

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Notes on Nigeria - II

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Malta

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

Benin City lies to the west of the Niger and is near the sprawling delta of that mighty river. These days Benin is just another ramshackle Nigerian town, filled with mud-walled houses and tiny shops. But Benin is different from the others in its history. All of southern Nigeria was a land of oppression, terror and fiendish cruelty, of slave raids, slavery, juju, human sacrifice and cannibalism. But Benin surpassed them all as a City of Blood.

Hundreds of people were tortured to death regularly in Benin's juju rituals. These blood-stained orgies went on for centuries, and were only halted in 1897 when the British captured the city. One man who entered the city in the British expedition gave this description:

"...Altars covered with streams of dried human blood, the stench of which was awful... huge pits, forty to fifty feet deep, were found filled with human bodies, dead and dying, and a few wretched captives were rescued alive... everywhere sacrificial trees on which were the corpses of the latest victims---everywhere, on each path, were newly sacrificed corpses. On the principal sacrificial tree, facing the main gate of the King's compound, there were two crucified bodies..."*

It is said that the crucifixion idea was all that remained of a Portuguese attempt early in the sixteenth century to convert Benin from juju to Christianity. A Portuguese seafarer had visited Benin in 1485, the first white man known to have done so. Missionaries were sent out later, but the mission eventually had to be recalled because so many missionaries died. Fetish worship and juju rites returned and, in time, Christianity's only permanent contribution was to give Benin the crucifixion idea for its mass ritualistic murders.

The present Oba, or King of Benin, is His Highness Akenzua II, and the British have hung the title of Commander of the Order of St. Michael and St. George upon him. He is the grandson of Ovonramwen, or Overami, as the Europeans called him, the Oba in power during the last bloody days of old Benin. I called on the Oba at his palace one morning.

The palace is only one story high and it is made of mud, roofed with corrugated metal. There are something like two hundred rooms to it---no one knows for sure---and it covers several acres. The Oba

* Bolsragon, The Benin Massacre, quoted by Sir Alan Burns in History of Nigeria, London, 1929.

received me in his office at one end of the palace. He is 56 years old, tall and thin, and he was wearing big gold-rimmed glasses, a white gown and a white cap. He was sitting in a wicker arm chair behind a desk and he rose and shook hands. His eldest son, the heir apparent to the throne, was there as well. The prince had just returned from England, where he had studied at Cambridge, and he wore western dress.

It was still early in the morning, but already it was hot and two large electric fans had been placed near the desk to keep the Oba cool. The walls of the office were lined with drawings and photographs of the Oba, his father and grandfather Ovonramwen. "I think you've heard of my grandfather," the Oba said with what looked like a forced smile. He asked me if I would like a whisky and I settled for an orange squash. A servant took a bottle of orange squash from a refrigerator at the end of the room, poured one for me, one for the Oba and one for the prince and returned with them. Then the Oba got down to talking about his pet project, a separate state within the federation of Nigeria for the 1,500,000 people in the Benin and Delta provinces. At present they are part of the western region.

"The people of Benin and Delta are very unanimous about the demand for a separate state," the Oba said. "They are not keen about achieving self-government in 1956. We do not want self-government until we are fully developed economically. We want to put our house in order economically and after some years we will think of other things. Changes are good but they are coming too fast. The large percentage of illiterate people don't understand these changes."

It is easy to see how the idea of a separate state would appeal to the Oba. It might restore at least some of his faded powers. There was a time in Benin when heads rolled and slaves were nailed to crucifixion trees at the whim of the Oba. Now he has to be content with functioning as president of a largely elected local council. The British have reduced him to the position of constitutional monarch and even as constitutional monarch, he rules over a much smaller area than did his forefathers.

The Oba then took me on a tour of the palace. A party of nobles were seated in one room and they all sprang to attention when their ruler entered. Each noble was wearing a string of beads around his neck. These beads are symbols of nobility and sometimes an exceptional commoner is permitted to wear them as well.

Each room in the palace is windowless, but there is an interesting arrangement for letting in sunlight. There is an open, rectangular gap in the ceiling of each room and it may be anywhere up to 10 by 15 feet in size. The corrugated metal roofing slopes down to the gap on all four sides. Naturally this will allow rain water to pour through the gap in bad weather. To get around this difficulty, a rectangular pit a few inches deep is dug into the floor just below the gap. This serves as a pan to collect the rainwater and a conduit under the floor drains the water away to the outside of the palace.

