

## CHAPTER 7

# Been-To *Dreams, Disappointments, Departures, and Returns*



This is about the been-to (or beento, or *bintu*): the kind of Nigerian (mostly young) who in the late colonial or early postcolonial period would go abroad, preferably to Britain, usually in pursuit of more education, and then return home for a career. There were would-be been-tos as well.

The idea of going to the United Kingdom made girls in Nigeria very flexible in their dealings with boys.

Nne had been dreaming of going to the United Kingdom, and how and when to get to her land of dreams could only be deciphered by her alone.

All attempts to get a scholarship award proved abortive. She had no money, to start with. Most of her class-mates had left for the U.K. To crown it all, a greater number of her girl friends had left the country for the United Kingdom, to join their husbands, and this mass exodus of girls worked faster than poison in her blood.

She must go to England! (Ogali 1977: 13–14)

This is from Ogali A. Ogali's novel *Coal City*, which is in large part about Nne. If Enugu is her real habitat, her dreamland is overseas, and so Nne becomes known as "Baby UK."

Ogali stands as the author of works in many genres, not least drama—popular works more or less coming out of the Onitsha tradition. *Coal City*, which becomes rather a burlesque, was published in Enugu by Fourth Dimension Publishers.

Nne, "Baby UK," teaches in an Enugu school. When her attempts to get an overseas scholarship for herself fail, her next strategy is to find a suitable boy with a scholarship so she can go as his wife. She uses her

organizational asset as secretary of the Choose Me Social Club to invite all the likely, and attractive, male candidates to an event, at which she presents herself in the best possible light. And indeed, there she and Okoro meet each other. Okoro is a cashier at a local bank, and has had a letter from the Balham and Tooting College of Commerce, London, granting him admission to a course. Now only the funding is missing.

At the bank, Okoro manages to lay his hands on a blank check from a wealthy customer and makes it out to himself for a large sum. He marries Nne, and they get on the plane from Enugu to Ikeja Airport, Lagos, for the connecting flight to London. However, when they are about to board that latter plane, Okoro is arrested. His check theft has been discovered.

Nne returns to Enugu, and soon enough she has also returned to her maiden name. Okoro is not heard of again.

Apart from Nne, there is a second central figure in *Coal City*: Emenike, from a wealthy business family in Umuahia, doing a rather careless day job at the post office, but more active during the night shift. He has seven main women friends, one for each night of the week, and is also known as “Stormy Weather.” Then he makes a very expensive mistake at the post office counter and is fired. As his widowed entrepreneur mother is tired of his escapades, she refuses to keep on paying for them, or even for his unemployed survival.

Meanwhile, Nne gives up on the marriage strategy for getting to the United Kingdom, although not entirely on getting there somehow. She gets into a lot of loose living, and her reputation is no longer so good. One day she gets a cable from a Yoruba senior civil servant/businessman, based in Lagos, although she has met him once at an Enugu dance. He invites her to Lagos and sends a ticket. So off she goes for a flight to Ikeja Airport once more. In Lagos, her new admirer puts her up in his elegant apartment and says that as soon as his divorce is over, he and Nne will go on an extended international trip—to include two months in London. (And during a couple of weeks in Rome, perhaps they could get the Pope to marry them?)

Again, however, there is trouble. While Nne is alone in the apartment, a “Thick Madam” appears at the door. Nne’s male friend is her husband, and there is a violent fight between the two women. Nne needs emergency medical treatment, and is then flown back to Enugu. The fight is described by a Lagos newspaper under the headline “FIGHT OVER A MAN, AND THE INTRUDER HAS TO BE PARCELLED HOME BY AIR.”

Stormy Weather, homeless, is absorbed into a group of other apparent down-and-outs—but they turn out to be a somewhat sect-

like group of robbers. He is initiated into it through a ritual including the sharing of a calabash of palm wine, some meat, a kola nut, and a male lizard, plus a lecture on what the leader calls “rogueology” and “escapeology,” and then the next night the gang heads for a massive attack on an apartment building. While they are ransacking the homes, however, some witness manages to call the police—and so Stormy Weather and the other bandits are taken into custody. Fortunately, his very effective mother learns about this and comes in from Umuahia to Enugu to fix things with the police, and her son becomes a witness for the prosecution. He returns with her, joins her business, her church, and her political party, and begins a new life.

And Nne? At an Easter Dance, where as usual she outshines the female competition, she is approached by a man who presents himself as a recent returnee from England, with a fresh PhD, just beginning as a lecturer at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He argues that with her excellent command of English, she just needs a little polishing off at a British institution before she can start a new career. And so they drive off together in the night, ending up in a modest hotel with mostly a prostitute clientele. While Nne is fast asleep, her escort makes his exit with her gold wristwatch. He gets into his car. He has already removed the TAXI sign from the roof to make it more anonymous.

