Burkina Faso, distinguished and honorable members of the National Assemblies of various West and Central African countries, Ambassadors for Peace from the region of West and Central Africa and all FFWPU National Leaders.

Nigeria had been given the singular honor to present an address to be delivered by Universal Peace Federation (UPF) Nigeria Chairman during the opening ceremony. So I looked forward to being present at the opening ceremony of that august gathering to support our chairman.

I had never been to Burkina Faso. It would be my first time. The adventurous part of me was strongly suggesting I should travel by road as a chance to see and explore that part of the African continent along the route to Ouagadougou. So I plotted the road trip. The Abuja – Sokoto – Niamey – Ouagadougou route looked attractive because it seemed more direct on the map. But it was an unknown. I had never even been to Sokoto. An alternative route is the Abuja – Lagos – Cotonou – Ouagadougou route. This is familiar to me up to Cotonou. And that part of part of the road that I know is not particularly likeable. I decided I will try the Sokoto route. I had always sought a reason to go in that direction anyway, and this was a perfect chance.

I announced to my wife that I was going to travel by road and she said, "What? How?"

I said, "Yeah, that's what I want to do."

"But don't you speak French. You don't even know Hausa. How are you going to manage?"

"Well, I'm an educated person. I'm sure I can manage anywhere." I said adamantly.

Saturday 6 August 2016, 8.30am, I arrived at Utako Motor Park in Abuja to take a bus to Sokoto. A seven-seater Toyota Serena was loading. Two passengers were already there before me; a man and a woman. The woman, in her late sixties, sat on the front passenger seat. I took the left end of the middle seat.

We waited for other passengers to come. It wasn't until about 12.30pm that the vehicle got full and we started the journey. The driver is non-English speaking. He spoke only Hausa and drove like there is no tomorrow. Unfortunately there was no way to persuade him to slow down. The man who came earlier than me appointed himself a spokesman for the driver. Any comment directed at the driver he would be the one to answer in English. He would defend the driver whenever anyone protested about over-speeding. He would point out that Sokoto was a long way and that we needed to get there in good time, and so the way the driver was driving was OK.

We made three stops: one in Kaduna to refuel the vehicle; next Funtua in Katsina State to eat. There was nothing familiar to my taste at that rest stop so I made do with just oranges. I had never been in Funtua. There were many children hawking things. And many more begging at the stop area. They all spoke no English. Meaning they were not in school.

It was still day light by the time we got to Gussau, Zamfara State. Afterwards it began to be dark. After Gussau we made a third stop at a village to pray – Islamic prayer. It was about 7.30pm. The prayer took about 50 minutes and we proceeded on our journey afterwards. We had just driven for about 5 minutes, towards Sokoto, when the vehicle developed a fault and stopped in the middle of nowhere.

The driver opened the burnet (hood) and began fiddling with something, with the assistance of his 'brother' that spoke English. They couldn't get the car working. They concluded it was an electrical problem. Now how do we find an electrician in the middle of the bush this night? We were stranded. We were at least an hour away from Sokoto. Some of us began to flag passing vehicles for help. No one would stop. I looked up at the sky and there were so many stars. I had never been aware of that many stars as there were that night. I said to myself, "God, I'm in for a real adventure."

A motorcyclist was riding past and someone (one of our fellow passengers) had the good sense to shout out something in Hausa. The motorcyclist stopped. The Hausa speaking passenger pleaded with him and he agreed to turn around and return to the village where we had just stopped for prayer and bring us an electrician. The good motorcyclist left behind with us a man he was carrying and went back to the village to find us an electrician. It took about an hour for him to return with one, a young man in his mid-twenties. In less than no time the young man fixed the fault and we were ready to proceed on our journey. But we first had to bring him back to his village.

We then drove uneventfully to Sokoto, arriving at about 11pm. I was the last to be dropped off at the Sokoto Motor Park. I had hinted the driver through his 'brother' who spoke English that I was going to Birnin Konni and so I needed to be taken to the border. They said no problem, they would assist me to get on a vehicle that will take me to Illela (the border town on the Nigerian side) from which I would then cross to Birnin Konni, the border town on the Niger side.

Sokoto Motor Park was very crowded at that hour, more with vehicles than with human beings. The driver pointed to the direction where I would find Illela bound vehicles and I proceeded according to his direction.

A man that sounded quite rough welcomed me to the only vehicle going to Illela that night. He said there was only one chance remaining. I eagerly accepted that one chance. The car was an old rickety two doors station-wagon (hatchback). It was hard for me to make out what brand of car it was in that darkness. I sat on the front seat with a slim gentleman. Still it was a tight sitting. Four persons sat at the back seat. The boot (or trunk) was overloaded with goods. I could not make out what goods they were in the darkness. The boot door was half open and had to be tied over the loads with a rope on to the chassis (body) of the car. As we drove through the night, I dosed off part of the way. Surprisingly there were very few police or military checkpoints on the road. Given what we hear about security issues in the northern part of the country, I had expected more presence of security officers on the way. On the contrary, from Abuja to Illela, I could count with my five fingers the number of police and military checkpoints on the way; quite unlike Southern Nigeria where you have police and army checkpoints almost every kilometer apart.

We arrived at Illela at about 1.30am and stopped a few times to drop off passengers. Each time we stopped, the driver would turn off the car head lamp. The third time he did this I wondered aloud why he was doing it.

"Oga, na border area we dey now, (Sir, we are now at the border area)" he said. The import of his reply sent a chilling message down my spine. It must be quite dangerous here – with robbers, and all sorts of criminals, I thought. With no electricity and the place in pitch darkness the driver's answer was simply alarming.

All other passengers had been dropped off except me and a man who looked like he is in his thirties. He was slim, not so tall, of average height and wore a short-sleeved shirt on jeans. He is most likely from Southern Nigeria, but he spoke some Hausa. His name is David, I discovered later. The driver drove both of us into the Illela Motor Park which was in darkness. The park was crowded with vehicles of all kinds:

trucks, mini buses, small cars etc. God knows which one could move and which couldn't. But even in the darkness one could make out they were mostly scraps. Stench of urine filled the air.

I asked the driver how I could get to Birnin Konni this night. Among two men standing nearby, one of them, a tall and strong-looking fellow, wearing a white northern-style robe and holding a touch light promptly answered, "Come, I will take you." And our driver said, "Yes, follow him."

David and I followed him. David was in front of me because I had to pick up my bag from the trunk of the car that brought us from Sokoto. David himself had no luggage.

The man led us to his car, a white station wagon that I could not determine the make in the darkness. I sat on the front seat and David sat behind. We drove out of the motor-park toward the border post. I asked the driver how much he would charge. "Three thousand naira (N3,000)," he said.

"Are you new to this area," he pursued. "Have you crossed this border before?"

I did not answer. He proceeded to put me in a dilemma. "If you want, I can handle all your crossing procedure but if you don't want you can handle by yourself. But you know, this is night time and anything can happen." I felt really threatened. But I kept my cool. God is with me and nothing really bad can happen to me – was the reassuring voice within.

Just then, we arrived at the border post. An officer of the Nigeria Immigration Services stood up from his seat, stepped up towards us and flashed a touch light into our car. He greeted us politely and asked where we were going. "Birnin Konni," we responded.

"Do you have your passports?"

"Yes I do," I said.

I came down and was taken to a room to have my passport stamped. The room was lighted with a hurricane lamp. David had no passport and was ushered to a group of officers sitting in front of the small building that served as the control post. A small burning touch provided light outside the building.

My passport was stamped without any fuss, after answering such questions as where I was going and what was my occupation.

