

Lucia Troksiarova A New Adunni 'Resurrects' In Lagos' Forgotten Creeks

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Lucia Troksiarova, a Slovak national by birth, Austrian by parental lineage and who until she came to Nigeria was resident in the United Kingdom for many years. She also lived in the United States and Asia where she worked in a multinational company that specialises on healthcare and education. Lucia came to Nigeria through the Olu Adewunmi, whose father set up a village in one of those long forgotten creeks of Lagos and she has since settled down to care for the people and bring succour to their faces in company of her friend, Olamide Dosekun, a medical doctor. Somehow, she was given the Yoruba name "Adunni", the same name given to Susanne Wenger, the Austrian born, Osun river devotee who died few years ago in Osogbo. Lucia narrated her background and experiences in Nigeria to TUNDE AKINGBADE. Excerpts:



When was your first time in Nigeria?

The first time I arrived in Nigeria was 20 months ago. It was in the month of July. I remember it was in the raining season. I visited the villages and I spent two days meeting with the communities. The places I visited were basically Lagos, Ago-Ajo and Moba village. I was in Nigeria for seven days.

How did you get to know and learn about Moba village?

It was through a friend of mine, Olu Adewunmi. His father set up a village in Badagry area called Ago-Ajo. Moba is just close to Ago-Ajo across the lagoon. Olu's idea was to build a resort on a small Island between those two villages. One day in London, we discussed the project and I said we should set up a Foundation first, develop the villages, build the resort and both projects will benefit from each other. Then he said, that's a good idea; why don't you come and try to help me. So I found myself in Lagos and later in Moba. I enjoyed it. I remember my first day in Moba village he was speaking with Moba village Balee and his leaders, about 20 people in one room. Everyone was speaking Yoruba. I asked him what was going and he said; "Well I told them you came here to change their life." For me, he didn't have to say more. I looked at the people's faces and realised I brought a hope to them and it was like; oh my God, I am staying here! (laughs). It's about 20 months ago and I am still here. I know their names, their children, their houses. They are not just faces now; they are real people that I am helping.

Have you heard about some Europeans who came to Nigeria in the past and they actually changed the life of people?

I have heard about such people here in Nigeria not in London. When I came here, people for some reasons compared me with Susanne Wenger. I know she was an artist and she was more into art and culture and so on. I am a businessperson that follows the arts but I am not an art person. But I love arts. I have been to Nike Gallery a number of times. Chief (Mrs.) Nike Davies-Okundaye is an amazing woman. Yes some people compared me to Susanne Wenger because she came here for awhile and 50 years later, she was still here. And I think she died about two years ago.

Yes, about two years ago. And the villagers too have now given you a Yoruba name, her name Adunni?

It was Nike not the village that gave me the name. It's funny, yes (laughs) may be history is repeating itself and I will be here for 50 years.

Now you are here and people believe Nigeria is your home now. How do you feel about that?

I am a citizen of the world. Sometimes when I said I am going home, people wonder where? And I may say. 'I am going to Slovakia or no, I am going to London. Nigeria has become my third home.' The Adewunmi family truly adopted me. They have been amazing, helping me with the Foundation, with my life here, learning about the culture and understanding people better. I have become part of that family – sister — and they help me to understand when people behave in certain ways or as you call it in Nigeria — obey the protocol; (laughs). There are a lot of protocol issues here and for the work that I do, it's important I follow the protocols in the villages, in the local government and even in the Lagos community in Nigeria. It's my home. It's becoming my home.

Where did you work in London before coming to Nigeria?

I worked in an American company based in London. I worked with the company in India, Dubai and in the United States as well. Most of our work was in healthcare as well as Education. I am close to those two subjects and I am using those things I have learnt in 10 years across three or four continents and I am hoping to apply them here in the village; although there are much bigger levels, the local government, the state government and the federal government.

Some of the things you found in the village in Moba were unhygienic. Can you shed some light on that?