Then Nne somehow joins an undercover branch of the police force, helps catch a currency forger, and is quickly promoted. On the other hand, she finds herself pregnant, and seeks out a witch doctor-abortionist. This is in Aba, two taxi rides away. When she comes back from that, she finds her apartment totally empty, the result of a burglary.

She, too, returns home, to the slow village life with her parents. She, too, begins to devote her time to the local church. Emenike, ex-Stormy Weather, who had already noticed her in Enugu in the past (but had been spurned), hears from a distance of this change, and contacts her. This time it eventually results in a grand wedding in Umuahia, with Emenike’s mother’s friends in the political elite present. Nne gets to run a new fancy fashion store, while Emenike becomes very wealthy in the timber business. Back in Enugu, as he is visited by those seven once-a-week girlfriends of his past, his wife walks in, to sit on his lap observing all those other women as they get into a free-for-all fight.

Quickly on to a final scene: the matronly Nne is being interviewed by a journalist about her work with the Young Women’s Christian Association, when her two young children, a boy and a girl, come in. They both speak very good English, and the ex-Baby UK notes that she and her husband have plans for them. They will go to the United

Kingdom, “where Chikwendu will do Business Administration when he grows up, and Chinyere will do Medicine.”

All this in some 160 pages.

Ogali Ogali’s been-to story is thus about the imagined been-to, in two generations, all mostly in and around Enugu (with those brief Lagos excursions). But there are also stories about been-tos who do go abroad and come back. In Obi Egbuna’s *The Madness of Didi* (1980), the middle-aged, learned-but-mysterious Uncle Didi comes back to his home area after a long period in Britain. His presence causes considerable local upheaval—but it turns out that he was somehow released and sent off to his home country following a long period in prisons and madhouses, after he had killed six people. With a Father O’Dennehy (who had saved him when he was orphan child) as his original guide, he was supposed to have trained for the priesthood, but then he joined a political terrorist group instead and committed his crimes.

As Uncle Didi is on his deathbed, he reminisces about his life to a young local man, Obi, who has the hope of becoming a trader selling motor parts. But Uncle Didi challenges him to aim for something better, and also sends off a letter abroad. It turns out to be addressed to a Dr. Schlomo Guddman, Oxford Street, London. Guddman, an extremely wealthy man who has risen from a Polish refugee background to a fortune in publishing and other pursuits, supported Didi in Britain and was behind his release and return to Africa. Now it turns out that he will also support young Obi—who under such conditions has decided that he wants to go abroad to study, somewhat surprisingly, librarianship—for the road to becoming a writer is through reading. Again, the bright future is overseas.

The presentation of the author at the front of *The Madness of Didi* states that Obi Egbuna completed the book while studying for his PhD at Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Before that, he received a master’s degree in English from the University of Iowa. (That would have been before Amos Tutuola came there.) One may wonder a little about the occasional similarity between Uncle Didi’s career and Egbuna’s own. Obi Egbuna was for a period one of Nigeria’s most productive writers.<sup>1</sup> During the years of the Biafra War and the period leading up to it, he was in Britain engaged in radical politics, participating for one thing in the British Black Power movement. In the 1970s, he was back in Nigeria, in the East, as a writer and public intellectual, but he then returned to the United States. He died in Washington, D.C., in 2014. His son, Obi Egbuna Jr., who was

following in his father's footsteps as a transnational Black activist, took his ashes to be scattered at the Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe.<sup>2</sup>

Ngali, to repeat, has his roots in the Onitsha pamphleteer tradition, and the been-to is indeed a recurrent figure in it. One might expect returning been-tos to be success stories, coming home with new credentials and cultural capital. To an extent, Uncle Didi could seem to have done that. But among the Onitsha writers, Obiechina (1973: 54–55) concludes, the been-to is ambiguous and frequently dangerous. Men who are not been-tos themselves, in particular, should beware of been-to women. An “unsophisticated and unspoilt village damsel” is regarded as a better bet.

Obi Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960) is a prominent example of how been-tos are often tragic figures. Obi is a smart boy in Umuofia, the small Igbo town where his father is a catechist (and also, of course, at an earlier time the setting of *Things Fall Apart*). Townspeople get together to help him along financially in furthering his education. He gets to England and decides to study English; this will disappoint people at home who had hoped he would go into law, but in any case he should be sure to get a senior administrative job, succeeding some departing expatriate, with all the extra benefits that have gone with these positions.

He remains in England for nearly four years. At a social event of the London branch of the NCNC, the Igbo-related political party, he meets Clara for a brief encounter on the dance floor in which he manages to step on her toes too many times. They do not see each other again until they happen to be on the same boat, taking its time to return them both to Lagos. During that passage, romance begins to flourish.

Clara, of course, is another been-to, and an Igbo. Like many young women who go abroad for training, she has been a nursing student. In fact, the term “been-to” shows up only once in this book, referring to Clara rather than Obi: “You could tell a been-to not only by her phonetics, but by her walk—quick, short steps instead of the normal leisurely gait. In company of her less fortunate sisters she always found an excuse for saying: ‘when I was in England . . .’” (Achebe 1960: 93).

