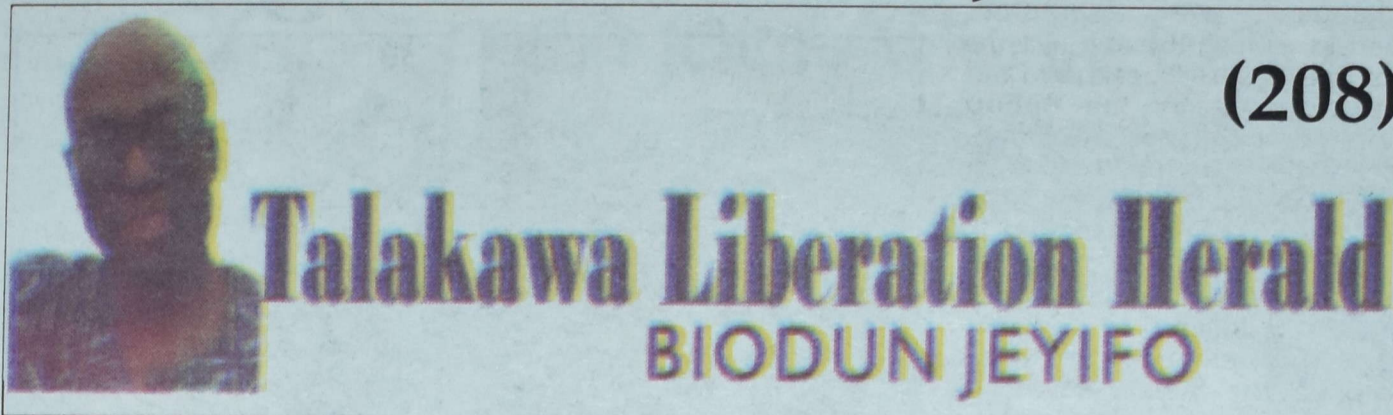


# A book I would love to write in the near future, inshallah (1)

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•Why does a phone call to China go to the particular number called and not any of the other billion-plus phone users in the country?

YES, there is a book that I would love to write in the near future. This will be a book the like of which I have never written. Also, it will be addressed mainly to a class or category of potential readers who have never read anything I have ever written, including even the journalism that I practice in this column. This book will be about the range of both the inherited and the accumulating knowledges that we have about the universe in which our species live, die and reproduces itself. At the heart of the contents of the book will be the clash between rational, scientific and testable knowledges of the universe and knowledges which, in being untested and untestable, vigorously resist proof and disproof, especially with regard to fortifications against the forces and phenomena that make human life miserable, insecure, fearful, lost. How did I come about the desire, the determination to write this book?

Let us call him Monday Electrician. He and people like him in our country and our continent will be the targeted or ideal readers on this book that I would like to write soon after my retirement at the end of the academic year 2017/18. I have slightly changed the name, the appellation by which I call this person and have him down in my phone list. He does bear one of the names of the days of the week, but it is not Monday. By profession he is an electrician and more generally, he is a contractor that deals in setting up the wiring circuitry and grid of new homes and businesses. We met because he was recommended to me by a friend who is an architect and master builder who has recently been supervising a major reconstruction of my house at Oke-Bola, Ibadan.

For several days earlier this week, Monday Electrician neither showed up for work nor responded to my phone calls. When he finally showed up on Thursday, he was in a state of great emotional distress that was underscored by a deep spiritual crisis. The cause of this was a strange and rather bizarre medical condition that had struck his younger sister: in the last one year, a sore that refused to heal, a sore that gradually extended to her entire lower lip had assailed the poor woman in her early thirties. The sore was found not to be cancerous - which was a relief. But then, neither was it showing any signs of healing and closing up anytime soon. As Monday Electrician narrated this story of his sister's travails to me, I noticed that his emotional agitation was extreme, as if he and not his sister was the sufferer, the victim of this bizarre affliction. When I probed into this, though what was revealed to me was not totally unexpected, the emotional charge that it carried astonished me considerably: Monday Electrician and all the members of his extended family knew the persons behind their sister's strange ailment!