Well, when I arrived Moba village for the first time, I realised that sanitation is a huge issue. Animals walked all over the place and rubbish was dumped everywhere. There was also rubbish that came from the Atlantic Ocean. It's quite dirty and the people in this area have no latrines. The system is still very much backward. We are hoping to build communal latrines. So, I am teaming up with a local NGO called Metamorphosis. They have done a lot of projects in urban areas. We will be the first they will be working with in the rural area. We are building the latrines, but they will give the training about the usage and hygiene to the local people. It's about cleaning up the village. It's about educating people. It's about teaching them how to actually use the latrine and not throwing waste into the bush. First, we will train the children at school, through our education project, then we will teach the parents and then teach the community. We are doing it step by step. We also plan to set soap making business. This business enterprise will provide job opportunities as well as soaps for communities. In the last couple of days, I have been approached by the youths, who asked me to help with the clean up of the village. They had been to Ago Ajo, a village that had already been cleaned up. They approached me directly. It was important breakthrough. Community projects need to be owned by the community to succeed and achieve sustainability. Having them to initiate and drive projects is even better. They are having about five youths in an environmental committee who will be checking out that the villagers play by the rules that we will be putting in place. They will be cleaning up the village as well as doing the small scale business that will be set up for them. That will give them the job and opportunity to actually make money as well. We have different phases for the projects. Understanding the dynamics of communities is key to development.

You found incidences of malaria among the kids?

Yes.

What actually did you see?

Throughout the medical outreach that we have been doing, we went to the village for two days for malaria prevention and advocacy and also we teamed up with NOVARTIS who gave out anti malaria medication for children. The idea was basically to go to villages, give them mosquito coils (given to the project by Meleni Bharwani, Earth Couture (Meleni's company) gives a box of mosquito coils to a child for every purchase at their boutique), and talk to them about malaria in terms of how malaria occurs and what the villages should do in order not to have so many cases of malaria there. I found out approximately 70 per cent of people in the village don't have mosquito nets and coils. They just live without them. Their children get sick on a daily basis. During our first medical outreach, we found about 20 per cent of children have malaria. We set up a programme called FIVE DAYS 1000 CHILDREN. The idea was to go back to the villages for five days and see 1,000 children. We are on our fourth day now. We are getting close to 600 children and might extend it to six days. We are hoping to reach a target of 1,000 children. The number of children with malaria is very high in the villages. We realised that these kids are not treated, as they don't have any healthcare facility to go to. There is a PHC in Ojo, but it is very far from the communities. The communities are also cut from the mainland and they have to take transport across the lagoon to the clinic or health centre on the mainland. So, it's expensive for them and instead of doing that, they tend to find a way to treat themselves. We found about 20 per cent of kids on a daily basis suffering from malaria and different kinds of skin diseases. This is due to many sanitation and hygienic issues. They have a lot of heat rashes because they wore wrong clothes. All this can be prevented with very simple interventions.

What you want to set up there is not a large primary health care centre?

Absolutely not, I have been extremely lucky. I have a good team of experts working with me. From doctors to education experts, teachers, university professors, etc. All of them have volunteered in this medical outreach. Through these experts, I have learned that we don't need a big PHC. What we need is maybe four rooms, maximum. One room will be for a doctor, two rooms will be for the nurses and one room will be for keeping the drugs – maybe in the fridge or in storage. We are working on it right now with the architect and we find out how much it's going to cost to prepare to any organisation that will be interested to work with us on this.

The biggest issue that I know we will face is staff. We might be forced to build an accommodation for them because we might not find the right people who live in the area. So, in order for the primary health care centre not to be empty, we may have to build accommodation for a doctor or nurses who will live there and work there to help the community. I have learnt that most of the primary health cares in this area are basically empty. There is a building but there is no one working there.

While you were growing up in Europe you must have heard that West Africa and especially Nigeria has one of the shores affected by malaria. Now you are here. You have seen malaria in people, and you are not scared, especially when you travel?

I actually grew up in a communist country. I haven't really known what Africa was going through or what was happening. The information was not flowing much. But once I left Slovakia and moved to London, I learnt about Africa and all the development issues.

So when I first traveled here, I took all the vaccine shots that I could and my arms were hurting for weeks. In addition, I took malaria tablets. I think I haven't really taken it now. My mother thinks I am absolutely crazy but I said to her, you know what, every single time a celebrity comes to Africa, I don't know what they do and they come back and have malaria. I have been coming and going in the last 20 months and no malaria has attacked my system, or maybe so many villagers are praying for me that I have become untouchable to mosquitoes and malaria (laughs).