This design is not found elsewhere in West Africa. It has always intrigued European visitors and some have thought that it must be Roman in origin and to have reached Benin via North Africa.

Despite these "skylights," the palace rooms were gloomy. The Oba walked in front, very slowly and with much dignity. The nobles trailed along after us. This palace, the Oba said, was not the same one as in the old days. When Benin was captured by the British, Ovonramwen was exiled to Calabar, on the coast. His people, the Binis, refused to acknowledge another Oba as long as that one lived, so the palace remained deserted until Ovonramwen's death in 1914. His son was installed as Oba then, but the palace, having stood idle under the tropical sun and rains for 17 years, was in ruins. It was rebuilt completely, on the same site and following the same plan. Western civilization made a few inroads when it came to the reconstruction. The present palace has a corrugated metal roof instead of a thatch one and the rooms have concrete instead of hard mud floors. Some of the pillars supporting the roof are of hardened mud, as in the old days, but others are of brick.

There were juju shrines in several of the rooms. They consisted of dead birds, small bags containing charms, clumps of dried grass. At one shrine there was the skull of a monkey. Another consisted of a group of iron stands. "Those are our fetishes," the Oba said with a trace of embarrassment in his voice. "They're to protect the inmates of the palace and ward off evil spirits. They're like the statues and crosses and things in Christian churches."

The Oba said no, he wasn't a Christian. "I follow the traditional religion," he said. Goats and other animals are sacrificed in the palace occasionally, which represents a considerable improvement over the old custom of using human beings for those rites. In 1936, three years after Akenzua succeeded to the throne on the death of his father, a young elephant was sacrificed by sword thrusts as an offering to his "god of good luck."

Another room... A rusty sword, looking like an execution sword, lay on a throne. "That's the sword of state," the Oba said. "It rests on the throne to show that the throne is never empty." There was a chain running from the ceiling to a bolt in the floor. "The Oba grasps it to support himself while he is standing next to the throne," the Oba explained. "The Oba never stands alone unless he is supported by the chain. Otherwise he never stands or walks unless he is supported by two nobles or by one of his boy sword bearers." In the old days the Oba was always so loaded down with ornaments that he actually needed help to stay on his feet.

The Oba had been walking around with me without any assistance, and it seemed that he decided at that point that he ought to follow the old custom. He looked around for his boy sword bearer and a lad of about ten came darting out of the crowd of nobles. The Oba said something to the boy in Bini and the boy picked up the sword of state and held it upright in front of him. The Oba leaned on the boy's shoulder and we started off to the next room. "Yes, now when I walk through the palace, the boy carries the sword like that and I lean on him like this," the Oba said.

We passed through several more rooms, some empty, some with juju shrines. The Oba would explain that one room was used for audiences with nobles of a certain rank, another for audiences with nobles of a lower rank. One room would be for robing and another would be for other ceremonies.

At one point the nobles dropped behind us. The Oba, the boy and I went on alone. "By tradition no one but me and my sword bearer is allowed in these rooms," the Oba said. They were the same as the others, gloomy and empty except for an occasional throne or juju altar. Then we came to a big room that was more like an open court. The faces of lions were carved on the pillars. "This is where I have audiences with the women of my country," the Oba said. "My wives attend these audiences and advise me on how to handle the complaints."

We walked back through all the rooms to the outside, picking up the nobles on the way. I asked the Oba how many wives he has. "I have about ten," he said, looking crestfallen. "My father had about 400 wives and my grandfather had over 1,000." The Oba's black face knotted up in anger. "I have for economic reasons only ten. There is no other reason why I should not have 50 wives. Or maybe 100." Anger gave way to resignation. "The times have changed," the Oba said wearily.

"How many children do you have?" I asked.

The Oba thought for a moment. "There must be about 50."

"How many sons?"

The Oba thought again. "They must be about equal in number. New babies are born all the time. I don't always keep track of them."

We came out into the dazzling sunlight in front of the palace. Several American cars were parked there. The nobles said something to the Oba in Bini. "They want to show you how they make the traditional salute to their Oba," the Oba said to me.

The nobles lined up in front of the Oba. Each man advanced alone, pounded his left palm with his right fist, raised the clenched fist in salute, then finished up by rubbing his palms together.