It is impossible for me in this writing to faithfully and accurately render the emotional force of this "knowledge" of our man and his family regarding the identity or identities of the evil persons allegedly responsible for the nonhealing, disfiguring sore. But this much I can at least render or convey here: Monday Electrician was shocked and

disappointed to find me unresponsive, indeed unbelieving and unsympathetic to his "revelation" of the identity of the persons "behind" his sister's ailment. His challenge to me on this score was as uncompromising as it was startling: is it because I am a professor, a man educated in "Western" knowledges and belief systems that I was scoffing at his knowledge of and belief in how some people, some forces operate in human life and the universe itself? It was this question that prompted a long conversation between me and Monday Electrician the like of which I have not had in a long time, a conversation indeed that led me to the decision that I would one day have to write the sort of book that I indicated at the beginning of this piece.

In the present context, I can only give a brief account of that conversation. I did not of course take the position that witches and witchcraft don't exist, even if that is not only what I think now but what I have believed for most of my adult life, beginning from the years of my secondary school education. No, the position that I took, elaborated in three or four propositions, was/is this: First, on the one hand, there are rational, testable knowledges and beliefs and, on the other hand, there are knowledges and beliefs that are neither testable nor provable. Secondly, it is important to recognize the existence of these two orders or categories of knowledges and beliefs. Thirdly, at a deeper level, each category or order of knowledges and beliefs has its

uses and misuses, its valid and invalid truth claims. Finally - and rather alarmingly - in our society, there is a vast unawareness of both the existence of and the need for rational, testable orders of knowledge and belief. More specifically, there is in our society a widespread unawareness or lack of appreciation of the centrality of rational, testable orders of knowledge and beliefs to the organization and successful implantation of modernity and the myriad amenities, products and services that it makes possible, together with its informing ethos. How did all this emerge from my conversation with Monday Electrician? That is the question!

Here I should explain that Monday Electrician has secondary school education, but not a high-order technical education, the sort that one gets in a polytechnic or a college or institute of electrical engineering in a university. I found this out indirectly, by basing my discussion with him on the rudiments of scientific or technical knowledge. It was on the basis of this approach that I found out that though our man can put in place a complex and safe grid or circuit of electrical power in a house or a factory, he knows next to nothing about how electricity as a phenomenon, a force, can be and is frequently used for purposes as diverse as powering a simple household blender; transforming images, words and graphics to waves and pulses that a computer or a television set can render as moving pictures, sounds and

messages; or how as a stored reservoir of power in a small dry cell or a gigantic battery, it can sustain life in a machine used to preserve life when all the major organs and tissues of the human body have collapsed. Indeed, Monday Electrician had never once thought of electricity, the medium of both his professional training and occupational earnings, as an invisible force, one among a number of phenomena that though we can't see them with our eyes, the effectivity of their presence in the universe is everywhere palpable. As a matter of fact, Monday Electrician did not know that we are on a planet that is constantly and forever moving, this on an axis that though it is invisible, it is more real and lasting than me, BJ, that is writing these words.

Here, I must confess my own sort of ignorance. For what else but ignorance could have made me so astonished to discover that there are still, in this day and age, people who, like Monday Electricians, are "flat earth" believers? I will never forget the look that he gave me when I asked him if he knew that we were both of us on a planet that is moving all the time, moving even as we were having our discussion in a small and insignificant part of the universe in Oke-Bola, Ibadan, Nigeria. He said absolutely nothing, but his look said all that he left unsaid. And the core of what he left unsaid is, I think, the idea that even educated people, even professors can be fooled into believing anything as long as the idea comes from the white man!

I think I completely lost Monday Electrician in our

conversation when I asked the following question: why is it that if you or I called a phone number in China, a country of 1.6 billion people, the call will go to the ONE number called and not to any of the other billion-plus phone numbers in China? It was not that this question did not interest him at all. To the contrary, it was tremendously exciting to him, being apparently the sort of question that he had neither ever been asked before nor posed autonomously to himself. But still as far as I could tell, the question did not spark any curiosity in him about what, as a species, we do know; what we do not know; or what we can or should know about the universe in which we live.

The book I have in mind would deal with these issues, and it would do so on the assumption that though humanity as a species is one and indivisible, the orders of knowledge and belief of the different regions and societies of the world are multiple and diverse. And then there is the question of language, or more precisely languages and translations and relations between them. For an illustration of this last point, consider the following fact. In Yoruba, the term in general usage for electricity is "ina monamona". Literally, this means "the fire of the thunder". But we know that thunder is only or merely one of the phenomenal incarnations or instantiations of electricity, especially in its natural occurrences compared to its deliberate, purposive generation and distribution by humankind. If we continue to render electricity as "ina monamona" we perpetuate a linguistic obfuscation of useful knowledge about electrical power and how best to generate and use it for beneficial purposes.

