NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DER - 41
Notes on Nigeria - I

May 16, 1955
Malta

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522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Lagos is squalid, filthy and noisy. It is packed with humanity---nearly 300,000 people---and it reeks with foul odors. When you first see Lagos, you feel as if you were carried back to another century---to one depicted in old wood-cut prints of plague cities in medieval Europe. Bubonic plague swept through Lagos in 1924. But, though the city appears ripe for any epidemic, none has occurred since then. "I guess it's just luck," said an educated African who has lived in the city all his life.

The slums of Nairobi are bad enough, but they are confined to small areas. In Lagos, for street after street, mile after mile, there is nothing but slums. There are a few decent houses here and there, but they are lost in a sea of mud-walled hovels. Most are not more than cubicles, packed tightly against other hovels. They are roofed with flattened five-gallon tin cans or with rusted corrugated metal. The narrow lanes between these dwellings are muddy and littered with garbage. Goats and chickens wander up and down the lanes, and sometimes into the hovels, and add their bit to the refuse.

Sometimes when you look inside the slum dwellings, you can see people squatting on the floor, eating with their hands from a piece of matting. Many of these people are desperately poor. But others are well off, even by European standards. One Nigerian I met, a prosperous auditor trained in England, lived in a slum area, though in a slightly better house. Yet the filth in and around his home was the same as that of his neighbors. He had recently purchased a shiny new American car.

Open concrete ditches run along the edges of the streets of Lagos. They are designed to carry off rain water, but the populace sometimes uses them for other purposes. The stench is considerable. In addition, the weather is hot and humid in Lagos and the air often hangs motionless over the city so there is no chance for its foul odors to be carried elsewhere. Naked children play in the streets and lanes and sometimes in the ditches too. There is no place else for them. Quite often their bellies are puffed out with nutritional diseases and some of the children have grotesque umbical hernias.

The Marina, Lagos' harbor-front drive, is not much better. Slum life spills over onto it as well. It is lined with office buildings and stores, many of them ramshackle and decrepit. Aside from the European residential areas at the edge of the city, an energetic city planner would find little in Lagos that he would not want to demolish.

You find none of the ease and politeness of East Africa in Lagos. Its people are in a hurry. Taxis, trucks and cars race through the narrow streets at twenty and thirty miles an hour, angrily blasting paths with their horns. Pedestrians, cyclists and pushcart pushers jump quickly when they hear a horn and once I saw a man wind up in one of the putrid storm ditches. Death or disability goes to those who dally. Road courtesy toward other vehicles also is unknown. When two vehicles meet, the drivers behave like knights of old at a narrow foot bridge. Bad accidents occur regularly.

There is a god who rules over Lagos with a firm hand and his name is Get-Rich-Quick. People bent on making their fortunes pour into the city daily from the outlying districts of Nigeria and the population has been growing rapidly. A good many of these people are traders, and you see them everywhere. They even wander into hotel lounges to pester visitors into buying cheap watches, trinkets, crude wood carvings and other junk.

The streets are lined with shops, most of them so tiny that they amount to not much more than a niche in a wall. They sell flashy cloth prints, wrist watches that run only until the buyer has parted with his money, pots and pans, herbs and juju, or witchcraft, charms. A great many of the traders are women---"mammy" traders---and some of them even spread their wares at the edge of the street, only a few feet from the wheels of speeding trucks.

There is a continual din in the streets, the combined result of the cries of vendors, auto and truck horns, the chatter and laughter of passers-by and the cacaphony of a dozen radios and phonographs blaring out different American jazz and African tribal tunes. Even the naked urchins have picked up the mood of Lagos. "Give me money," they scream at you when you walk down the street. Failing to get any, they scream insults. Sometimes people stop you on the street and tell you that you can photograph them if you will give them a couple of shillings.

The costumes of the people in the streets are varied and colorful. Most of the people are Yorubas as Lagos is in western Nigeria, the home of the Yoruba-speaking tribes. Yoruba women wear big blue turbans, western-style blouses and long pieces of blue cloth which they wrap around themselves as skirts. Every few minutes a Yoruba woman will unhitch her skirt, revealing a stretch of brown thigh or more, then hitch it up again with a flourish.

Many men wear the traditional Yoruba dress, a gown, usually of bright colors, pajama-like trousers and a cap. This costume is said to be of Arab origin, having come from across the Sahara. It is considerably modified from the Arab style and Muslim, Christian and pagan Yorubas alike wear it. In these days of impending self-government, when national feelings are running high, a number of Yorubas have given up western dress for the traditional one.

