

Inside Prof. Akinyemi's animal kingdom

By **Evelyn Osagie** Published 14/12/2009 *The Nation Newspapers.*

Not even the twittering sound of the birds could disrupt the quiet setting of Peacock Place in Ikeja, Lagos. In the midst of business activities and vivacious nightlife of Opebi, the place thrives in its rustic charm. Every part has a touch of nature; pretty flowers complimented the large trees and desert plants scattered all over the compound. Peacock Place houses a mini-zoo including a fifty-year-old tortoise and an antelope.



The array of different kinds of beautiful birds and animals numbering about 500 reminds one of African folktales where animal kingdom existed side by side the human's. When *Newsextra* visited the place, it was discovered that Peacock Place is home to an antelope, tortoises, parrots, geese, ducks, peacocks, crown birds, water fowls, golden fish, rabbits, pigeons, goats and rams. Each is arranged in a way that is almost similar to its natural habitat. The organizers of *Tales by Moonlight*, a local TV hit, would find a perfect scene for their tales. They would not need to make do with makeshift animal costumes; the kids would see the animals live. Interestingly, over the years, Peacock Place has served as tourist site to school children in Lagos.

But this is no fairytale; it is the world of Prof Bolaji Akinyemi, Nigerian former Foreign Affairs Minister. The place presents another side to the political scholar. It shows he is not only involved in diplomacy but also zoology. Meeting the professor inside his home, one would find a man that is in tune with nature. Scattered across his compound is a display of his love for, and attachment to, nature. The day *Newsextra* visited the place, the professor was in his elements. He chatted about everything including his love for nature, his animals and his childhood.

What could have inspired the professor to set up a place like Peacock Place? Akinyemi said: "I just love having the animals around as they give me pleasure. And I haven't finished. If I come across something that I don't have, that I am fascinated by, and that I think living in this environment will not stress the animal, of course I will get it. I sometimes refer to myself as a village boy because I love being with nature whether it is fish, different kinds of flowers, different kinds of plants. Fortunately I have big enough land space to actually plant flowers and trees that I like, so I don't mind. In fact, I actually take pleasure in calling myself a village boy rather than a city boy."

According to Akinyemi, the place has been in existence for over 20 years. "I started keeping animals since 1975 and the peacocks were the first. So, when we moved here in 1988, I asked the children to name the place and they called it 'Peacock Place'."

As he took the reporter round, she asked: "Sir, do you see yourself as a naturalist?"

"Yes. Most Nigerians are actually naturalists. I remember growing up at Queens Street, Yaba. In those days, in the 50s, every house had a garden in front and back. It was really beautiful then. Unlike what you have today where every inch must now be built upon. This destruction of habitat is a latter phenomenon. Nigeria never used to be like that. I suppose it's the quest for wealth in expense of health that makes people build a bungalow and a high-rise on the same plot of land which he would then rent out, in order for him to maximize financial returns. If you move round the various reservation areas... that is a terrible term as we make it sound like people who live there are exotic human beings, but some people call them 'GRA'... If you go round GRA, VGC and places like that, you find that most residents still retain the old model with flowers in front.

"With the re-greening exercise of the present administration, I am happy that gardens are beginning to come back. In fact, I must say, I am very pleased with what Fashola is doing in Lagos. I am not surprised; he also went to Igbobi College, where we were taught the importance of maintaining the environment. Nowadays, you could see different kinds of flowers and trees well-manicured. It shows what life should be about. And not this kind of jungle that we seem to have turned our cities into round the 70s, 80s and 90s."

Rowena Library

On the outside, the beautiful big green gate has succeeded in shielding the serenity of the place from the eyes of the world. The small lettering on the wall 'Peacock Place', welcomes a visitor to the place. The gate opens up into a large compound beautifully adorned with flowers and trees. As one moves in further, one could see that apart from celebrating nature, the place is also a compendium of a sort. The milk-colored one-storey building facing the car park at the entrance seems to negate the countrified environment. It is Rowena Library that houses Akinyemi intellectual wealth, named after his wife, Rowena. It is a complete resource centre. The ground floor is filled with books on different disciplines particularly diplomacy arranged in stacks similar to that of the university libraries as well as the Rotaben documentation centre. On the top floor are his office and a conference room. Akinyemi said he intends to make it open to students soon. "Once the library is fully established, I will let the universities know their post-graduate students, whose area of interest is in International Affairs, can have access for their own research. But they would have to come with a letter from their Head of Department or Dean. This would be probably next year," he said as he led the way to other parts of the compound.

The ranch hut

As one walks deeper into the compound, one is gradually introduced to the wild life in the place. By the library are some array of flowers behind them is a Spanish ranch hut called the Gazbo. Inside the hut contradicts the rusticity it represents. On the ground are white granite and a music system on a table by the window. The Gazbo is directly facing a big edifice, the main building.