Above all else, there is this factor to consider: though nearly all the peoples and cultures of the world for the most part quickly adopt new techniques, artifacts and products of scientific and technological modernity, popular, widespread knowledge(s) about them are vastly unequal in the regions and nations of the world. At the risk of oversimplification and to put this observation in rather blunt terms, knowledge about the laws or principles of mathematics, physics and the motion of the planets, the oceans and terra firma itself are far better disseminated in Europe and Asia than in our continent. We use all the gadgets, all the products and all the paraphernalia of modern industry and technology but are remarkably incurious about how they are made and what scientific knowledges make their production possible. In the book that I have in mind, this observation would be the point of departure.

Why does a phone call to China go to the single, particular number called and not to any of the numbers of the other billion-plus cell phone users in the country? We shall start with the answer to this question in next week's concluding piece in the series.

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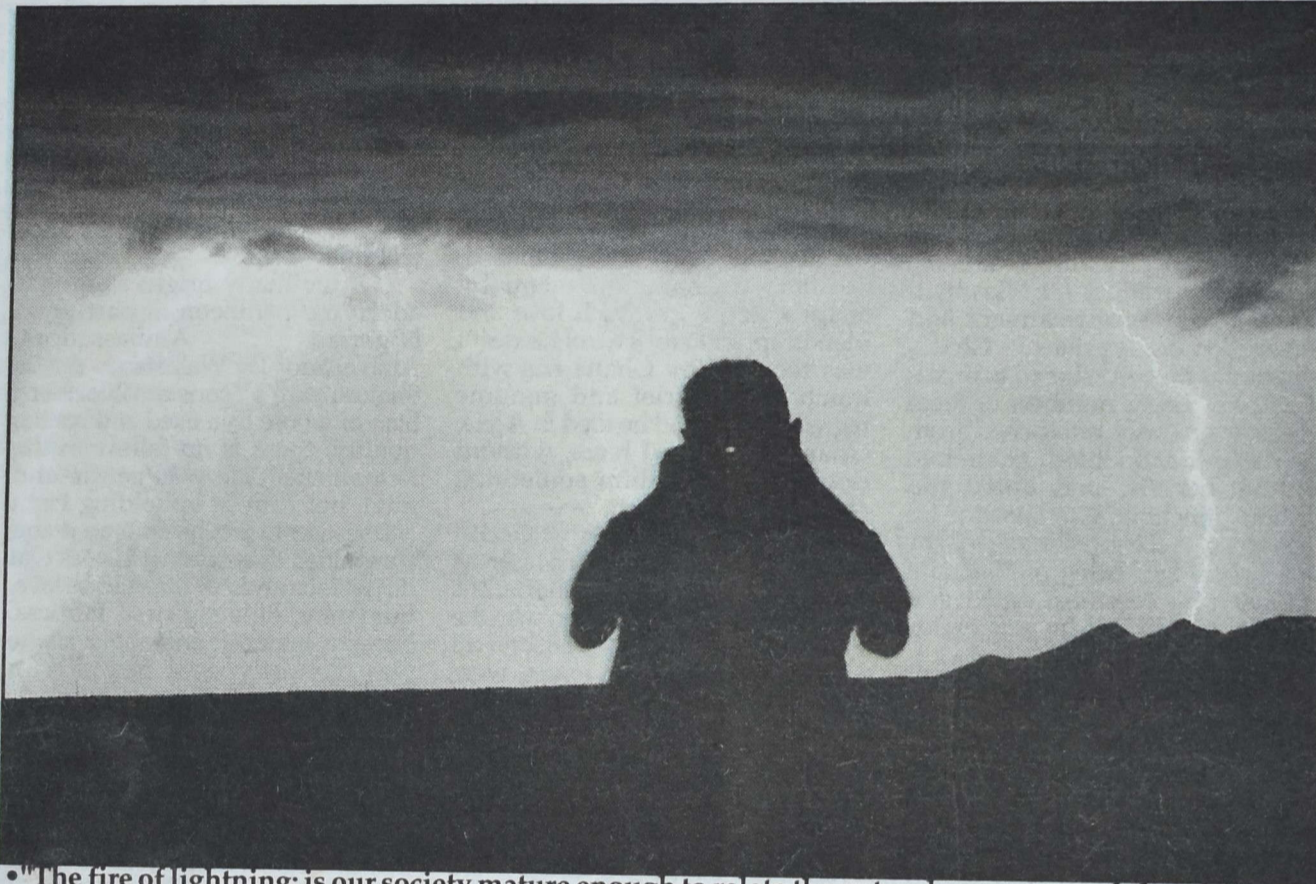