As I came out, I saw David being interrogated by the officers. Our driver was there with him. There was a kind of solidarity between David and the driver that got me a little worried. What if both of them are working together on some devious scheme and I am with them in the minority? I sat in the car and waited for them. At length they sorted things out with the Immigration (I don't know how) and they came. We drove across. It took just a few minutes to get to the Niger border post.

We stopped at the post and came down. The driver pointed to me the room to have my passport stamped.

The border on the Niger side had electricity and the place was well lit. The officer-in-charge here was as polite as the one on the Nigerian side. While I was having my passport stamped, again David and the driver had gone in a different direction. This time they came out faster than they did at the Nigerian side.

It was about 2 am when we got into Birnin Konni. Even at that hour there was life in the town. By now my worries had subsided. The driver stopped at a particularly busy spot. "We don't reach (we have reached)," he announced in Pidgin English.

"So how much?" I asked.

"N3,000, sir."

"The N3,000 is it for me alone or for the two of us?"

"For you alone"

"No, then it's too much," I protested. "It is just a few minutes ride and you are charging me N3,000, Why?"

"I told you before. That is what we make if we carry full load to cross the border – to and fro. Now I have to go back empty this time of the night."

Well indeed, he told me N3,000 before, in the darkness of Ilela. Then I had no voice to protest. I admit it is wrong for me to protest now that I was out of the seemingly dangerous zone.

"What is your name?" I asked him.

"Labaran."

"Ok, Labaran, thank you so much for your help." I gave him the N3,000.

I then asked him how I could get a vehicle to Ouagadougou.

"Ah, Ouaga? You cannot get a direct vehicle from here. You have to go first to Niamey"

"Can I get a vehicle now to Niamey?"

"Oh, no! You have to wait till morning."

Anyway my mind was more at peace now.

"If you wan change money you better change with that man over there. If you pass here now your naira will be totally useless," Labaran cautioned.

Though I was still suspicious of him but I had to agree with him on this point because I had experienced a similar thing in the past while I was travelling by road to Ghana through the Seme border. I had a huge regret that I did not change my money at Seme. By the time I got further away from Nigeria and into Ghana I could not even find a place to change naira and when I did find a place, the rate was so ridiculous that it was as good as a give-away. So I agreed with Labaran and we walked together to the money changer across the street.

I changed almost all the naira with me into CFA. While that was going on I asked the money changer if he knew how I could get transportation to Niamey. He did not understand English. My trouble had started. Labaran volunteered to translate for me into Hausa.

"Those small buses yonder can take you to Niamey for 5,000CFA. But if you want the big luxurious bus it will be 8,000CFA," he explained.

"Where is the luxurious bus station?" I asked. Labaran volunteered to take me there. David came with us and we drove into the premises of a company called Rimbo Transporte and Voyager. Labaran inquired from the security guard if there would be a bus in the morning to Niamey. The answer was, "Yes."

"Is there a hotel around here that I can stay in until morning?" I asked. Labaran again volunteered to take me to a hotel. By now I was completely relaxed in his company. We drove to a nearby hotel. The security guard at the gate had fallen asleep. Labaran called out in Hausa and he quickly jumped to his feet and came to inquire what we wanted.

"Do you have a room?"

"Yes"

"How much," I asked.

"18,000CFA."

Wow! That was more than half the money I had just changed. This will not work. I said no, it's too much. Labaran said he thought so too. "Let me take you back to the station. You can just wait there. E no go tay day go break. (It will not be long before daybreak)," he suggested.

On the way back to Rimbo Station I saw those people who sell tea, bread and fried eggs and I remembered that I had not eaten all day. I asked Labaran to stop for me to take something, and he did. We sat down on a bench and Labaran helped me place the order in Hausa. Labaran and David also placed their own orders.

As the seller was preparing the dishes, I turned to David. "Do you live here in Birnin Konni?"

"No, I'm going to Agadez"

"Do you live there?"

"No."

"You are on business?"

"Yes."

I paused for him to volunteer further explanation. But he didn't. Then our dishes were served and we focused on our meals. But I couldn't help going over what he had said in my mind. Agadez? I know that Agadez is a town in Northern Niger; a major town before entering into Algeria through the Sahara Desert. Many Nigerian young men have gone through this route in an effort to migrate to Europe. Some have been victims of boat disasters while crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Others have run afoul with the law in one country or the other along the route. I hoped that my travel colleague is indeed in some genuine profitable business that would not land him in trouble.

After the meal, Labaran took me back to Rimbo Station and we bided each other fare well and I especially wished David good luck in his 'business.' As for Labaran, he was indeed a jolly good fellow. I admit I had misjudged him in the beginning, in the darkness of Illela due to my fear. However, I do not regret my exercise of caution. It was the least I could do under the circumstance.

At the Rimbo premises, there is an open hall full of passengers, all sleeping on mats on the floor. I found a bench near the entrance of the hall and sat there until morning. I attempted to sleep but couldn't because of mosquitoes. They were so ferocious and they wouldn't let me sleep.

Birnin Konni has the look of a typical West African French speaking small town. The buildings are not so gorgeous, the roads are not too fancy or wide but basic amenities are intact – electricity, water etc. The toilet at the Rimbo station was very clean. At the entrance of the toilet is a line of water cans (gallons) for cleaning the body (Islamic style) after using the toilet.

7 am, the Rimbo Transport office opened and we went in in an orderly manner to buy our tickets. Exactly 8 am, the bus arrived from Agadez. It was a Chinese bus with a sitting capacity of more than sixty. While some people disembarked we embarked. The bus remained fully loaded. We departed Birnin Konni at 8.30am.

I had asked the ticket seller how long it would take to get to Niamey. He said 5 hours. But the journey took us a good 8 hours because of so many stops on the way. We stopped at almost every town or village.

The east-west journey from Birnin Konni to Niamey is across a vast plain, with little or no vegetation and very sparsely populated. Since childhood I have looked forward to seeing the Sahara desert and here was I, not too far from it. The earth is indeed a mother. Even on the obviously dry ground surface, I could see cultivation being carried out. I could see maize, as short as I had never seen before, bearing cobs.



Animals such as cattle, goats and sheep grazed about on I don't know what. Donkeys were used for pull carts. Sometimes the cows were also used for pull-carts. The animals here are particularly skinny due to meagre pasture.

The building style is also curious. The traditional buildings are mostly done with mud, with the walls of the building going up to the top such that the roof cannot be seen from the front side and two other sides

of the building. This is probably so for efficient collection of rain water through the roof. As water is a scarce commodity in this area every drop of it must be collected.



One incident touched my heart on this leg of the trip. A young man of about 17 or 18 sat beside me on an aisle seat. I had a window seat. At one stopping point where passengers came down to refresh, I chose to remain on board. You could do that here. The young man went down. When he came back in, he had two sachets of pure water. He was sucking one sachet and handed me the other. I impulsively accepted it. I did not realize how thirsty I was until then. Due to the hot and dehydrating weather, the importance of drinking water cannot miss out on you. Therefore offering water is such a great show of care and concern, more so to a total stranger. I was very impressed with that young man.

One curious observation on the road is that at several stopping points there were government officers in uniform – police or gendarmes or whatever they call them. They would come into the bus and have everyone show their ID cards; in my case my passport.

Those who have no ID to show are matched out of the bus. After a while they would come back in and the journey would continue. There were about 4 or 5 of such stopping points. I don't know exactly what those without IDs do to clear themselves. Your guess is as good as mine.

Apart from these stoppings for checks and for the dropping off and picking up of passengers, there was nothing else to delay the journey. The road was smooth all the way and traffic was light.

We arrived at the Rimbo Terminal in Niamey at about 4.30pm. I promptly went over to the ticketing section of the company across the road to enquire about the connecting bus to Ouagadougou. I was told the next bus would leave at 3am the following morning. This will not work for me because I have to get to Ouagadougou before 3pm the following day to meet up with the program. The best thing would be for me to find my way to the Niger/Burkina border this night, and then in the morning proceed to Ouagadougou. This way I might be able to make it.

