Growing Up in Radicalized Nigeria: A New Novel Shows the Gritty Reality

BORN ON A TUESDAY
By Elnathan John
264 pp. Black Cat. Paper, $16.

Elnathan John is a Nigerian writer and blogger who describes himself on Twitter as: “Satirist; recovering lawyer; novelist . . . not award-winning; not on any cool list; in an abusive relationship with Nigeria; bald.” He tweets about alcohol, food, sex, man boobs and a certain male competitiveness (as in: “Benedict Cumberbatch looks much shorter face to face”). And he is never lacking for a quip: “I write for my landlord who basically has gotten almost all the money from the advances I got for the novel.”

Those who may have dismissed John as someone who writes chiefly to get a rise will be surprised to hear that he has
produced a thoughtful, nuanced first novel, employing a style that is as unadorned as it is unflinching. This young lawyer, who has twice been a finalist for the Caine Prize for African Writing, may be brash, but he is also capable of depth and subtlety. His restraint in handling difficult material is just one of his many gifts.

John was born in 1982 in Kaduna, in northwestern Nigeria. At that time, it was a cosmopolitan city, a place where Christians and Muslims lived side by side in easy companionship. But in the 1990s, a series of clashes between religious groups led to an effective apartheid, with people leaving their once peacefully mixed neighborhoods to live with those who shared their beliefs. The clashes soon spread beyond the city.

“Born on a Tuesday” begins in 2003, during the uneasy truce that followed. Dantala, the novel’s narrator, is one of a gang of street boys who sleep under a kuka tree in Bayan Layi, a small northwestern Nigerian town. They steal sweet potatoes, smoke Nigerian grass (called “wee-wee”), brag about their exploits and get into fights. Dantala used to go to Quranic school, sent there by his father, until he drifted away. He’s the smallest boy in the gang and the swiftest runner. He doesn’t know how old he is, but says he has fasted for Ramadan “nearly 10 times.”

During the elections, the boys are paid to cause trouble by the Small Party. They’ve been promised a shelter “for us homeless boys and those who can’t return home or don’t have parents, where we can learn things like making chairs and sewing caftans.” When they attack the offices of the victorious Big Party, Dantala holds the matches while another boy pours the gasoline. A fat man runs out of the building, and Dantala strikes him with a machete. He is already dead when they set him on fire. By now, the police are shooting into the crowd, and Dantala’s friend Banda, the leader of his gang, is killed.

Dantala runs until he can no longer hear the guns, then hitches a ride in the back of a truck and eventually makes his way to a big nearby town, where he is taken in at a mosque that offers
free food, a place to sleep and the comfort of communal worship. “Praying in congregation makes us equal before Allah,” he remembers a former teacher telling him.

Safe in the embrace of a generous Islam, Dantala exchanges the rough violence of his childhood for more adolescent musings: “Camels look sleepy to me, like they are being forced to do everything when they are tired.” “A bra is an interesting piece of clothing. I wonder who came up with the complicated idea.” Modest, clever and discreet, Dantala gains the trust of the local imam. He teaches himself English and learns to love books. But this sunny interlude is already turning dark.

On a visit home, Dantala has learned that his widowed mother is now mute; her other sons have been sent away to Quranic school; her two daughters, twins, have died in a flood. Only her sister-in-law, abandoned by her husband, who has taken a second wife, is willing to care for her, feeding her “like a little baby.”

Whether Dantala’s mother has dementia or is in shock is never clear, but the absence of a maternal presence in his life is symbolic of an existence marked not only by bad luck but by a terrible lack of love. “My mother’s voice is leaving me,” Dantala tells us. “I close my eyes to bring up her voice, to make her speak in my ear, in my head, but all I see is her smile. Will I lose this too? . . . Will it all pass and leave behind a shadow where there was once Umma?”

The real horror begins when Dantala leaves his native village and returns to the mosque, where he learns that a new Islamic leader, once a friend of Dantala’s imam, has set up a rival movement that burns books and trains its followers with guns deep in the bush. Money from Saudi Arabia is being diverted from religious purposes. The local governor is killed in a helicopter crash. The imam who has been a father to Dantala is attacked and beheaded. Men in plainclothes carrying huge black guns appear at the imam’s home, and soldiers shoot into crowds to make them disperse. The bus in which Dantala tries
to escape is attacked by soldiers: “They order us to lie flat on the hot asphalt, and they tie our hands behind our backs with wire.”

Violence is intrinsic to this novel from the very first sentence, but it is only in the final pages that you realize just what it means to say that violence begets violence. This is where Elnathan John’s talent comes to the fore, as Dantala must decide what being a Muslim really means to him and to his companions.

“Born on a Tuesday” brings home the reality of what is happening in northern Nigeria with a power the news reports of Boko Haram’s atrocities can’t adequately project. Elnathan John is a writer to watch.

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