* * *

One evening in Lagos I had drinks with the correspondent for The Times of London. He is an African in his sixties and his name

is Ernest Ikoli. Ikoli is a veteran Nigerian newspaperman and politician. He is portly and has bushy gray hair. He invited me to come to the Island Club, an inter-racial social center. Several young men, some of them Lagos town councillors, came up to pay their respects to Ikoli. None of them ever began or ended a sentence without including at least one "Sir" in it. All over Africa the older generation complains that the younger men have no respect for them, but Ikoli seems to show that the younger men will pay the traditional respect if the older man has the education and background to meet them on equal terms.

Ikoli and I talked about the hostile attitudes between the three regions---the west (mostly Yoruba), the east (mostly Ibo) and the north (inhabited by the Hausa and other Muslim tribes). At present these regions are loosely federated, each having its own premier, and some people think they will fly apart, or at each other's throats, once the restraining hand of the British is removed. In fact, some Africans I met talked gleefully of war. I asked Ikoli if he thought war was possible.

"There'll even be war between Ibos and Ibos," he said. "The British brought us together by one government and by roads, communications and schools attended by boys of different tribes. We never had been together before and we never wanted to be. When the British leave, we'll probably go back apart again, unless we get a really big leader to hold us together."

"Is there any leader like that around?" I asked.

"Heavens no," he said.

Some more young men came up to greet Ikoli. After they left he sighed and said, "We're going too fast and nobody knows where we're going."

As we were leaving the Island Club, Ikoli introduced me to a young African woman and he said that she is the third Nigerian woman to become a barrister. "I may be primitive but I think a woman's place is in the home," Ikoli told her. "That's where I like them."

"Well, you're wrong," she said good-naturedly.

* * *

When I returned to my hotel, an African in sloppy western dress bounded up from a chair in the lounge and said, "Hello, my friend." It took a while for me to place him and then I remembered that I had stopped my car to ask him for directions a few days before. He got into the car and rode along to show me the way. I had given him two shillings for his trouble.

"You didn't recognize me and you don't know that I am a prince," he said.

I bought the prince a beer.

"Some days I will be King of Lagos," he exclaimed loudly. "When I saw you, it was like an elecka trick shock to my body. I said to myself, 'There is a man who has come to Nigeria to set up a business!' I also told myself, 'I am the man to help him!'"

The prince's eyes gleamed through a fog of many beers. I told him I was not a businessman. He took that for caution on my part and dismissed the denial with a wave of the hand. Pulling his chair closer to mine, he said:

"Yes, I told myself that I, the prince, who has the local knowledge, is the best man to be associated with this foreign businessman who has come to Nigeria. I worked for an American once and when he left Nigeria he gave me his radio. I said, 'Should you be giving me this expensive radio?' and he said, 'Yes!'" The prince inadvertently expectorated on the table.

At that point, the prince's brother, who seemed to be the senior prince, rose from a nearby table and started out the door. The junior prince quickly bolted down the rest of his beer and bounded after his brother. "I will come back to talk more business with you tomorrow morning, my friend," he hollered over his shoulder. Fortunately he did not.

* * *

Africa is riddled with inefficiency, but in Nigeria it surpasses any territory I have yet seen. The local telegraph service is described as "hopeless." Often it takes several days, or even a week, for a telegram to reach a town a few miles away. Service between Lagos and the other main centers sometimes is interrupted for days at a time. Business firms and government agencies are staffed with Africans and there is little or no European supervision. My experience was that it was always difficult and sometimes impossible to deal with African clerks and officials. Either there is unbelievable confusion, uncomphrehending ignorance or outright hostility.

One time I waited in Barclays Bank, Lagos, for an hour and fifteen minutes while four clerks went through the otherwise simple process of converting a dollar bank draft into sterling. With great effort, they would draw the figures and words on the cash and audit slips. Then they would study the slips for five minutes, arguing among themselves. Finally they would conclude that there had been a mistake and they would tear the slips up and start all over again. The European in charge would dart over frequently, mutter some angry words, put them on the right track, then return to his desk. He wound up handling the transaction himself while the four clerks glared at him, seemingly convinced that this was another instance of imperialistic oppression.

At other times I would explain what I wanted to an African clerk or official. After repeating it a few times, it would dawn on me that the African was not comphrehending anything I said. I would look around desperately for a European and if there was none, I would have to forget about the matter.

"It's fantastic what goes on here," a British businessman said. You tell a clerk to send so many drums of oil to a customer. Then you come back later and say, 'Did you send those drums?'