Water fountain and fish pond

Between the two buildings is a water fountain that has a calming effect on the visitor sitting in the ranch. As the water flows from the artificial granite-caved waterfall into the fish ponds, one could see the golden fish swimming about. Oblivious of the world above the water, they swim up to pick some food but retreat into the water at the slightest sound. While the visitor stands admiring them, the tranquility is broken by the Yoyo, one of the African parrots.

Parrots

The way the professor holds court with his parrots which respond accordingly, one would think he was talking to his dear friends. "Hello, Pretty Polly, what are you up to now?" He would say as the bird flies out of its cage to greet him. When all is silent again and the visitor is not watching, you would hear them call your name, "Hello Kemi." And as you come closer, they are quiet again.

Tortoise

The place has two tortoises – male and female. According to Akinyemi, in terms of the interpretation of the rings to determine the age, the male is about 50, while the female is between 20 and 30 years old. The visitor watched as the male tortoise fed on the pawpaw leaf thrown into its hole. Gently it rose out of its shell and began to devour the leaf, not minding who was watching.

Peacocks

Seeing the visitors, a peacock moved up, turned and opened up its tail towards them while they watched in awe. The peacocks are in the same place as the crown birds and the water fowls. Akinyemi said: "The peacock came first, and then came the geese, then antelope, Pekinese ducks, parrots, including the tortoises.

The geese

The geese are three in number. Among the collection, they are the most aggressive. And in the lot the black goose is the most aggressive. As soon as the visitors came to its cage, it charged at them. And began to cry out when its beak could not reach them.

Antelope

The tour round the place can not be complete without the visit to the antelope's pen. He sat down quietly, watching as the visitors invaded its privacy. They were told it is harmless. With his eyes wide open as if he was getting ready to charge, the antelope gaze stayed on them. As they moved about, it sat still, but its eyes followed them from left to right, watching closely their movements. They wanted to take a close shot at it. His eyeballs became darker and shone from its socket, expanding and shrinking at intervals.

Suddenly, he stood up as if to charge, turned and retreated deeper into its pen. This move seemed to frighten the visitors who were immediately pacified by Akinyemi, the host and keeper. "It won't hurt you, don't worry," he said. As if to placate the animal, everyone remained silent.

Reading their thoughts, the host said: "He is a male antelope and it does not bite." By this time, the reporter who wanted to take a shot of the animal was already shaking.

"Go closer and take, it won't hurt you," said the host. "Okay," she replied in a shaky voice. After one snapshot, she ran out of the pen as if pursued by the antelope.

Pigeons and rabbits

As they left for the rabbit farm, the pigeons flew in, in large number. Passing from there to the main building is like passing through the wood.

The Mediterranean Terrace

After touring round the reserve, the tour took the visitors to the topmost floor of the main building. The penthouse holds a garden of flowers. It is divided into a part that is covered where the visitors sat and rested after the tour. And in an open space different pots of flowers are arranged on the tiles. Akinyemi called it a 'Mediterranean Terrace'. It is more or less like a flower shop.

"It was built about three years ago," he said.

Why surround yourself with so much flowers and trees? "I get irritated by slabs of cement or tiles. You can calm the atmosphere down by introducing lots of nature. I have sufficient space to put chairs, table, etc, instead of leaving it blank, I have introduced nature because it helps calm the nerve. You tenderise the environment by introducing nature."

On the gathering of animals

On how he was able to gather the animals, he said: "I have this friend called Yahaya, who is into animals. So whenever he finds any animal he feels I would like, he brings them. I pick those I like and reject those

I don't like. Once, he left an ostrich which I rejected. First of all, the ostrich was bigger than me. And the way the ostrich is built does not appeal to me."

Most of the animals in the place are herbivorous. "I don't have anything that eats meat here. No snakes, no crocodiles, no lions. I was once offered a baby lion and baby cheetah which were very cute but cute babies whether animals or humans end up growing up and then they become a problem. I resisted the temptation," he said.

Cost of maintenance

Contrary to people's beliefs, animals as these, Akinyemi said, are not expensive to maintain, adding that anybody can keep them. "Keeping them are not expensive at all. What do these animals eat? Cabbage, lettuce and so on. If you go to the vegetable market, these are leftovers. When the trucks have arrived and they have picked the one they would sell. You'll be surprised that even when you offer them money, they would ask you to bring just N50 and have it. In any case, they are just going to rot there. And also, it depends on what gives one pleasure. I am sure there are people who spend more in one year having 'Owambe' parties than I spend in accumulating and feeding these animals,"

Still on his animals, he said: "The thing about animals is that some of them have quite a stable life span, like tortoise and the peacock, but the antelopes tend to die in spite of all efforts. If all my antelopes were alive, they would have been up to about 25 in number. Right now, I have only one. I lost four this year. Even though, the veterinary doctor takes care of them, he could not save them."