I came out of the station to a taxi park outside. I approached a taxi driver and told him I would like to be taken to the border with Burkina Faso. He did not understand English. He was the only taxi driver there at the time. While we were struggling to communicate, he saw a man passing by and he motioned to him to cover over. This person spoke English and helped us with translation.

The taxi driver said he could take me to the border if I paid him 50,000FCA (about \$100).

"That is impossible," I said. "What is the last you can you go for?"

He said that is final.

"OK then, can you take me to where I can get the regular buses that go to the border?" I asked.

He said yes.

"How much?"

"5,000CFA."

"OK, let's go."

He drove me through the city center, by the central market – Grande Marche – and brought me to a motor park where they were loading passengers to the border in Toyota Hiace Minibuses with roof racks for loading merchandise.

My taxi driver explained to the bus driver who was loading that I was going to Ouaga and so he should take me up to Kantchari which is the border town on the Burkina Faso side. The bus driver put me on the front seat. I asked him how much and he said 3,000CFA. I paid him, and I paid my taxi driver the 5,000CFA as we had agreed. But surprisingly the taxi driver gave me back 1,000CFA. Perhaps he got a feeling he should not overcharge me. The distance was not really much for the amount he had quoted.



Quickly enough the bus was full and we were about to set off. Then a mild drama occurred.

I had been sitting alone on the front seat with my bags at the space between mine and the driver's seat. A young man came to join me in front and wanted me to remove my bags so that he could sit at the space between the driver's seat and the passenger's seat. I said no, I had paid for the entire front seat. While waiting for the bus to get full I had asked one of the passengers how much the fare was. He told me 2,000CFA. But I had paid 3,000CFA. Well, I shrugged my shoulders and assumed that it was because I was occupying the front seat that had more leg room than the back seats. The front seat must have a special price, I thought.

When the young man wanted to enter and I protested in English that I had paid 3000CFA for the entire place, this attracted a big commotion.

Everybody was talking loudly in French and in Hausa. I understood nothing of what they were saying and they understood nothing of what I was saying in English. They only understood that I would not let the young man in. And I misunderstood that I had paid a special rate for the front seat. It got quite noisy and at length the driver came to me and explained that he would be taking me as far as to Kantchari on the Burkina Faso side. That is why he charged me 3,000CFA. Those stopping before the Niger side of the border pay 2,000CFA. With this explanation the matter was settled. 6.30pm, we started toward the border.

Much of the city of Niamey lay at the northern bank of the River Niger. We drove through the city and across the bridge from the northern bank to the southern bank. The River Niger here was surprisingly big and it was beautiful. My appreciation of the beauty of the Niger here probably had something to do with the novelty of the environment to me. It was like, is this the same Niger around which I have lived most of my life at its lower course? There was a certain mystique about it as it flowed through bare lands here, free from the over-bearing vegetation that I am used to in its tropical rain forest and delta segments. After crossing the river, stopping briefly for fueling and for a security check at the outskirts of the city, we headed south-west toward the border with Burkina Faso.

Generally, so far the roads I have seen in Niger are nice, better than Nigerian roads in terms of going a certain distance without encountering pot holes or ditches in the middle of the road. But the towns are as littered with trash as Nigerian towns.

We had driven for about an hour of good road and we came to a small busy town; kind of a market town. The road narrows. As we approached the town center, there was a truck parked at the side of the road. As the road was narrow the parked truck took up part of the main road such that to go past it, one would do as if one is overtaking it. Then of course before overtaking you would have to make sure there is no on-coming vehicle on your left side. If your left is clear you may overtake. If not, you stop to let the on-coming vehicle pass before you can overtake.

In our case, at that instance, a truck was approaching. Our driver tried to stop behind the parked truck but the break failed we were heading for a crash into the rear of the parked truck. Our driver then turned the steering to the left to avoid the parked truck, thereby heading for a head-on collision with the on-coming truck. The on-coming truck managed to avoid the head-on collision with our vehicle by a hair's breath,

but not without squeezing our vehicle between it and the parked truck, shattering the two side-mirrors, the two door glasses and the front bumpers. None of us was wearing a seat belt as our vehicle had none. All the passengers were in a frenzy of screaming. But we had managed to escape what would have been an incredibly fatal accident.

The impact was much to my side. Broken glasses poured all over my body. But I had not a single scratch. Our vehicle came to a stop and we all came down to assess the damage. There was a lot of discussion and yelling between the driver and the passengers. I could not contribute to the discussion because I could neither speak French nor Hausa. I had no idea what was going to happen next.

After about 10 minutes of heated talks, the driver jumped back into the vehicle and started the engine. Everyone scrambled back in and the journey resumed. It was clear to me we were driving a vehicle without brakes at night. My God! What an adventure I have put myself into. And the driver continued driving so fast as if there is no tomorrow.

This is one of the times in my life I see myself vividly in a life-threatening situation requiring divine intervention. This would be the third time I would be in such a situation. The first was on the water. I was travelling by boat from Victoria Island in Lagos to Tarkwa Bay to teach in a workshop. Our boat developed a fault and we drifted into the Atlantic Ocean. We were miraculously rescued by a Marine Police boat that appeared from nowhere. The second was in the air. I was on a Cathy Pacific flight from Hong Kong to Seoul. The plane developed engine problem and had to make an emergency landing in Taipei, Taiwan. Fortunately the emergency landing was harmless. Now I am in this danger on the road in a vehicle without brakes driven by an inconsiderate driver.

After driving for about an hour we got to the border town on the Niger side. Some of the passengers had reached their destination. We could not help being envious of them. About six of us remained, heading for Kantchari on the Burkina Faso side.

The driver left us in the vehicle at the side of the road at the border village of Say and disappeared. I later learned that he had gone in search of another vehicle to trans-load us into.

An hour passed and we were making no progress on the journey. I was getting worried that I might not be able to make it to Ouagadougou on time for the opening event after all. What is more frustrating is that I have no information about what is being decided or what is being done on our behalf. Due to the language barrier I could not participate in any discussion with the driver and other passengers concerning our fate on the journey.

A couple of other vehicles came in from the same direction of Niamey and dropped off their passengers. The passengers went their way into town. None of the vehicles crossed where we were. And I saw no vehicle coming from the other side either. I was wondering if I had not come to a dead end of the journey.

Some motorcyclists were hovering around in case any of us needed their services. I called one of them that looked clean and well dressed. Fortunately he spoke some English. I asked him if Kantchari was still far from here. He said yes.

I told him I needed to get to Kantchari this night.

"Kantchari? Why? Are you going to Ghana?" He asked me.

"No, Ouagadougou."

"Oh, Ouaga!"

"Yes, I hope I can get a vehicle from Kantchari to Ouaga this night."

"No you can't; only in the morning." He said. "Even from here you can get a vehicle in the morning straight to Ouaga."

It's good to know I can get a vehicle from here straight to Ouaga but I was not sure it would serve my need of getting there in time for our event. This town is a small town. You never know how long it could take for a vehicle to have enough passengers to move and to reach on time. Moreover, I preferred to finish everything with borders this night. So I must do whatever it takes to get to Kantchari this night. I asked my motorcyclist friend if he could take me to Kantchari. He said yes but I'd have to pay 10,000CFA.

"What? Is Kantchari that far from here?"

"Oh yes," he said.

"How many kilometers?"

"About 80 kilometers," he said.

"Really?" I couldn't believe it. "Isn't this the last town to the frontier? Why should Kantchari be that far and why should you charge 10,000CFA? Anyway, I can't pay more than 5,000CFA. Because this is night time, that's why I offer to pay that much."