"The clerk will look straight at you and without a flicker of the eye---mark you, that is important, without a flicker of the eye---he will say he sent them. You say, 'Fine.'

"Then a few days later you get a rocket from the customer saying where's the oil? You go back to the clerk and say, 'You did send that oil, didn't you?' He'll say, 'Oh, yes, I sent it,' looking you straight in the face.

"You get suspicious. You check the shipments and you find that the oil was never sent. You go back to the clerk and confront him with this. He'll look you right in the eye and say nonchalantly, 'Oh, I'm sending it now.'"

"Don't you fire these clerks?" I asked the businessman.

"What's the use," he said. "The next one would be just the same." Then, with a sneer, he added, "That's Nigerianization for you."

In Lagos and elsewhere in Nigeria you also have to cope with hostility and rudeness from clerks and officials in government and private offices. This rudeness is not only directed against Europeans, but against other Africans as well. An African reader recently wrote to the Daily Times, a Lagos newspaper, as follows:

"A few days ago I had occasion to transact what I had imagined would be business of five minutes' duration. It took the lordly counter-clerk ninety minutes to attend to a dozen of us. The policeman, the shop assistant, the counter-clerk, the nurse, the salesman and even the telephone operator is not ready to attend to you in time with courtesy or politeness, unless you have the courage to walk into the adjoining office of the local representative of British imperialism and seek the aid of a white expatriate before you complaint will be effective.

"And here I am tempted to ask whether in self-governing Nigeria duty will be performed freely, readily and willingly for its own sake or only for fear of the consequences of default."

One time I went into the main Lagos parcel post office and was told to come back the next day. It was 4:50 p.m. "We're closing in ten minutes," an insolent clerk said.

A young British civil engineer told me he came across a road accident some months before. A small bus had gone off the road and plunged down a ravine, injuring several African passengers. "There was a hospital just up the road, so I raced up there in my car," the engineer said. "I told the African nurses to come quickly. Do you know what they said? They said, 'No, we're going off duty in five minutes.'

"I returned to the scene without them. An African policeman and I stopped a passing lorry and we asked the African driver to take the injured to the next town. The driver refused. He said he was through work for the day and was on his way home. He finally took them, but only after we threatened to tell the crowd about his attitude and turn them on him."

But there is a way of getting things done in Nigeria. That is by means of "dash." Dash signifies anything from a gift or tip to an outright bribe. There seems to be no real distinction between the two.

In the old days, no one would approach a chief or any other important person without giving him a gift. You couldn't expect him to listen to your complaint or grant you a favor unless you did something for him. Dash was part of the social code and it meant good manners.

These days some incidents I encountered savoured more of rapacious exaction than of courtesy. One time, while driving just outside Lagos, I came to a public bridge across a public road. There was a gate across it and it was locked. A by-stander said we would have to walk across the bridge and ask the African road foreman to open the gate. "Oh, that means they'll want money," an African hitchhiker with me said.

We crossed the bridge and I asked the road foreman to open the gate. He stood there in silence for some time, eyeing me uneasily, then he slowly went back and opened the gate. It seemed as if he might have been debating whether to try his little racket on a European, and had decided against it.

On another occasion, when I went to a customs house to pay import duty so I could sell my car in Nigeria, the clerks let it be know through a hanger-on that they wanted "dash" for completing the transaction. I refused and an angry argument ensued. Soon all of the clerks were bellowing insults. "It's a black man's country and if you don't like it, get out," they screamed, neatly turning the issue from one of attempted extortion for performing a public service to that of race.

It seems that bribery and corruption and not confined to junior grade officials and clerks. Stories are rife in Lagos about such doings in high places and the two main political parties regularly accuse each other of wholesale misdeeds.

Those British officials still remaining in Nigeria are disgusted by the situation. They have very high standards for public service and they look on anything else with horror. A few British officials, while admitting that corruption exists, minimize its importance. After all, they argue, corruption goes on in the United States, yet it is not of the utmost importance as far as the country as a whole is concerned.

But there is an important difference between U. S. corruption and that in Nigeria. U. S. corruption stems largely from the fact

that too few of the best people choose politics or the civil service as a career. Particularly at the municipal level, politics and the civil service are largely the domain of the ward heeler and even the semi-criminal type. But in Nigeria public service is in the hands of the "educated" men. They are the local elite and they stand as far apart from the bush tribesmen as a university professor stands from a river ward committeeman in Chicago.