## A book I would love to write in the near future, inshallah (2)



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Talakawa Liberation Herald  
BIODUN JEYIFO



• "The fire of lightning: is our society mature enough to relate the natural occurrence of electricity with its deliberate, purposeful generation and distribution?"

outside our terrestrial home on earth into a significant part of the epic story.

I perhaps digress. The book that I have in mind and that am writing about in this series is not about the marvels of modern telecommunications technology, though of course it will not avoid that topic. No, what is central to my projected book is the fact that every single one of the marvels of the i-phones and smartphones of the new millennium is based on knowledges and ideas that are testable and *are*, indeed, tested. Moreover, any literate person in the world can, with some application, educate him or herself on the knowledges and beliefs from which smartphone gadgetry operates. As a matter of fact, this was what I tried to do with Monday Electrician in our conversation on Thursday last week, the conversation that led to this series of articles in my column: I tried to spark his curiosity in the rudiments of scientific knowledge about the universe in general and, in particular, about electricity as a phenomenal entity. From the account that I gave of that conversation in this column last week, I failed woefully in that endeavor.

This was largely due to the fact that Monday Electrician seems unaware of - or resistant to - the order of knowledges and beliefs central to modern science and technology - even though he is a trained electrician who doubles as a contractor in the business of installing electrical circuitry in dwelling houses and factories. He found the idea of he and I being on a moving planet in our infinitesimally small corner of it in Oke-Bola, Ibadan, so absurd as to

be beneath his commentary. And beyond the learnt, practical and repeated things that he knew about electricity, he had little interest in it as a phenomenal entity that does far many more things than lighting up houses and powering labour-saving appliances. He absolutely could not wrap his mind around the idea that sounds and images are converted to and from electrical signals during a phone conversation. Indeed, to the extent that it can be said that my "failure" with Monday Electrician was what instigated my desire to write this series as well as the book that I have in mind, to that extent is the "failure" the motive force of this discussion. Permit me to briefly engage this observation.

The careful reader of this piece would, hopefully, have noted that I place a bracket around the word, "failure" in the present discussion. This is because "failure" is perhaps not the right word to use. For how could the appropriate word be "failure" when there was not the slightest chance of success in the first place? One proof of this assertion is the fact that Monday Electrician was willing to go so far as to claim that a disbelief in witches and witchcraft was a white man's duplicitous proposition for which any true Nigerian, any true African should show nothing but disdain. To this, add the fact that he vigorously asserted that "we" (Africans) have no obligation to prove what we "know" to them (the Western world)! They have their "science" and we have ours, that is all!

One of the most shocking claims of Monday Electrician in our conversation was an assertion that our Babalawos, Dibias,

Marabouts or Sangomas traditionally did not deal in *testable* and *tested* knowledges and propositions. Herbs, the bark or sap of trees, the claw or tooth of a leopard, the ground powder of the testicles of a tiger and many more things beside these, all have their "names", their "essences", Monday Electrician proudly proclaimed! This of course is total nonsense, as anyone knows that has ever met and conversed with a herbalist that is not a charlatan.

I place brackets around "failure", compatriots, because I suspect that there are many Monday Electricians out there, hundreds of thousands of them, perhaps tens of millions, including many who not only have university education, but actually teach in our tertiary educational institutions. If this is the case, it would be very mistaken, very wrongheaded to think that Monday Electrician or any of the hundreds of thousands of people like him out there can be singly and separately "corrected". For we really are talking of the conditioned and determinate creation in our region of the world of widespread unawareness or lack of curiosity about the scientific and technological bases of modernity. Our agbero or kalo-kalo mode of capitalism is content to import and not produce any of the commodities and gadgets of up-to-the-latest-minute modernity, leaving both the masses of the citizenry and the political and educational elites largely ignorant of or indifferent to the knowledge bases of the "modernity" that we so enthusiastically and massively consume.