The young man said if I could pay 7,000CFA he would try to go, but not for less. I said no.

A lady sitting behind me with a child called out in English: "Daddy, Kantchari is still far oh." I looked behind with surprise but also with relief to know there is an English speaking person in the bus.

If, as I had thought, the young man was exaggerating the distance in order to collect more money from me, I could live with that, so long as I got out of the dead-end situation I was in and so long as I do not have to deal with this vehicle without breaks. But if Kantchari truly is as far as he is saying, then it makes no sense for him to volunteer to go to there this night for all the money in the world. With that reasoning I cut the discussion with the young man.

Now to the lady: "Where are you going?"

"I am going to Ghana, daddy. I'm from Ghana."

"OK. Your family lives in Ghana?"

"Yes daddy."

"So what's happening here now, what are we doing here?"

"The driver is trying to find another vehicle for us. But nobody wants to go."

This is certainly one of the times you are in a situation whereby you have to resign your fate into the hands of God. There was nothing else I could do.

While I was ruminating over the situation, the lady said, "Daddy, do you have any coin on you for me to buy pure water for my child?"

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a bunch of coins, all the coins in my pocket and handed them to her. She selected two or three of them and was handing the rest back to me saying, "It's more than I needed."

"No, I'm sure you'll need all of it," I said. "Please use them."

She came down from the vehicle with the child and went to a nearby shop still open. Afterwards she came back with not only pure water but a loaf of bread and other snacks.

I had also come out of the bus to stretch my legs. There was very little activity there that night. But I believe in the day time the place would be a beehive of activities. Beside where we were parked, to the left side of the road, there were market stalls, showing that in the day the place would be full of people and thronging with activities.

As I was standing out there looking around, people began to come back to our bus. A man and a woman came by. They were not part of our original group from Niamey. The man opened the front passenger door for the woman to enter and she took my seat. I went and told her that she had taken my seat and she quickly came down and took a back seat. The man who came with her began to challenge me. Why would I ask a woman to get up from a seat? He spoke some broken English. I'm I from Ghana or from Nigeria?

"Maybe you're Ibo. You people don't respect woman. Here in Niger we are Muslims and we respect women. You can't ask a woman to stand up from a seat."

As he spoke, I could perceive a strong smell of alcohol coming out of his breath. While my mind was busy taking cognizance of the contradiction between his lecture on Islamic values and the fact that he had been drinking alcohol, I had nothing to say to him. I was absolutely quiet.

When he had finished talking he bade the woman safe journey and walked away. I sat there musing to myself. "So the Ibos are also known here? Good for the Ibos. Is it easy for a people to be so well known all over, even if in a prejudiced way?"

While all this was going on, our bus was getting full of people. I thought our driver had gone to look for another vehicle to trans-load us into. Instead he came back with many more passengers. Did he inform the newcomers that his vehicle had no brakes? I had no way of knowing. We had spent about 3 hours there.

He started the vehicle and began driving towards the border in full speed.

"Oh God, our lives are in your hands," I prayed.

In less than 5 minutes we were at the Niger border post. Fortunately at that time of the night there was no traffic. We were about the only ones on the road. Bringing the vehicle to a stop was a dare interchange of brake pumping and clutching. We had not slowed down enough before we got to where we should veer off the main road into the lane that led to the border guards' office building. When the guard standing at the check-point saw us coming down the lane with unusual speed, he had to step clear from his post. The vehicle was brought to a stop when we hit a very high speed bump; not without hitting our heads on the roof of the vehicle. We all screamed and scrambled out.

The border here is very clean and well setup. Of course they were not busy at all. As we approached the building, five officers were sitting under a tree on one side of the building eating a local meal from a giant bowl like children of one mother would eat in the village.

As I approached them, I greeted, "hallo," waving my passport to them. One of them asked in French what I wanted and I said, "Stamp!" Another one said in English "You don't see we eat? Wait there!" He was pointing to a hut nearby on the same side of the office building. I went over to the open hut and sat down on a bench. As I sat, I couldn't help but to be amused at the idea of being kept waiting by border officials while they enjoyed a group meal at 11pm. All the same I was impressed with the cleanliness and orderliness of the Niger border. There was no such hustle and bustle characteristic of West African borders. It was a Sunday night anyway. Certainly there was no feeling of insecurity here. There was electricity and the place was well lit.

After about fifteen minutes of waiting, one of the officers motioned to me to come over. We went into an office together where he stamped my passport, handed it back to me and said, "Have a good journey." I went back to our bus where all the passengers and the driver were sited, waiting for me. I was the only one who needed to have his passport stamped.

All and all, Niger strikes me as an orderly place where people are generally honest and kind. Never mind the big mouth and expression of prejudice by the guy at Say. You can have people like this anywhere. Never mind our driver who would drive us on full spend without brakes and without giving a damn about human lives.

We proceeded toward Kantchari, driving for about forty-five minutes on good road. The road was lonely. Throughout the entire drive we encountered on-coming vehicles only two or three times. The driver was on high speed of course, determined to give us a hell of a nightmare. It was such a long drive before getting to the Burkina Faso border post, true to what my motorcyclist friend had said.

Just before we got to the Burkina Faso border post, a shocking incident occurred. A dog was trying to cross the road and our vehicle, coming with full speed, ran over him. We heard the loud screaming of the dog in death pain. What was more shocking was the laughter and gleeful cheering of the driver to what he had just done. A kind of weird feeling came to me that this dog might have sacrificed its life on our behalf.

Hitting the dog slowed us down enough for us to veer into the lane that leads to the checking area of the Burkina Faso border post without the same kind of experience as we had on the Niger side. Like the Niger border post, the Burkina Faso one was also not busy. At the time we arrived there was no electricity. The whole place was in darkness. We were greeted by a border official who ushered us all into a room in the building which was lighted with a hurricane lamp. He requested for our ids and I presented my passport.

Again, mine was the only passport. Others had other kinds of ids. Some had nothing. Anyway, id or no id, he requested everyone to pay 1,000CFA. For me I should pay 2,000CFA. Some negotiations went on. In fact, a group went out of the room with another officer. Those who remained, one by one, paid to the officer what he had requested. Finally it was my turn to pay. I asked what the 2,000CFA was for. He said it was for 'stamping.'

"2000CFA for stamping? I've never had to pay such money on this journey"

"Well here you have to pay." He spoke some English.

"I'm sorry I don't have money for that."

He had my passport in his hand. He put it down on the desk and said, "If you will not pay go out."

I complied and stepped toward the door. When I got to the door I turned around and came back to him and said, "Do you want me to go and leave my passport with you? Does that make sense to you?"

"What work you do?" He asked

"I'm a pastor."

"Pastor in Nigeria or pastor in Ouaga"

"Pastor in Nigeria"

He picked up my passport and handed it back to me and said, "Go to the next building and have it stamped."

"Thank you and God bless you."

I did as he said and got back to the bus. Everyone was waiting for me. We drove from there, slowly this time, until we came to a barricade, which is the final stop. Our vehicle will not cross that point.

"Oh God, we've made it alive to Kantchari. All Glory and honor be unto You!"

Our driver switched off the engine and the bus rolled over to a final stop where buses from across the border are meant to park. We all scrambled out and picked up our luggage. As we did so, we were accosted by motorcycle riders asking to take us to our destinations.

One heavily built man approached me and I began to explain about going to a place where I could get a bus to Ouaga. The man was already reaching for my bag when I received a tap on my shoulders from behind. It was a young man who was with us in the bus from Niamey. He motioned to me to leave that man and follow him. We walked together in the darkness between two lines of trucks parked on both sides of the road.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Adio"

"Are you from here?"

"No, I'm from Togo."