Perhaps the situation will remedy itself in time. Or perhaps it will always remain that way. It could be that Nigeria just is not interested in our ideal of honest, efficient government. There are people in the world who accept rule by a corrupt few as inevitable. The British have tried to transplant an exotic flower in the land of despotic kings, nepotism and dash. The flower may well wither for lack of care.

* * *

Reading the morning newspapers in Lagos is always an amusing experience. One, for instance, features a column headed "DON'TS FOR LADIES," from which the following nuggets were gleaned:

> "When at socials, don't try to be greedy, or make much puff when asked for a dance. This makes one a nuisance."
>
> "Avoid spitting in public, for it is a very bad habit."
>
> "When men come to propose love to you, don't feel too big. Rather, try to be courteous and polite, whatever your answer may be---whether 'yes' or 'no.'"

News items are apt to startle the reader. One recent item, captioned "BURGLARS!" read as follows:

> "The Acting Senior Superintendent of Police, Benin City, has issued the following warning to the Benin public:---
>
> "Benin people, hearken to the voice of reasoning. It is understood that certain cliques and demagogues are arranging for burglars to burgle your houses.
>
> "Mr. Oluwole, Acting Senior Superintendent of Police, now calls upon you in the interest of Benin that you should give informations about such people and their plans.
>
> "You have been warned."

In a recent issue, one paper carried a variation on the usual wedding notice. It seems that three people were joined together in matrimony---a Miss Johnson and a Miss Bida to a Mr. Sulaimon. The paper reported that:

> "The nuptial knots were tied by Alfa M. K. Ekemode of

the Ansar-Ud-Deen Society. At the reception which followed, the toast of the brides and bridegroom was proposed by Mr. M. K. Jinadu."

* * *

Nigeria is on the verge of self-government, but no definite date has been set yet. A round table conference of Nigerian political leaders is to be held next year to discuss what will be done. The big problem is whether Nigeria will remain intact or will split up. When the British were ready to withdraw from India, the problem was whether there should be a Pakistan or not. In Nigeria there are two possible Pakistans. Antagonisms between the West, the East and the North run high. Each region has its own government, with its own Premier and cabinet, and there is a federal government in Lagos.

In addition to the regional antagonisms, there is the problem that the north is not eager to have full self-government at this time. While the south has forged ahead with western education and other aspects of advancement, the Muslim north, suspicious of change, has lagged behind. Northern leaders now fear that self-government would result in the south dominating the north. They want the British to remain until the northern masses have acquired enough western education to compete with the south as equals. The Premier of the northern region, a Fulani noble named Ahmadu the Sardauna of Sokoto, even invited those Englishmen kicked out of the independent Sudan to come to northern Nigeria to work. He and other northern leaders fear that western education will undermine their Islamic society, but confronted with the rising south, they feel they have no alternative.

The northern cabinet has thirteen Africans and three British officials in it. The two southern regions have rejected even that much British participation and all their ministers are Africans. The British have surrendered most of their power in the south and something less than that in the north. But British governors in each region still have certain veto powers.

The regions have been told that they can have full self-government next year (thus doing away with the governors' remaining powers). But there is a proviso: self-government for any region cannot interfere with the proper working of the federation.

This loose federation is centered in the federal House of Representatives and the federal Cabinet in Lagos. The north, with more than half of Nigeria's population of 31 million, has 92 seats in the house.(*1) The east and west each have 42 seats.(*2)

(*1) The north has a population of 17 million; the east has 7.8 million and the west has 6.4 million.

(*2) The Southern Cameroons, a United Nations trust territory under British administration, has six seats and the federal territory of Lagos has two seats. The Northern Cameroons, also a U. N. territory, politically is part of the Northern Region.

The federal Cabinet is composed of three British officials and ten Africans. The federal government deals with a long list of subjects such as posts, currency, banking and defense. As African ministers outnumber the Europeans, they can set the policy. However the Governor-General, who presides over the Cabinet, has certain veto powers, and powers to declare that a law has been passed. Owing to the regional antagonisms, there is no federal Prime Minister. The federation is not of the most solid sort and owes a lot, if not all, to the presence of the British.

The British are eager to keep Nigeria together. There are strong economic reasons why the federation should be preserved. The north otherwise would have no access to the sea. The south depends on the north for meat and other animal products. But economics do not always determine the future course of nations. Nigerian leaders of all views admit that federation is desirable, but there are strong centrifugal forces. If not into two or more fully independent countries, Nigeria might develop into two or more countries with something like a Benelux arrangement with each other. Europe stands as an abiding monument to "tribalism" among white people. One should not expect Africans, whose divisions are as deep as those that separate Frenchmen, Germans and Poles, to abide by artificial boundary lines agreed to in Europe during the scramble for Africa. Some Africans talk of war. "If there is a war, it wouldn't be the first time in history," one leading politician said to me. "There are ideas that must be ironed out."