Since you are developing a resort there, you can have a place for writers to enjoy the serene atmosphere away from okada?

I can tell you that when it comes to artists; whether they are writers, painters, photographers, it truly applies to all, your imagination will work overtime. It's a very inspirational place with a lot of inspirational people. They tell you about their life, what they have been through and what they go through everyday. It is inspiring.

That place is a forgotten island and the people are also forgotten. Don't you think so?

Yes. And it's not just my opinion because I work with local NGOs, they have seen different communities in Ojo Local Government area, they have seen communities in Lagos State and they have confirmed that somehow those communities are cut off, they are forgotten. But they can be elevated and empowered. They haven't been really spoilt by the urbanisation of Lagos City. I think we have a great chance to succeed in the project. One of the reasons for picking a rural area is because we believe that Lagos City is over populated. We have to start with the development of rural areas so that more people will stay in the villages and don't come to Lagos. Lagos cannot take any more people. The truth is that the people staying in the rural areas do have much better life. If you compare the fisherman in the rural areas and the driver here in Lagos, you will find out that the driver might be making a little bit more money than the fisherman, but the fisherman have a house, job security and because it is his own business he is more likely to develop it and earn more than driver per day.

And he doesn't have peace of mind?

He doesn't have peace of mind. I do believe in rural development! In addition, for me, its not just about developing sustainable villages and helping communities, I hope in the next four to six years, when I have done this ground work, I can actually talk to institutions like the Lagos State government, Federal Government, the World Bank or the United Nations to share my experience from the rural development and the impact of it. One day, I would like to take this to an international level and use what I have learnt with my fieldwork to lobby for sustainable rural development as one of the priorities when it comes to development strategies.

As a model?

Yes as a model to say I have been there, I have done it for four or five years and I believe this is the right way to go. I have the data and I can prove it to you. Right now, I am getting my hands dirty. I am doing a lot of fieldwork and I am enjoying it. But one day, I will want to use it and show the international community that this is the way to go.

You found incidences of AIDS amongst the kids?

Yes.

Six of them?

Yes, so far six! We checked about 300 children. The doctor that joins me on the medical outreach is a specialist on AIDS/HIV. She has a clinic in Lagos and helps me on weekends. We are not out there to test AIDS/HIV specifically because as you know people have prejudices about it. What we will do is that we will refer the children to the clinic where the doctor is working.

What did you think could have been responsible for the AIDS?

They were born with it. The mothers came with the children but they did not look very sick. Obviously we all know how AIDS is being contracted but the children unfortunately got it from their parents.

Where are your parents now?

My parents are in Slovakia. They are in a small town called Malacky, which is about 40 km from

Bratislava, the capital. It's interesting that you asked me about them because I am actually going back there for four weeks. I am going to set up our new office there. Hopefully, we will set up the legal structure in April but officially, we will open and we will carry out fundraising there in August. I have a number of Nigerian friends who are interested in coming and to meet my parents and meet the people I grew up with in Slovakia in a small town with 20,000 people. Slovakia has about eight million people; it's a small country. I have two reasons for setting up an office there — one, I would like to reconnect with the country where I was born. I left there when I was 17 years old. I haven't been back there for a long stretch of time; it's just one week here, one week there. Secondly, I like to reconnect with people from my country in terms of supporting my project in Nigeria. I have some people who will help me to set up the office including my brother and my mother. As I said, we hope to set up a number of projects. Right now, the idea is Twin-Cities cities. I actually want the Mayor of Malacky to team up with the Mayor of Ojo in a sister-city initiative. The idea is basically to come to Nigeria and meet the chairman of the Ojo Local Government and discuss what they can do together. My idea is to see if people in my hometown will be willing to help people here. There may be fundraising three times a year to help the community I am working with.

Then the other project is sponsorship for a number of children to have access to primary and secondary education. I also have a programme called: "Women for women". In this programme, I am looking for women in Slovakia to support the women in our villages financially as well as mentoring them. They can also exchange letters or small tapes. It will be finance as well as a mentoring programme. This is what I intend to do this year. Obviously, I am going to look into corporate social responsibility initiatives in Slovakia and look at the ones that are internationally willing to support some of my projects here. I also approached the Slovak Embassy in Abuja and they are thinking of setting up a fund for me to support my project.

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