"Are you going to Togo?"

"No, I live here in Burkina."

We walked for about half a kilometer between those lines of trucks and came to an open ground where several minibuses were parked. They were the same kind of bus with roof-racks that brought us from Niamey. I enquired if these were going to Ouaga. The answer was yes, but in the morning.

"Is there any hotel around here?" I asked.

"No, there is none," Adio said, while helping me put my bag in one of the buses. He suggested I go to the food court yonder to eat something. That was a very good idea for I had eaten little or nothing the whole day except for a French bread sandwich and yoghurt I had pick up during our stop for security checks at the outskirts of Niamey.

I walked in the direction Adio had pointed and it was indeed an open air food court with about three or four food stands and a couple of drinking stands. Out of one of the drinking places came loud music that filled the air in the entire open ground. They played mostly Afro rock in French. The other drinking place had a TV set showing European football. I did not stop to look at which teams were playing.

After surveying the food stands, I settled at one that had the most customers and looked the busiest. I sat on a bench. The stand arrangement was such that the seller himself was in the middle surrounded by 3 tables arranged in a U formation. In front of him were four large pots containing different things – rice, noodles, sauce etc. I ordered rice and stew with chicken.

He served the rice and sauce on a plate and was handing it to me without meat.

"Where's the chicken?" I asked.

He was looking lost. He did not know what I meant by "chicken."

"Qu'est chicken? (What is chicken?)" He asked in French.

Now I'm trying to remember what chicken is in French. Then I got it. "Le poulet." Donne mois un poulet (Give me chicken),"I tried to say in French.

"Ah, le poulet." Then he opened a pot at the end of the line of pots and scooped out something three times into the bowl of rice meant for me and handed it to me.

When I look closely, it was chicken intestines he had served me. Wow! What should I do now? Protest? That'd be useless. In any case I was too tired and hungry and had no strength for any protest to people who will not understand what I would be saying. I settled to eat my rice and chicken intestines. I realized how hungry I was when I had consumed everything. Without asking how much, I pulled out a 1,000CFA bill and gave to the seller and he gave a change of 500CFA. I arose and walked back to the bus.

I met Adio and asked if he had eaten. He said no. I gave him the 500CFA change I had received and urged him to quickly go and get something for himself. While we were talking about the meal, another young man came up to us. He had a mat with him and he was offering it to me.

"What for?" I asked.

"For sleep," Adio answered. "You need it. You can give him 200CFA." I took the mat and gave him the money. He pointed to a house nearby that had an extended balcony. People were lying on mats at the balcony. I found a space and put my mat down and sat with my back to a wall and offered a prayer of thanks for God's protection; and an intercessory prayer for the poor good souls that surrounded me. These are people struggling hard to make a living and to take care of their families. It's just the same everywhere. After the prayer, I lay down to a peaceful sleep. Fortunately there were no mosquitoes as there were at the Birnin Konni bus terminal the previous night.

As I slept, I dreamed that I was in a hall full of very high level people in a conference. The hall was so beautifully and delightfully decorated that it was out of this world.

Before 4 am I was awake and I sat up with my back against the same wall and I started a session of prayer and meditation. When it was 4.30am, there was a loud call to prayer from a nearby mosque. Adio came over and told me it was time to start going. I went over to the bus and got on the front passenger seat.

The driver came – a heavily built man in his late thirties or early forties – and started the engine. There was just myself, Adio (sitting between the driver and me in front), another passenger behind and the conductor. We drove into Kantchari town proper in less than five minutes.

The driver stopped the vehicle at an open square, at what looked like the town center. The place was deserted at that hour. We all came down. I was wondering what he meant by stopping there. Is this the place to load more passengers? We spent about 30 minutes there. Not one soul was on the street. Meanwhile, the driver led the way to a building which is perhaps a public convenience. We all used the place to relieve ourselves and washed our faces.



Afterwards the driver summoned us back to the vehicle and we began the journey, briefly stopping at a local gendarme station for routine check and at about 5.30am we hit the main road towards Ouagadougou.

The road was not as smooth as Niger roads. There were lots of pots holes. Nevertheless, the driver drove this bus with such power and speed that made the driving of the driver from Niger a child's play. Fortunately, this bus had seat belts and I made sure I had mine securely fastened. Still I was worried.

As we drove on, dawn revealed a beautiful country. Burkina Faso is a country of lakes. Plenty of small lakes and patches of water were visible on both sides of the road. Irrigated agriculture is quite obvious as far as we could see. Even the animals have enough pasture to keep them fresh and healthy, not like the skinny cows and sheep one could see in Niger.

The road from Kantchari was not busy that morning. We would drive one or two kilometers before seeing an on-coming vehicle. One gruesome incident happened as we drove along. A pack of dogs, about six or seven of them were snuggling or fighting (I'm not sure which) in the middle of the road. Our vehicle was coming full speed and the driver made no effort to slow down. In fact, he pressed down on the accelerator and ran over the dogs – all of them. Imagine the sound of six or seven dogs screaming in pain. How heart rendering it was. I was beside myself. It was beyond me to know what people in that area have with dogs. Last night one dog, this morning seven dogs.

"Did they all die?" I asked the driver.

"No, no, no die"

"How do you know?"

"No die, hahaha... no die" He shook his head, laughing.

I became more upset and I kept silent. It took me quite a while get over this incident.

As the journey proceeded, we were picking up and dropping off passengers on the way. There were so many security checks. Every passenger must show his/her id at every stop. Hawkers were everywhere selling all kinds of things, mostly fruits and snacks.

I was looking at a particular snack I had never seen before that a woman was selling. The woman caught me staring at what she was holding and came over and insisted that I buy the snack. I indicated that I did know what it was and so I was not going to buy. She simply dropped a sachet of it on my lap through the bus window as I was seated in the bus. I then asked how much? She indicated I should take it for free for trial. I asked Adio if he knew how much the thing cost. He said it was 100CFA. I had no change and Adio called her back and gave her 100CFA on my behalf. The thing turned out to be a kind of burns, deeply fried. Quite nice actually and it became my breakfast.



At about 12noon we arrived at Zorgo, still about 100 kilometers to Ouagadougou. The driver announced that this is his final stop. As it turned out, all the passengers, including Adio, were ending their journey here. I was the only one going as far as to Ouagadougou. The driver had to arrange for me to be trans-loaded into another bus going to Ouaga and he settled the fare with this new driver after I had paid him 3,000CFA. I bade Adio farewell and we exchanged phone numbers. I told him if he ever finds himself in Nigeria, he should call me.

This final leg of the inward journey was very intense in a way. The Niamey-Kantchari and Kantchari-Zorgo legs were intense because I was in a life threatening situation. Both drivers drove like crazy. In one, we drove without breaks and the driver did not care. In the Zorgo-Ouaga leg the journey was intense for a different reason. The driver was just too slow; so slow that I worried I might not be able to make it to Ouaga in time after all for the opening event; after all what I had passed through. This driver would stop everywhere to carry anyone no matter how short a distance the person is going. It was like he was running a town service. What is weirder is that even motorcyclists would flag him down and he would

stop for them. He would take them by putting their motorbike on the roof-rack. He did this on two occasions. Loading things on the roof-rack takes a lot of time and it was so frustrating.

At length, exactly 2 pm we entered Ouagadougou.

A characteristic of most African cities is that the outskirts are largely unplanned and with much litters. As you advance, you see a well-planned city. Ouagadougou is a mixture of French colonial architecture with modern architecture, as well as traditional architecture. The streets are straight, crossing each other at right angle. Other than a few road junctions and road repair sites, the traffic flowed pretty well. Traffic lights worked well.