In a way, modernity is only a *symptom*, and not the root cause of the problems and crises I am discussing in this series. The struggle to attain and preserve rational, testable knowledges of the universe that we live in predates modernity. Indeed, long before the successful institutional advent of science to pride of place among humanity's knowledge bases, all human social organizations had struggled to obtain rational, experimental knowledges of the world and its physical and environmental coordinates. What modernity did was to tremendously intensify, expand and shorten processes of the widespread distribution of rational, testable and experimental knowledges that had taken an aeon of time to consummate - *but only in some societies and nations of the world and not in others*. Ours happens to be one of the regions and nations of the world where the pace has either slowed down considerably or has stopped altogether. Hence Monday Electrician's severely limited knowledge of electricity as a phenomenal force and hence our country's longstanding and presumably insoluble problems with the generation and distribution of electrical power.

Ina monamona - the "fire of lightning". That is the term in wide usage for electricity in the Yoruba language. Lightning is only one of the phenomenal instantiations of electricity, one that is *naturally* occurrent. Does this exclude modes of deliberately and purposefully generated and distributed electrical energy? Frankly, I do not know. In private conversations between us, my friend, Femi Osofisan, has long argued that legends of Sango's affinity with lightning and thunder reveal or encode the theocratic king's "experiments" with electrical energy, experiments that ended in a tragic accident that destroyed the god-king. This argument seems to me apocryphal, the sort of after the event or the fact rationalizations that followers or devotees of an anthropomorphic god or avatar periodically provide to humanize and rehabilitate their hero or champion. Nonetheless, I must admit that it is plausible: experimental, testable knowledges did not start with the historic advent of science but had always existed in nearly all human cultures and civilizations.

I had planned to conclude the series with this week's piece. But there remain some more issues to discuss. The astute or careful reader would have noticed that so far, we have hardly talked about untested and untestable knowledges and beliefs. Are they all of one and the same kind? Are human beings and societies divided into those with and those without untested and untestable knowledges and beliefs? What is the mix of these orders or categories of knowledge and belief in our own part of the world? And Monday Electrician, what is it about him and people like him that make them the ideal readers of the book that I have in mind to write? These and other similar questions will provide the starting point in next week's conclusion to the series.

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THE answer to the question with which I ended last week's column is both very simple and profoundly complex. The question is: why does a phone call to China go to the particular phone number called and not to any of the other billion-plus cellphone users in that country? Before briefly dealing with both the simple and the complex answers to this question, I should perhaps reveal here the fact that it belongs to an order of questions known as "trick questions". How is this the case? Well, by using China, the most populous nation in the world as our example, I had deliberately focused reactions to the question on the weight of *numbers*, that is to say on a country and a world in which the users of cell or mobile phones are legion. However, in reality, the radio frequencies upon which China's 1.5 billion (and the world's 4.8 billion) cellphone users are organized and grouped are limited. In other words, the networks and the providers that make the whole vast, global phenomenon of cellphone usage work are very, very limited. And that's because the radio frequencies are limited and *shared* resources rooted in phenomena and processes that modern science and technology have mastered and converted to our use as a species, a global or planetary community.

Here's another way of putting this observation across: the number of cellphone users in the world is truly awesome and moreover, it is still growing; however, instead of fragmentation and isolation, connectedness and community are the hallmarks of cellphone usage in our world. And that's thanks largely to the fact that the laws or principles through which sounds and images can be converted to electromagnetic signals and sent and received throughout the world are limited, known values. From this observation, we can deduce the simple answer to our question: every cellphone and its user is *customized* to send and receive the electrical signals to which our voices (and images or pictures) are converted when we use the gadget. One mark of the customization is the SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) card. Another is the phone number. In other words, it doesn't matter how many cellphone users in the world there are as long as we recognize that every single one of them is indeed customized. But that is not the end of the story for we also have to deal with the more complex answer to our billion-users question.

