

Sozaboy

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Sozaboy's language is what I call "rotten English," a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English, broken English and occasional flashes of good, even idiomatic English.¹ This language is disordered and disorderly. Born of a mediocre education and severely limited opportunities, it borrows words, patterns and images freely from the mother-tongue and finds expressions in a very limited English vocabulary. To its speakers, it has the advantage of having no rules and no syntax. It thrives on lawlessness, and is part of the dislocated and discordant society in which Sozaboy must live, move and have not his being. (K. S.-W.)

Lumber Five

So one afternoon as we were playing football one policeman came and told us that we must go to the church now now. Church from football? With sweat on our bodies? This policeman must be stupid. What is his trouble, anyway? Can policeman confuse himself like this? If it is kotuma, somebody will understand. Because after all, kotuma is just man with small education, no plenty job, just chopping small small bribe from woman or man in Dukana. But police is big man going on transfer from Lagos to Kano and so on. And he can be promoted too to sarzent, then inspector and so on. So it is not good that he should confuse himself. So, nevertheless, since he say we must go to church, we all begin to go there. Everybody. Are we going to pray in the church, and today is not Sunday? Will this police force us to begin to pray? Ha!

As we entered the church now, not only those who were playing football were inside that church. Everybody in Dukana. Plus Chief Birabee, smiling that idiot foolish smile which he will be smiling whenever he sees soza or police or power. Trouble don come again, oh. Even people who do not go to church are entering this church today. I beg, God, make you no vex for these people, and this nonsense police who is causing all this trouble. So we waited inside the church. People were talking, talking.

Because in this Dukana people will always talk. After some time, Chief Birabee with idiot smile looking at policeman begin to shout "Keep quiet all of you, oh! Keep quiet all of you, oh!" Then after some time he will shout again, "Keep quiet all of you, oh. Hei! Why can't you people close your mouth?" The people will keep quiet for small time then after some time they will begin to hala again.

As you see these Dukana people, they are not talking anything good oh. I can see they are all fearing, because once they see police or soza or even kotuma, they must begin to fear.

Notes

1. "Sozaboy is a war novel, the narrative of one young man's helpless and hapless journey through a terrifying African war... Sozaboy – as the hero, Mene, is dubbed ('Soza' means 'soldier') – is one such uncertain conscript and he meanders through the novel in an almost permanent state of ignorance; clarity beckoning from time to time only to be occluded promptly ... The language of the novel is a unique literary construct ... I cannot think of another example where the English language has been so engagingly and skillfully hijacked... *Sozaboy* is a novel born out of harsh personal experience, but shaped with a masterful and sophisticated artistry despite its apparent rough-hewn guilelessness. With equal skill and deftness, it also carries a profound moral message that extends beyond its particular time and setting. Sozaboy are legion, and their lives are being destroyed on the planet. *Sozaboy* is not simply a great African novel, it is also a great anti-war novel, among the very best the twentieth century has produced." From the Introduction by William Boyd, in *Sozaboy* (London, 1994). The extract is from pp. 45-46 of the novel.