Our bus took us all the way to the Grande Marché (Central Market) at the city center, arriving at about 2.20 pm. I called a Nigerian lady, Mrs Andy Akpan Barre, married to a Burkinabe and who is a staff member of the conference organizing committee, to get directions on where to go. I got her to explain to a taxi driver, on phone, how to bring me to the quarters that had been prepared for national leaders. Andy and her husband runs an international school and the quarters prepared for us happen to be at her school. When we got to the place, the taxi driver waited for me while I shaved and showered and dressed up. He then took me to Hotel Laico Ouaga 2000, venue of the conference. I arrived at the hotel lobby at 3pm on the dot. I had made my goal. Halleluiah!

Andy was at the UPF conference reception desk. We greeted each other very warmly as we had not seen each other for several years. A few of my international colleagues who had come for the conference were sitting at the hotel lobby. It was a pleasant moment of reunion.

"So what's going on?" I asked Andy.

"Well, the event opening ceremony has been shifted to 6pm," said Andy. "Many of the special guests from abroad could not arrive on time for reasons that has to do with flight delays into the Ouagadougou airport. In fact, our staff transportation and hospitality teams are still at the airport waiting for guests to arrive." So among the Nigerian delegation I was the first to arrive. The others who were coming by air had been delayed due to the issue with the airport.



We were a total of nine delegates from Nigeria: UPF Chairman and Secretary General, one Senator, one member of the House of Representatives, one journalist from Radio Nigeria, another journalist from Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), two Ambassadors for Peace and me.

Since I now have plenty of time, Andy suggested I go have lunch, and detailed a staff member to take me to a restaurant. I had a big lunch of steak with fries and vegetable salad, starting with a chapman and finishing with a slice of baked French dessert which the waiter served along with a pot of coffee. I told

him I wanted tea instead and he returned the coffee and brought me tea. It was my first real meal in three days.

Afterwards, I went up to the conference office and asked if there was any last minute thing I could do to help. Danwere Sou, my friend and colleague at the seminary was the conference chief of staff. He gave me some conference materials that had been translated from French into English for me to check for errors. Thus I spent the remaining time until evening. The opening event did not begin until about 7 pm. A grand opening event it was, attended by the high and mighty in Burkina Faso. The President of Burkina Faso did not come in person for he was out of the country. But the government was well represented.

During the banquet that evening, I was asked by the conference organizers if I could moderate the first session tomorrow at 10 am. That session was scheduled to be moderated by the Secretary General of UPF Ghana, but she was unavoidably absent. I said no problem. I had a very short time to obtain briefings from the speakers on my panel on their topics which addressed a sub-theme of "Peace Makers in Action."

Indeed the following day, 9th August 2016, the International Leadership Conference (ILC) proper began with an opening plenary. Three opening addresses were presented; first by the representative of the President of Burkina Faso, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, followed by an address by a former president of Mali, and then followed by the UPF Nigeria Chairman Senator Ibrahim Mantu's address. The keynote address of UPF Co-Founder Dr. Mrs. Hak Ja Han Moon, our True Mother, was presented by Dr. Thomas Walsh – International President of UPF.

Ours was the first session after that opening plenary. Six speakers presented various perspectives on the sub-theme. Rev. Katherine Rigney, UPF Chairperson for Africa, shared her 40 years of missionary service in Africa; Dr. Tageldin Hamad, Secretary General of UPF International shared about UPF Founders' investments in efforts to solve the mutual mistrust and suspicion among the major religions through education; Mr. Momodou Gaye, a Unificationist and star sport broadcaster spoke on the efficacy of the Tribal Messiahship strategy in community peace building; Mrs. Mau Ilboudo, Regional Women's Federation for World Peace President shared about the matching and intercultural marriage Blessing as viable instrument of bridge-building and lasting peace among cultures; A professor of Philosophy from the University of Ouagadougou spoke on the role scholars in molding a new generation of leaders as peace builders; Senator Ibrahim Mantu, former Deputy President of the Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and National Chairman of UPF Nigeria spoke about conflict management and peacebuilding in the political arena.

These presentations, which were quite intimate but powerful, elicited a lot of discussion. This session helped all conference participants gain an appreciation of the kind of investment and sacrifice that peacemaking entails and how these principles might be applied to the larger society. Three other sessions were held afterwards, which dealt with wider issues such as good governance and anti-corruption as well as terrorism which have become rampant in the region.

On 10th August 2016, the launching of the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace for West and Central Africa Region was held at the Burkina Faso National Assembly under the chairmanship of the Vice President of the Burkina Faso National Assembly. A PeaceRoad march through the streets and a rally was held at the Ouagadougou Memorial Square to bring the events to a close.









In the evening of that day, FWPU Regional President Dr. Dong Ho Cho conducted a ceremony to bequeath four great holy items to national leaders.

Details of the proceedings of the conference and associated activities are presented in a different article. But it was a very worthwhile experience one would only be proud to have participated in. This report is about my journey to and from Burkina Faso and the challenges I faced as an English speaking person in a French speaking terrain and one who did not speak the native language(s) in the area.

During the proceedings of events, I was already considering my return journey. As I was chatting with the National Leader of Benin, Emmanuel, he told me he came together with the Congo-Brazzaville National

Leader, Nono. They travelled with a bus company called TCV from Cotonou. It took them 18 hours. The bus is nice and fully air-conditioned, they said. I said if so I should accompany them and return through Cotonou. This would probably be less stressful than my inward journey. But they said they already had return tickets for the 12th of August. They advised me that if I wanted to go on the same bus I should buy a ticket ahead of time. I called the attention of the Burkina Faso National leader, Thierry, to help me arrange for someone to buy the TCV bus ticket. His question was, if that particular bus is fully booked, would I mind to travel by any other bus? I said I wouldn't mind. "If there is another bus going to Cotonou in the evening of the 11th or morning of the 12th, I wouldn't mind taking it," I said.

A few hours later I got a call from Thierry saying the TCV was fully booked for the 12th and their next bus will leave on Sunday the 14th.

"Do you want to wait until Sunday?" he asked

"Absolutely not," I said.

"Then there is another company whose bus is departing for Cotonou, 6pm on the 11th," he pursued.

Thierry was aware that National leaders would have a meeting with the Regional President on the 11th, from morning until about 12 noon. Therefore, departing 6pm would be OK for me. It would have been nice for me to travel together with my French speaking colleagues on the TCV, but that's OK. I can always manage. I gave Thierry the go ahead to buy the ticket. It costs 18,000CFA. The name of this bus company is TSR.

4pm on the 11th I was about to proceed to the bus station for my journey. I asked one of our church members in the quarters to guide me on how to get there.

"Bus to Cotonou at this time?" The brother expressed doubt and asked to see my ticket. I gave it to him. He looked at it shortly and drew my attention to the fact that the ticket says departure time is 6am, 11th August.

"What?" since that ticket was given to me I did not look closely to see what was written on it.

"It must be a mistake," I countered. "I was clearly told I was being booked for 6pm, 11th August. Thierry was aware we had a meeting with the Regional President in the morning of the 11th. He couldn't have booked me to travel and miss the meeting with the Regional President. I put a call through to Thierry to confirm.

"Hi Thierry, this is George."

"Yes George."

"What is my bus departure time?"

"6pm. You should be on your way to the bus station now."

"Someone here is saying the bus already departed at 6am."

"No, no, no! That's a mistake. Don't listen to that. Go to the station now."

A lady was just driving out of the school premises and I asked if she could give me a ride to any place I could get a vehicle to the bus station. She obliged. I hopped into the front seat. A young man sitting at the back seat greeted me in English and we struck a conversation. He is the lady's nephew. He spoke better English than her aunt and so he explained to her exactly where I was going and she volunteered to take me all the way there.