After a few minutes, the nobles got tired of saluting their Oba. Some of them were around ninety years old and any exercise is too much. We stood around without saying much. "This noble's father had 66 wives, but nowadays for economic reasons the man himself has only seven," the Oba said, pointing to one of his ancient vassals. It seemed that the Oba could not get the injustices of the times off his mind. We all shook hands and I got into my car and drove off.

* * *

At sunset that evening I crossed the Niger on a ferry. The river was very low at that time of year and it was filled with sandbars. Native fishermen had built temporary villages on some of them.

The ferry steamed along at a fast clip, carrying a dozen cars and a couple of hundred foot passengers. In mid-stream we picked up a strong breeze. It had been a long hot day and the breeze felt fine. The ferry steamed past several long, thin dugout canoes. I walked around the deck between the cars and came upon the prince of Benin.

"You know," he said, "I have never been in some of the rooms you visited today." He would have to wait until he became Oba to see them. I asked him how he liked the "democratization" of Nigeria.

"I don't like it too much," he said. "The other day I wanted to acquire some land. Do you know, I had to make an application just like anyone else and now I have to wait for it to be processed? In the old days I would just point to a piece of land and it would be mine."

The prince's bright smile had disappeared and he stared moodily at the river and the canoes as the ferry nudged up to the landing on the east bank.

* * *

Enugu, the capital of the eastern region, lies at the foot of a steep escarpment. There are a number of coal mines in the area, the only ones, I was told, in West Africa. As the eastern capital, Enugu is the stronghold of the NCNC. I wanted to meet the Premier, Nnamdi Azikiwe, or "Zik" as everyone calls him. But Zik was out of town that day and the regional information officer introduced me instead to M. I. Okpara, Minister of Health in the regional government.

Okpara was in his outer office when I entered, giving orders to his British Permanent Secretary, or chief assistant. I couldn't help thinking that this was the end of the colonial road, the white man and the black man having changed seats, or that there, but by the grace of white settlement, stood Jomo Kenyatta, Mbiyu Koinanage or Eliud Mathu.

"The NCNC believes in one strong united country," Okpara said. "That is the cardinal difference between the Action Group and the NCNC. We have never been in favor of regionalization. We are in favor of a central government with most of the powers and small, weak states."

I asked him what he would do in face of northern reluctance about full self-government.

"Self-government must come at the same time for all three regions," he said heatedly.

But what if the north refused to string along?

"No one has the right to break up a federation or hold back progress," he said. He added that the south has the sea ports and might use this

to force the north into a federation.

"That sounds a bit imperialistic to me," I said.

"Well," said Okpara, seeking a way out, "I'm not satisfied that this northern reluctance about self-government is not white in origin."

He may have a tough time bulldozing the west, not only the north, into accepting the idea of one united Nigeria. The west has its own port, Lagos. The NCNC would not be able to use the matter of access to the sea to "persuade" the west.

* * *

From Enugu I started north to Kano. It was early in the morning when I left Enugu and children were streaming along the side of the road on their way to school. The boys were dressed in white shirts and khaki shorts and the girls wore freshly-ironed dresses. Some carried books, and even ink pots, on their heads.

Then, a few miles down the road, I came upon something else. A man was striding along rapidly, decked out in the full regalia of a juju practitioner. He was covered from head to foot with long strips of grass. At a distance he looked like a shock of hay. He had a grotesque carved mask on his face.

The Ibos, who predominate in the eastern region, were notorious for cannibalism in former years. Burns says that one tribe to the north of the Benue river "eat anything from rats, mice and bats to their own deceased relatives; while others, more fastidious, will not eat their own people, but exchange corpses with neighboring villages."*

A British officer in Enugu said, "Cannibalism these days? People do disappear and we don't know what happened to them. We can only guess." Brutal ritual murders by "Leopard Societies" have occurred as recently as 1948.

There is a great deal of nudity in the eastern region. Women wear only a small skirt, or a clump of grass fore and aft. A number of men wear only loin cloths and you see some of them along the roads completely naked.

* * *

Kano, the gateway to the Sahara, is in the far north of Nigeria. The old city is surrounded by a mud wall thirteen miles around. In the old days the wall was thirty to fifty feet high and guarded by a double moat. There were fifteen gates in the wall and these were closed at sundown each day. Now that Pax Britannica has come to northern Nigeria, the wall is no longer needed. It is crumbling away. In places it is only ten or fifteen feet high and footpaths lead over the top. The gates are gone and the archways stand open day and night.