From the bulky telephones of the past to the small, portable cellphones of the present, and from landline phones to wireless, mobile phones that you can take everywhere with you, the modern technology of communications has taken extraordinarily amazing strides. If we take the conversion of human and natural sounds to electrical signals as the starting point, the real wonder is that as this phenomenon or operation has been brought, at least potentially, within the reach of every human being on our planet, the products or gadgets have become smaller and smaller, while at the same time fulfilling more multiple and complex tasks and functions. No landlines, no direct connections and the sending and receiving agents of the basic, foundational electromagnetic signals get smaller and smaller and yet, yet the phones get smarter and smarter! At a crucial stage of the development or unfolding of this fascinating process, communications satellites enter the picture, bringing the universe



# A book I would love to write in the near future, inshallah (3)

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**Talakawa Liberation Herald**  
BIODUN JEYIFO



• Barack Obama, hundreds of thousands of Americans still believe that he was not born in America and is a Moslem, not a Christian.

AS I come to the concluding piece in the series that I began two weeks ago in this column, I think it is only fit and proper that I make a confession concerning the subject whose conversation with me provided the impetus for my reflections in the series. This is of course none other than Monday Electrician. What is the "confession" that I need to make about this compatriot? Well, simply this: if the conversation had occurred in the other place apart from Ibadan, Nigeria, in which I also live, it would have been totally different. This other place is Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A. Though I have had workmen come to make installations or repairs in my apartment in this location, I have never needed the services of an electrician. For that reason, for our "Monday Electrician" I would have to substitute any of the workmen I have encountered in Cambridge, Mass.

In doing this, I must say that I cannot imagine any of these American workmen telling me that a stricken sibling is the victim of evil, malefic relatives or neighbors that operate through witchcraft, through "spiritual attacks". Similarly, I cannot think that my imagined or putative interlocutor in Cambridge, Mass, would have been so incredulous as to be rendered completely speechless if I expressed the observation to him or her that we are both on a planet that is constantly moving, constantly rotating on its invisible axis - as Monday Electrician was when I made that remark to him. No, Monday Electrician was encountered in Ibadan, Nigeria and there is no way in the world that I could have encountered a technician like him in America. And that's my "confession".

Are things so cut and dry in the difference between what ordinary workmen and folks in Ibadan, Nigeria know, believe and think about the world, the universe in which we live compared with what obtains in Cambridge, Massachusetts? Dear compatriots, if you expected the answer to this question to be a resounding yes, I hate to disappoint you because this is not the case at all, at least if we stick to the subject of this series and the book that I am thinking of writing, this being the relationship between rational and testable knowledges and beliefs that most people have in comparison with those that cannot be tested or proved - or disproved for that matter. In other words, what I am saying here is this: in matters of rational and non-rational knowledges, or of testable and untestable ideas and beliefs, the differences between the individuals, peoples and cultures of our world are not so fundamental, so unbridgeable that what we have is a divided humanity. Indeed, this observation is so crucial to my reflections in this series that I would go so far as caution that nothing could be more unhelpful in these matters than to fall into the trap of dividing our world and its peoples into those that live and die on the altar of rationality and testable knowledges and those that cling tenaciously to the age-old, non-rational, non-tested (and non-testable) knowledges and beliefs of their cultures. Things are far more complicated than that! To illustrate this observation, I would like to briefly discuss a "Lagosian" joke that I initially heard from a denizen of that city after which I will narrate a version of the joke that I have sometimes told as a revisionary form of the original. First then, the original version of

the joke before I give my revisionary version of it.

To an invitation from an Inspector of secondary schools from the State Ministry of Education to name the first flying object or thing that came to their minds, the following collective responses from pupils were recorded at each named location: Victoria Island: airplanes! Surulere: mosquitoes! Agege: witches!. In each area that represents a known demographic constellation of the city's population, the expected or not so surprising though funny answer was given. Thus, the class or status bias of the joke is unmistakable and is heavily weighted against Agege and the response of witches as the first object that came to mind with regard to flying things. It was this fact that prompted me to revise the joke so as to either reduce or neutralize the bias.

On the basis of this decision, I came up with the following expanded and revised responses: Victoria Island: airplanes, drones and UFO's (unidentified flying objects). Surulere: mosquitoes, birds and bees. Agege: witches, demons and angels. For an explanation, here's the rationale for my revisions: For the Victoria Island children of the elite, drones and UFO's show, I hope, that when they think of flying things they are as much influenced by fanciful ideas as their counterparts in Surulere and Agege. Similarly, the inclusion of birds and bees for the children of the denizens of Surulere implies that they can and do think of pleasant objects apart

from mosquitoes (and flies) if they are invited to think of flying things. Finally, for Agege, the inclusion of demons and angels in my revised version of the Lagosian joke places the kids of that mini city of working class and underclass folks squarely in the mainstream of contemporary Nigerian evangelical Christianity that cuts across all classes, all status groups. For indeed, with the exception of atheists and secular humanists, who in our country today isn't thinking of demons and their archenemies, angels? Isn't the epic war against Satan and his hordes the grand theme of countless sermons, hymns and tracts?