We arrived at the TSR station. The young man accompanied me to the ticketing counter to assist with translation if necessary. The lady at the counter said the bus for today had left at 6am, true to what the brother at our quarters had said. Hey, what to do now?

"Is there a bus to Cotonou tomorrow morning?" I asked.

"No, the next bus is on Sunday morning. I can book you on that one?" The lady asked.

"No I cannot wait here until Sunday. I have to leave here latest tomorrow morning. Can I get a refund of my money?"

"No, no refunds."

Well, in Nigeria bus operators do not refund money either, in this or other circumstances. But it's good to know that we are not the only ones that do not refund bus ticket money.

I must be on my way home this night. I felt like trying to return the same way I had come. So I decided to go to the Grande Marche where the bus that brought me had dropped me on my inward journey. The lady who brought me agreed to take me there. After maneuvering through a bit of traffic around the Grande Marche, she found a convenient place for me to come down.

"Are you sure you can find your way from here?" asked the young man.

"Yes, I'll be fine," I said. "Sorry to make you go out of your way."

"Not at all Sir."

"Thank you Madame"

They drove off. I was completely on my own. It was about 6pm.

I had hoped I would find those small buses going to the border at this place so I could take one of them and make a start on the journey back home. There was no bus. No sign of any transport operator going out of town from that place at that time. Wow, what to do now? I hailed a taxi and asked to be taken to a station where I could get a bus to Cotonou. The taxi driver took me through some side streets and brought me to Rimbo Transporte & Voyager Station of Ouagadougou. This station was not as clean and as organized as the Rimbo Station in Niamey. I inquired if they have a bus to Cotonou this night or tomorrow morning. They said no. Their next bus is on Saturday. Kai!

I had asked the taxi driver that brought me to wait in case I would need to be taken elsewhere. I went back to him and asked if there is another bus station he could take me to. He said yes. He drove me to TCV; the very company that I was supposed to go with together with my Beninese and Congolese national leaders colleagues and which was said to be fully booked. All the same I presented myself at the ticketing counter and asked to buy a ticket to Cotonou for tomorrow morning. The lady at the counter said the bus was fully booked, but that she could book me for Sunday. She spoke good English. I explained to her that I could not stay here until Sunday. I am a pastor from Nigeria and I came here for a conference which we have just concluded and I must return to Nigeria right away.

"Oh, you are a pastor?"

"Yes I am, by the grace of God."

"OK, wait let me see what I can do."

She picked up her phone, dialed a number and began talking to someone in French. When she was done she said, "OK pastor, I can give you a seat because you are a pastor."

"God bless you my dear. How much is the ticket?"

"18,000CFA"

I gave her 20,000CFA and asked her to keep the change.

"The bus will leave at 6am. You need to be here by 5am," she said.

"Thank you. God bless you!"

My taxi driver was still waiting. I asked him to take me back to the school quarters where we were staying. The brother who drew my attention to the problem with my TSR booking was not surprised to see me back. I gave him the TSR ticket, which is now useless to me, to see what he could do with it.

As early as 4am, I was up. Together with Emmanuel (Benin national leader) and Nono (Congo-Brazzaville national leader) we went to the TCV station to join the bus. We departed the station at 6.45am.

The journey to Cotonou in the TCV luxurious, fully air-conditioned bus was much less eventful than my incoming journey. It was a long drive from Ouagadougou to Pako, border town with Benin. There were a number stops for identity checks by the gendarmes.

Of the more than 60 passengers, I could identify four Nigerians; three of whom seemed to be travelling together. They spoke Igbo among themselves and they were always together. The fourth person was sitting close to me in the bus. It was hard to make him out for he had a raster dreadlocked hair style. He was always speaking to himself in a raster-style English. When he wasn't speaking to himself he was singing along with the earpiece he was wearing. From his monologue I could pick-up that he had been travelling from Spain by road and was returning to Nigeria. In this bus there were also quite a number of Yoruba speaking women of various ages. But they could be Beninese, I'm not sure.

We arrived at the Burkina Faso border control post at about 3pm. Those of us with passports were asked to go to the office for stamping. Again the officials demanded 2,000CFA. This seems to be the standard price here. Emmanuel explained something in French to them. They stamped his passport and handed it back to him. He did not pay the 2,000CFA. They withheld my own passport and insisted I pay 2,000CFA. I explained that I am a pastor; travelling together with the gentleman they had just stamped his passport. After a brief hesitation they stamped my passport. We boarded the bus and proceeded to the Benin border post at Porga which was more than 20 kilometers away.

At the Benin border post we were made to line up and bring out our passports or any other form of identification. An officer came by and collected our passports one by one. He took them inside the building. Another officer came and took those without passports with him into the building. After a while someone came out from the building and began calling those of us with passports one by one to come into the building.

When it was my turn the officer calling the names handed my passport to another officer and asked me to go in with him. We went into an open office. The officer said:

"Your money, 2,000CFA"

"For what?" I asked.

"For stamping."

"I'm sorry I don't have money for that." That's been my song.

Just then a fracas occurred. The raster Nigerian guy was protesting loudly for being asked to pay 2,000CFA. As soon he raised his voice, four officers rushed on him. One gave him a swipe kick at his ankles and he fell on the floor. Two of them grabbed him from the floor – one on his belt, the other on his collar. They both jerked him up and dragged him out of the office.

My officer switched back his attention to me after that unsightly distraction.

"Yes, your money."

I was not intimidated at all. If I felt anything it was indignation. How mean for officers in uniform to treat a citizen of a country that way over 2,000CFA.

"I told you I don't have money for this. I am a pastor. I am returning home from a conference. I am not a business man," I said.

"Everyone who passes through here must pay," he pursued.

I am already hearing the honking of our bus. I was the only passenger remaining in the room.

"My friend, you need to give me my passport because the bus is leaving."

He simply handed the passport back to me.

"You are not stamping it?" I asked.

"You don't pay, no stamp."

"OK."

I took my passport and went back to the bus. In the bus I asked Nono how much he paid for stamping. He said he didn't pay anything.

"They didn't ask you for money?"

"No. But I have my visas."

"OK."

His country, Republic of Congo, is a non ECOWAS Member State. He comes in with a visa and he passes through the borders freely. But those of us from ECOWAS Member States are harassed. More so when we present our passports at border controls. This is ridiculous. So much for ECOWAS guarantee of free movement.

Most of the time for the rest of the journey to Cotonou I was asleep. It was 3am when our bus arrived at the TCV station in Cotonou. Emmanuel's wife, Genevieve, was waiting for us with a church van. They gave me a ride to the Cotonou Grande Marche called Datokpa from which I would take a taxi to Seme, the Benin border with Nigeria together with four other passengers. Even at that hour, Datokpa was very much alive and bustling with activities. So was Seme when we arrived at about 4am.

At the Benin side of Seme, after dropping from the taxi, I changed all my CFA back into naira with one of the local money changers. I then took a motorbike to cross the border. I presented my passport at the Benin immigration point for stamping. The officer, as usual, demanded N1,000. Without any word I gave him the money. Next, at the Benin Port Health desk, the officer demanded for my yellow card. This is the first time on this journey that someone would ask for my yellow card. Fortunately I had it and I handed it to him. He requested for N1,000. I asked why. He said he would have to put a stamp in my yellow card so that any other time I pass through the border I would not have to pay anything. He showed me the stamp on someone else's yellow card which mine did not have. I'm not sure it made any sense but I simply pulled out N1,000 and gave to him. He put the so-called stamp on my yellow card.

I crossed over to the Nigerian side and presented myself at the Nigerian immigration point. It was a make-shift kiosk. In fact, the whole of the Seme border, both the Beninese side and the Nigerian side consist of make-shift temporary structures. The place is so disorganized and rowdy. I won't say more.