* Ibid.

In the old city there is all of the filth and squalor of a Nigerian town. But instead of the usual drab hovels, there is a touch of architectural effort about Kano. Many of the buildings look like little "Beau Geste" forts. The tops of the buildings are decorated with "dog's ear" projections called zanko. Originally they were designed to keep the rain from seeping through the corners, but now they are more decorative than anything else. Some buildings are decorated with geometrical designs cut in the walls.

There is a maze of streets in the old city, narrow and twisting and filled with pedestrians, goats, sheep, donkeys, chickens and, occasionally, camels. Many of these streets are too narrow for cars. Vultures hover around in the sky and sit perched on the roofs. Sanitation is primitive and there are quite a few cases of smallpox, meningitis and leprosy. "We could stop every disease here if we got cooperation from the people," a British medical officer said. "But the people have a fatalistic attitude. And they prefer to go to a juju man first. Or they won't take their medicine. Or if you vaccinate them, they will try to wash it off."

The land around Kano is dry and dusty, but nevertheless large quantities of peanuts, or groundnuts as the British call them, are grown. North of Kano the cultivation dwindles out and the land blends imperceptively into the Saharan wastelands. At this time of year, before the rains come, Kano is like a furnace. The temperature rises to 100 degrees and more each afternoon and it is not much cooler at night. During the months of December and January, the harmattan, a gale wind from the Sahara, lashes Kano with dust. Sometimes visibility in Kano at mid-day is cut to only fifty feet and airplanes have to be diverted elsewhere. The air becomes so dry during the harmattan that unseasoned wood splits open.

The Hausas are the largest population group in the north, numbering five and a half million. According to Burns* they are "more or less Negroid in origin," but they have their own distinct language. They had reduced it to a written form, using modified Arabic characters, long before the Europeans arrived. Burns says it was the only language in West Africa to be reduced to writing by the natives themselves.

The Hausa states of the north, of which Kano was one, were founded many centuries ago. They accepted Islam in probably the thirteenth century. A fairly well developed form of government, based on Islamic principles, existed in the following centuries and they had kings, ministers and a judiciary.

The Hausa kingdoms lasted until the beginning of the last century, when they were overrun in a jehad, or Muslim holy war, waged by zealots of the Fulani tribe. The ultimate origin of the Fulanis is obscure and Burns says writers have variously described them as being of Indian, Jewish, Malayan, Phoenician and Egyptian stock. Their own tradition is that their last place of residence, before coming to northern Nigeria, was in the area of the present Senegal.

After the Fulani conquest, Fulani Emirs were installed in the Hausa states. The Emirs acknowledged the suzerainty of the Sultan

* Ibid.

of Sokoto and paid annual tribute to him in slaves. At the time of the British conquest of the northern Nigerian Emirates early in the present century, the power of the Emirs had waned and they had grown lax and corrupt. Kano itself fell in 1903 after offering only slight resistance.

The Emirs, like the Obas and other native rulers in the south, were allowed to remain in office by the British under the policy of indirect rule. The idea was to effect a smooth transition and avoid the troubles and upheavals that might ensue if the old order were wiped out at once. The policy had its drawbacks, however, and some people now consider the Emirs a drag on social progress.

Fearful of seeing their Islamic institutions swept away, the Emirs and other leading northerners have been hostile to cautious about western education and other change, and the north is still a long way behind the south by western standards. There are only two northern doctors and only one northern veterinarian. All of the important government posts in the north, if not held by Englishmen, are held by southerners. Young northerners now are crying for "northernization" of the civil service---i.e., get rid of the southerners. (In the south the cry is for "Nigerianization"---i.e., get rid of the whites.) Now, impelled by the fear of southern domination, the north is embarking on mass education but it will have a long way to go before it catches up with the south.

The Sardauna of Sokoto, a cousin of the Sultan, has not committed himself publicly on what the north will do about self-government in 1956. A conference of northern leaders is to be held next month and the matter is to be decided then. Some observers predict that the north will hold out, and will continue under British administration until such time as it thinks it can meet the southerners from a position of strength. These observers scoff at southern talk of forcing the north into a self-governing federation in 1956 by means of the threat of a blockade. "The south needs the north as much as the north needs access to the sea," one observer said. "The south gets its meat supply from here."