One afternoon in Lagos I had tea with a leading Gold Coast politician. "We're really going ahead in the Gold Coast," he said, and with scarcely a pause for breath, he rattled off a long account of what is going on there. I interrupted to ask him what he thought of Nigeria. He sneered. "These people fight among themselves all the time," he said. "It will take them thirty years to get where we are. But now in the Gold Coast..." And he was off again.

* * *

Several months ago there was a cause celebre in the local courts. It raised a lot of bitter feelings among the Europeans in Nigeria and those feelings still persist.

A peddler had entered the back yard of the home of a European pottery officer and was bitten by the European's dog. The European was brought to court and the prosecution said he deliberately set the dog on the African. He also kicked the African, the prosecutor said.

The European denied it, saying the dog attacked the peddler before he could intervene. The judge then sentenced the European to twelve strokes with a cane and a fine of £125 ($350.) The European appealed and an African appeals judge cancelling the flogging and reduced the fine to £25 ($70). The European paid the fine and left Nigeria.

* * *

The tarmac road from Lagos to Ibadan winds first through a dense tropical forest. There are occasional cultivated clearings, but otherwise the thick tangle of trees, bushes and vines comes right to the edge of the road.

"Mammy wagons"---trucks converted into make-shift buses---hurtle up and down the road at high speeds, carrying mammy traders and other Africans from one town to the next. The mammy wagon drivers are about the most reckless drivers I have ever encountered. I had to run partly into the ditch several times to avert head-on collisions. Many mammy wagons have sayings painted across the front. One was "Trust in God." That was rather appropriate. Another had "Live and Let Live" emblazoned across the front, which is a startling proposition to expound in that business. Others included "God's Time is Best" and "God's Case No Appeal."

In former days this coastal belt was one of the most unhealthy places in the world and West Africa was called "The White Man's Graveyard." Malaria, yellow fever and other diseases took heavy tolls from European expeditions. In 1841 four British ships were sent up the Niger to make treaties with the local chiefs to stop the slave trade. A total of 145 Europeans entered the river aboard those ships. Two months later 48 of them were dead. Sir Richard Burton, who visited Lagos in 1862, described the house of the British Governor and Consul as "containing a dead consul once a year." One had died in 1859, his successor in 1860 and that man's successor in 1861. An old saying used to sum up the situation:

"Beware and take heed of the Bight of Benin,*
For few come out though many go in."

Health conditions in Nigeria have improved tremendously since those days. The use of malaria prophylactics and mosquito netting, the introduction of yellow fever and other inoculations and swamp drainage and other mosquito control work have cut fatalities drastically. But still Nigeria is no health spa. The climate is hot and humid and, after a long stay, Europeans find that their energy and will power begin to wilt and that their tempers flare up on the slightest provocation. Tours of duty for colonial officials are much shorter than in other colonies. Men under 35 years of age serve 18 months; those between 35 and 45 serve 15 months, and those over 45 serve only 12 months. Each gets a week's leave for every month spent in Nigeria.

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There are no hotels in Ibadan and the government operates rest houses for travelers. In my room I found a sign advising patrons to sleep with their wallets under their pillows.

Ibadan has acquired a lot of importance these days. The University College for Nigeria is situated there and it is the capital of the western regional government.

A political party known as the Action Group won the western

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* Pronounced BeNIN.

regional elections and formed the government of the region. The Action Group is an off-shoot of the old established National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), which is in power in the eastern region.

In previous years the Action Group commanded little popular support. The situation changed in 1953 when the Action Group came out with a demand for full self-government in 1956. That caught the attention of the masses and Action Group candidates carried the field in the western regional elections.

The Action Group remains a Yoruba organization, however, and it carries next to no influence in the Ibo east. By contrast the NCNC has some strength in the west. Although the Action Group won the regional elections, NCNC candidates took a majority of western seats in the federal house at Lagos.

Observers say that although the Action Group rode to power on the cry of self-government in 1956, it now is becoming wary of it. The NCNC is the stronger of the two parties, with a secure position in the east and some strength in the west, and self-government might mean NCNC rule.

Action Group leaders say they favor federation, with strong regional governments and a Governor-General with reserve powers to keep the federation together. Their opponents in the NCNC would like to see a strong central government and, underneath that, several weak little states.

Sincerely,

David E Reed

David E. Reed

Received New York 5/23/55.