My revisionary version of this Lagosian joke is not of course intended to imply that there are no differences at all between pupils at elite neighborhoods and schools and those in poor and greatly disadvantaged areas. Rather, my point is that these differences are not written in stone, they are not unalterable. In other words, what I am arguing is that when it comes to what individuals and entire peoples know and believe, the line between the rational and the non-rational is not like the line separating day from night, the high heavens from the earth down below.

This is precisely the same point that I am making in the comparisons I made earlier in this discussion between Ibadan, Nigeria and Cambridge, Mass. In Cambridge in particular and America in general, you may not find workmen or technicians like Monday Electrician who will swear that witches and witchcraft are active parts of their reality, their

world, but you can and will find people who still believe that the story of creation as told in the Book of Genesis is a literal fact and the world was created in only six days. You will find climate change deniers who vigorously disparage solid scientific evidence for climate change. You will find people who not only think that there are aliens from another planet living secretly among us, but swear that they or people they know have seen UFO's. To this day, and against overwhelming evidence to the contrary, there are hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of Americans who still think that Barack Obama was not born in America and is a Moslem, not a Christian. To this day and against overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary, there are thousands upon thousands of Americans and Western peoples who still believe that Africans in particular and Black people in general belong to a different or subspecies of humankind than themselves and their kind, their "race".

Against the backdrop of these observations and declarations, I come to perhaps the three central ideas and themes of what I have been arguing in this series and what I have in mind with regard to the contents of the book that I plan to write sometime in my post-retirement future, inshallah. What are these ideas?

First, is the fact that frankly speaking, knowledges and beliefs that are rational, testable and tested interest me considerably far more than non-rational, untested and untestable ones, though I am not

in principle and in habit uninterested in non-rational ideas and beliefs, especially those pertaining to religious mysticism. Secondly, I believe that the marvels, indeed the achievements of rational, tested knowledges and beliefs are infinitely more interesting and more beneficial to humanity than the heritage of non-rational knowledges and beliefs. Thirdly and lastly and coming to our own country and continent, there has been a longstanding practice of under-appreciating the heritage of rational knowledges and beliefs that come both from our own traditions and from other regions of the world.

Unfortunately, I cannot in the present context write about each of these three ideas. This being the case, I can perhaps only give assurance to the readers that in the book that I am planning to write, they will be fully and joyously elaborated. For now, what I can or should perhaps do is give a short preview, a succinct account of the third of my central ideas, this being my assertion, my claim that in our part of the world we have to contend with a long history of disregard and/or under-appreciation of the vitality, the achievements, the *poetry* even of rational, testable and tested knowledges and beliefs. What do I have in mind in making this declaration as a cornerstone of both my reflections in this series and the book that I plan to write?

To answer this question and for the last time in this series, let us once again invoke the figure of our enigmatic interlocutor, Monday Electrician. At this late stage in this series, let me now reveal to the readers that even though my conversation with him took place entirely in Yoruba sprinkled with, now and then, English words or terms from scientific and technological modernity, Monday Electrician was of the unspoken but fiercely held opinion that much if not all of what I was arguing were the ideas of the white man. I mean, to him the idea that we were all on a planet that was always and forever moving was the white man's idea!

Even when I spoke specifically of electricity as a phenomenon, Monday Electrician was stolidly determined to hold on to the belief that that topic too could be of interest only to an African, a Nigerian who was the dupe, the intellectual slave of "white" knowledges and beliefs. When I told him of the wonder of once watching on a television monitor images of all that was going on in my own stomach through the technology of ultrasound resonant imaging made possible by electromagnetic waves of the frequency of x-rays, Monday Electrician saw, *indeed could only see* a man who was the mental captive of the Western world and its knowledge bases and belief systems. And yet, this is a technology that is being used, developed and mastered in many parts of our world, many of them outside the West. How can I turn this around, how can I make Monday Electrician a *subject*, not the object of a technological and scientific modernity that belongs to all of humankind? That is the task I face in the book I hope to write someday soon, inshallah.