Side by side with promoting education, efforts are being made to "democratize" the Emirates. Local councils, still pretty much under the Emirs' thumbs, are being expanded to include more commoners. At the moment there are no direct elections to the northern House of Assembly. Representatives are chosen in a complicated electoral college procedure and there is no secret ballot. Direct elections and the secret ballot are to be introduced eventually and it is said that the Emirs, fearful of losing their powers, are opposed to these.

The north, however, is deeply rooted in tradition and authority and it remains to be seen whether western ideas of parliamentary democracy will take hold. Talk goes on about ballot boxes and political parties, but slavery still exists in parts of the northern region. It has no legal status, of course, but it exists on a voluntary basis.

Before the advent of the British, the slaves brought to Sokoto as tribute from the vassal Emirs were apportioned out among the palace retinue. These days the Sultan has been reduced to an allowance and can no longer afford to maintain a large retinue. The retainers have drifted elsewhere and some have become poor farmers and poor town dwellers. Their slaves and the slaves' children or grandchildren are still with them.

The slaves know that they can leave their masters if they wish, but they have no other place to go. Some have been in slavery for so many generations that they have no idea from what village they were taken. Even if they found the village, they would be unwanted strangers there. In some towns where there is development and opportunities for employment, the slaves have left their masters. But there is little work in Sokoto.

"Sometimes if the master is very poor, he will sell one or two of his slaves," an educated northerner said to me. "The slaves do not mind because they know there will be more food for them in the house of a man who is able to pay money for them."

In Kano itself, an Emir was installed in 1926 on condition that he get rid of some 3,600 palace hangers-on, all slaves. They had been terrorizing the countryside and extorting money from people. There are opportunities for work in Kano and the ex-slaves have been absorbed into wage employment. Another old custom in northern Nigeria was the keeping of eunuchs in the Emirs' palaces. I was told that there are still a few today. "I know of two," one man said. "But I do not know if they became that way from disease or from something else."

The Kano market is one of the greatest in the Western Sudan and it probably has changed but little from the old days. It covers several acres and dozens of languages are spoken in it. You see tribesmen arriving from the Sahara, mounted on camels and leading trains of pack camels. Tall Tuaregs, the blue-veiled men of the central Sahara, are there in numbers and Fulani nobles arrive mounted on fine horses. Southerners hawking juju charms and Hausas peddling cheap watches rub shoulders with fierce Shuwa Arabs from Lake Chad, who speak a dialect of Arabic and use classical words no longer spoken by other Arabs. The stalls are tiny and a great deal of money changes hands in the market every day. Some Hausa traders, after acquiring a stock of goods, will set out on journeys that will take them as far as Leopoldville in the Belgian Congo. You can buy just about everything in the Kano market and the wares include camel's hair blankets, swords, daggers, ornamental Maria Theresa dollars and 19th century French five-franc pieces, high-pommelled desert saddles, embroidered saddle blankets and cruel-looking bits.

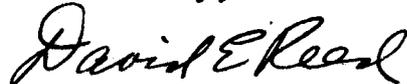
I stopped to photograph an old Tuareg man. He stared at the camera first in suspicion and then in amusement. Perhaps he had never seen one before. I laid a shilling down and a Hausa quickly

snatched it up. "He is his master," explained Ali, a young Hausa who was showing me around. I put another shilling in the Tuareg's hand. The Hausa quickly demanded that one as well. We walked on through the crowd. "Aie! In the old days those Tuaregs were devils," Ali exclaimed. "They would come down here fighting and killing all the time. But now that the British have come there is no more of that, of course."

That afternoon I boarded a plane to fly to Tripoli, Malta and home. We flew over the Sahara at 15,000 feet and it was cold that high up. The plane was filled with Englishmen and their wives and children. They had just completed an arduous tour of duty in Nigeria and now they were going home for a long-awaited holiday. They were in a gay mood and the drinks flowed free and the plane was noisy with talk and laughter.

The desert was more than two miles beneath us. Its desolate expanses reached to the horizons. The sun was setting. For a few moments, the Sahara was ablaze with blues, reds and oranges. The sun had set on many a now-forgotten Sultanate, Kingdom and civilization around the great desert before. Now, in Nigeria, it was setting on British rule. Something new, and probably different, was about to rise in its place.

Sincerely,



David E. Reed

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