Obi and Clara—a perfect couple, it would seem. There is, however, a big problem. Clara is an *osu*, a member of a caste-like grouping of descendants of shrine servants in pre-Christian Igbo religion. The *osu* remain a sort of untouchables, even as the Igbo have become Catholics, Anglicans, or Methodists. Obi wants their relationship to continue and move onward to marriage, although Clara is more doubtful. It does not remain a private matter between the two of them either. Word moves through the grapevine back to Umuofia, where anti-*osu* prejudice

remains strong, and Obi's parents are very much against having this prospective daughter-in-law. His mother would rather die first.

Yes, Obi does get a good administrative job, where, for one thing, he is involved in scholarship awards (for the continued production of been-tos). Between dates with Clara, Obi finds time to participate in Lagos nightlife in the company of other reasonably well-to-do Igbo bachelors. He lives comfortably in an apartment in what used to be a residential area for Europeans only, and a steward attends to his domestic needs. He gets a car, too, for his Lagos mobility but also for the occasional long drive back to Umuofia. But his personal finances become messier and messier. People in Umuofia expect him to return their past investment in his education, so that more youths from the town can afford more schooling. There are costs for insurance and for the infrastructure of the life of his extended family, matters of health and education. Consequently, Obi finds himself seriously in debt.

Then Clara finally gives up on the relationship, which she finds financially difficult and socially impossible, but only after a complicated illegal abortion. Obi has lost her, and his mother has died after a long illness. At this point, he gives in to temptation. He has already resisted other attempts to bribe him for the furtherance of particular candidacies for the scholarships that he would handle in his job. This time he accepts a sum, which would help him out of his financial crisis, from someone appearing at his door. But it is a setup, and he is promptly arrested.

There are no real cliffhanger points in *No Longer at Ease*, for Achebe has placed the ending in the first chapter, describing Obi's court trial and citing the surrounding commentary among Igbo, as well as nearby expatriates, the latter forever inclined to find corruption among the Africans coming in to take over their positions. So the chapters that follow, from an Umuofia boyhood onward, explain what took him to his failure.

Why, in the Nigerian fiction of the mid-twentieth century or so, were the been-tos and their lives so often depicted as problematic—while the tendency in real life was rather to see them as success stories? We might note that the men, especially, were often of the first generation taking over after colonialist expatriates, often inheriting their fringe benefits and the formal or informal control of major public resources. If the most general theme is that of a conflict between modernity and tradition, between universalist principles and more particularist claims of local or kinship loyalties, the specific focusing on the been-to at the center of such loyalties may well have something to do with the fact that so many of the early generation of Nigerian writers were civil servants

somewhere in bureaucratic structures—hardly themselves strangers to career thinking and the strategic significance of credentialed training in a prestigious “abroad.” People such as Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, Onuora Nzekwu, Chukwuemeka Ike—all had desk work during the day. The Onitsha writers, for their part, could see the been-tos as arrogant superiors.

Yet I am also inclined to detect here a more widespread motif in the midcentury commentary on cultures in contact, on what happens in migrations and with people somehow not quite in place. In metropolitan sociology, a body of writings grew around the new concept of “the marginal man.” The originator of the concept, Robert E. Park ([1928] 1964: 356), ancestral figure of the powerful Chicago School of sociology, and more concerned than most academics at the time with what we might now term globalization, proposed that “it is in the mind of the marginal man that the moral turmoil which new cultural contacts occasion, manifests itself in the most obvious forms.”

Something may have happened, however, between Park’s time and ours. Perhaps people like been-tos are now less likely to be seen as tragic? Compare Park with Salman Rushdie (1991: 394), commenting in a well-known passage on that famous and controversial novel of his: “*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the pure. *Mélange*, hotch-potch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*” (italics in the original). There has been a shift toward assertiveness and, indeed, celebration. Impurity and intermingling are a source—perhaps the most important source—of desirable cultural renewal. Perhaps Wole Soyinka, returning in the late 1950s from his sojourn at the University of Leeds, and quickly engaging in new creative cultural hybridity (while never in a bureaucratic career), has been the most conspicuous pioneer here, taking various kinds of risks along his continued path—more about him in chapter 11.<sup>3</sup> And later Afropolitans of the kind identified by Taiye Selasi, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Teju Cole, may be other examples of how been-tos have come a long way—see chapter 17.

## Notes

1. Among Egbuna's other books are *Wind versus Polygamy* (1964), *The Minister's Daughter* (1975), and *Diary of a Homeless Prodigal* (1976), variously published in London and Enugu.
2. The Victoria Falls have presumably retained their name to safeguard the tourist business; one may sense a certain irony in this, in some contexts.
3. It so happens that in an interview where Soyinka is asked which novelists he reads, he mentions Rushdie, together with Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Toni Morrison, and Charles Dickens (Wilkinson 1992: 102).

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