

How We Came To Ago Ajo 40 Years Ago, By Adewunmi

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Olu Adewunmi is a legal practitioner and businessman. He has been working in the oil and gas industry as well as in the construction world. His father, Otunba Adewunmi founded the Ago Ajo Village, one of the communities off the estuary in Lagos State. He spoke with TUNDE AKINGBADE at Ago Ajo on his father's inspiration and his own motivation to help the forgotten communities. Excerpts:



Tell us how you came to be identified with Ago Ajo?

Ago Ajo Village was founded by my father almost 40 years ago. He acquired a small piece of land there, and then there was no road. We used to come here and then and I actually wondered what he was doing here! The only other person in the territory who also acquired some parcel of land was Professor Pearse of Whispering Palms. And my dad said it was spiritual for him to acquire something in the middle of nowhere. We would come by boats. And over the years, he acquired a lot more, about the size of a village and named it Ago Ajo, (The Gathering of Angels.) He named it and placed it on the map. He retired at 50. He said at 50, he was contented and he was going to come here and do things for people. He built a church to start with for the village as a focal point for them. He felt through religion, one could keep the people together because they are atheists in this area over the years. My father and Prof. Pearse actually forced the government to help in bringing infrastructure here.

He is 82 years now; he has done that for 32 years. He set up a farm for the people and also put up a mill. He tried to get the community activity going. So I felt someone has to take this over. We have been here by boat. It's pleasurable. One of my businesses has its headquarters in Singapore. I used to have an office in Jakarta, Indonesia. The similarity here is too obvious. I went to Bali in particular, Bali has a series of villages and they have kept them. They preserved the villages and built tourism around them. They upgraded the people to that level. That is my first inspiration actually, and I felt to sustain it here. You have to develop the tourism aspect of it. So, I will acquire the territory from my father – not a gift. Because my father believes that everybody's property is no man's property. He wants someone who had natural interest in developing the territory. So, he practically more or less handed it over to me. And that is why I am using the inspiration and connection I got from Bali here.

So I kept playing with this concept and kept coming here alone, looking around the territory to see the whole layout of the land. I acquired the little Island across. This is Badagry (pointing) area, that area over there is actually Ojo Local Government. It goes all the way to the Ojo Creek. There are 36 villages called the Osolu Kingdom. When I acquired the island across the Atlantic, I thought I need to upgrade the villages to give them education, etc. My father believes if you are helping the community, you are securing your protection. I then said to take care of the security or insecurity, I need to upgrade those villages and take care of the people. That is where I am going to get the work force ultimately. I'm impressed about the King of the entire kingdom. He knows what he wants for his territory and he has not sold off their assets. I felt if I could work with this people and not bring the old attitude of Lagos to this area, I will succeed. I am going to

work with them. I have contacted the community across and told them what I wanted to do. They know what my father have already been doing.

He had already laid the foundation?

Exactly! The foundation was solid. It's trust. Complete trust. I told them what I had in mind and I brought this master plan for the resort. I brought a landscape designer one of the top in the world. They all came and when they saw the philosophy, which was a social thing other wise they would not have come, they knew what my father was doing here. They knew what I wanted to do, a sustainable village.

Luckily my brother is an architect, so he also joined from UK and decided to contribute too. We put together a team of designers, the master planner, the structural people, etc. They are all coming to move things forward on the resort side. Mr. Trevor Ward, also came in and he put together the whole business plan of the resort. So we have done the design for the resort. We want to build the prototype villa. We have talked to managers who will want to manage it. They are running similar things in South Africa. That's why they are here. The idea is to have a resort on that Island, to leave the beach as it is; and let the people know that what we want to do is to enhance the value of land around. We will not touch the villagers on the beachside. We will retain Ago Ajo as farmland and also build a residential estate; a natural Eco-village, if I may call it that; like the old Ikoyi would have been in the 1950s. This will all be in a sustainable manner. I don't need any glory for it. I need help because I need people to be aware of what's going on and what's going to come. We are unrelenting.

All of them will love to be involved?

When we adopt the school in the area, we will infuse tourism into the curriculum so that from the scratch, they are learning what is needed. These people are not learning how to become doctors, lawyers, etc. There is no space for that in Nigeria. What we need are artisans who can do plumbing, electrical work, woodwork, services such as house keeping, cooking, gardening, etc. We will set up a senior school and purely for these technical courses. When we develop this territory, we already have our work force. When we carried out a survey of the community, we found that the working age group is not in existence. They only have kids and aged people. There is no employment.

The working age is probably in Lagos?

They have gone to Lagos to possibly become miscreants. What we are planning will be restricted to Osolu Kingdom, 32 villages, and all cut-off completely! We have set up a Foundation two years ago to use a sustainable model. My dad has been putting money for years and no returns. He has done that from age of 50 and you'll run yourself aground anyway and I said, you can't continue to do that. The place must pay for itself.

The way I saw the people, one can describe them as the forgotten Lagosians?

Yes, nobody goes there. Of course government has programmes for all these people but when you really look at it; what can the government do? They've got programmes. What can they do? Urban Lagos is choked. By the time they finish there, how can they get across? It's a riverine area, very expensive. For example if a child here wants to go to secondary school, that's N50 one-way and N100 for the trip. One thing I am going to do here is to set up a small transport service, a sustainable one to take people from Moba village across here.

The community will love it?

They will love it.