When I presented my passport to the immigration officer in the kiosk, he demanded for N1,000.

"I'm sorry sir, I have no money for that," I replied.

"Oga, save my time," he protested with an air like I knew the right thing to do and I'm just wasting his time.

"Please stamp my passport and let me go." I stood my ground. "I'm not a businessman. I am a pastor, coming from a very long journey and I really need to be able to get home as soon as possible."

"Where do you live?"

"Abuja."

"All these pastors, you say you have no money but you are the ones buying private jets and building universities. Poor church members will contribute money to build universities but cannot afford to send their children there."

"Hmm! How did we get to this kind of topic now? Are you bothered about something?" I ask him.

"I'm just saying that churches are very unfair to their members, especially the poor."

"Why are you being so negative towards churches? You don't go to church, do you?"

"Yes I do. I am a staunch member of the Catholic Church, but not everything the Catholic Church does that I agree with."

"My friend, please don't say what you don't know," I counselled. "Any church worth its salt, that has a university, must also have a scholarship program to cater for indigent members, such that no child who is really qualified is denied educational opportunity. I know for sure that the Catholic Church gives out a lot of scholarships, even to non-members. So do other churches. Tell me what this country would have been educationally without the contribution of the church. Please do not insult the intelligence and piety of church members, no matter how poor they are."

"OK pastor, I give up." He stamped my passport and handed it to me.

"Thank you and have a nice day."

I passed through a series of other government agencies' desks or stands in the open – port health, customs, NDLEA, quarantine, SSS, police, mobile police etc. They were generally courteous to me. My

motorcyclist brought me over to the motor park on the Nigerian side of Seme. It was already 5am. A car was loading by the side of the main road going to Mile 2 in Lagos. I sat at the back seat. Three men were already seated – one in front, two at the back. The two men at the back were Beninese. They must be in their thirties. We took off toward Lagos.

When we got to Agbara, a small town just before the suburbs of Greater Lagos, the driver stopped and asked the two Beninese to come down and walk across an immigration check point before the Agbara bridge.

"Why do they have to walk across," I asked the driver.

"Oga, if they see this people inside this car, we no go commot here today," he said. "The kind money wey dem go ask them, maybe dem no fit get that kind money and dem go delay us." Meaning that the immigration officers will give the Beninese a hard time by asking for bribes that might be too exorbitant for them to afford and that would cause us a considerable delay.

Now I know that the aggressive treatment we get from Beninese officials is retaliation for what their citizens' experience from our own officials. Or is it the other way round? Whatever; the fact is that there is mutual aggression by both countries' officials in the border crossing process towards the citizens. I think it is totally abnormal that border crossing between two countries that should enjoy regional integration privileges should be so painful. Are the ECOWAS authorities and the Integration Ministries of member states aware of the pain involved for the ordinary person to cross borders; and that even when you carry a valid passport your ordeal is worse? Border crossing process in the West African sub-region must be looked into because what is obtaining now is abnormal. There is a semblance of sanity at the airports when one goes out and comes into the country by air. But it is a totally different experience when one travels across borders by road. The difference is like that between heaven and hell. Is it because those who travel by road across the borders are mostly the poor and the less educated and so they can be mistreated and exploited? I think that our leaders and policy makers should adopt a habit of travelling incognito once in a while, by road and by public transportation, around the country and within the region to see the actual state of things by themselves. This way we can be better informed about the condition of the ordinary citizen and to know how to improve the quality of life of citizens.

With all the morning traffic on the Badagry Road, we arrived at Mile 2 at exactly 8.30am. I then found my way to Maza-maza to take a bus to Abuja.

The Maza-maza bus station is just an open place on the Badagry Road with several buses belonging to different operators and loading in no particular order. Agents of the bus operators could be heard yelling: "Aba-Owerri-Onitsha..." "Abuja-Abuja-Abuja..." "Suleja-Kaduna..." As I approached, strong looking youths rushed at me.

"Where? Owerri? Onitsha?"

"Abuja" I said.

One of them quickly grabbed my bag and rushed toward a mini bus with "Abuja" sign on top. He guided me to a kiosk behind the bus where the tickets were being sold. I asked the lady selling the ticket how many passengers they have already. The men standing around there all said in unison, "only two chances remain."

"If you enter now it will remain one chance," one of them pursued.

I said I wanted to see. I went over to the mini bus – a 14 seater Toyota Hiace. No one sat on the front seats but two small bags were there, indicating that they had been taken. There were two women. One of whom had two children with her. The rest of the people were men. How am I sure they are not Agberos (touts) pretending to be travelers? But they looked better dressed than the youths that had accosted me upon my approach to the station. Anyway, I went back to the kiosk and bought the ticket, N6,500.

I came back to the bus and took one of two empty seats behind. Shortly afterwards I came down to look for a place to make water. There were no toilets in the vicinity and since I would not do what I see other people doing in the open, I walked quite a bit of a distance to find a compound to ask the people there if I could use their toilet. They obliged. Afterwards, I found a store selling drinks and I bought myself a yogurt, just to put something in the stomach that morning.

When I got back to the bus I discovered that most of the men who were there before I went out were no more there. There were only three men. One of them had his ten years old son with him. One of the three men might have come while I was gone. The two women, including the one traveling with children were still there.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"We don't know," responded the man with a ten year old boy.

"Wow, so all those people were Agberos? I should have known that."

"Na so..! Anyway, we gogo sha!" the man retorted.

By the time it was 10.30am we were still there and nothing was happening. I was beginning to be restless. From Maza-maza to Abuja is a good 13 hours journey, with bad roads and all kinds of bottlenecks. I went over to the lady at the kiosk.

"What time will this bus leave for Abuja?" I asked.

"Oga, try to be patient. When the bus gets full we will go."

"But look at the time now, to eleven and you are not moving yet. What time shall we get to Abuja? And where are the people in the bus when I got here?"

"Oga, they are coming."

By the time it was 11am, I had made up my mind I will not go with this bus. I began to demand a refund of my money on the ground that I had been deceived.

"You told me there was only one passenger remaining after me and since then more than one person have come and yet the bus is not full and we are to wait here indefinitely. I cannot do that. You either move now with the available passengers or you refund my money and I will make a different arrangement for my journey."

"Sir, we do not refund money. It is written on the ticket," the lady said.

"Well, I know that. But you'd have to make an exception this time. I cannot just stay here indefinitely."

"Oga, passengers will come. Have patience," she pleaded.

"Even if passengers come now at after eleven and we depart now we will get to Abuja way beyond midnight. For me, that's too late. I am a pastor and I must be in church tomorrow to preach."

Then a man standing nearby interposed: "If you reach after midnight you will still preach in the morning."

"Very good! Have you ever preached to a congregation in a church?" I asked him.

He did not answer. I turned to the lady again and said, "Okay, let me make it easier for you. Give me part-refund and keep something, maybe 10% as admin charges. Mind you, I must leave now, and you don't want me to leave here feeling bitter for being deceived and cheated, do you?"

At this point, she picked up her phone and called someone. After a long conversation in Igbo she turned to me and said her director said to give me N5,000. However, she will make it N6,000. She will make up the difference of N1,000 with her own money.

Great! At least someone here has a conscience. And I said, "Thank you for your good heart, but just give me the N5,000 that your director said to give to me."

She gave me the money and muttered something about not letting other passengers know she had given me a refund. I then quietly picked up my bag from the bus and went to the main road. I had had enough lessons for one trip. I therefore decided there and then to take a taxi straight to the airport. I arrived at Murtala Muhammed II (Domestic) Airport at about 1pm, bought a ticket for an Aero-Contractor flight scheduled for 3pm. The flight was on time and we arrived at Abuja by 4pm. My headquarter staff was waiting for me at the airport and by 5pm I was home.