A SOUTH AFRICAN IN NIGERIA

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THE moment I stepped off at Kano airport in Northern Nigeria I felt a wonderful sense of release. Being here in Lagos feels like having jumped suddenly out of a nightmare. How else can it be? There I was, on the night of September 6, walking across from the giant KLM plane to the airport offices, to find immigration, customs and other departments all staffed by Africans. And then to be accorded such civility as I could never dream of in any government office in South Africa.

You leave Ikeja airport on the outskirts of Lagos and drive into the city. The headmaster next to you, who has come to fetch you in his car, says you are welcome. The daily form of greeting the Nigerian keeps to is "welcome!" —whenyou have been to town and have come back home, when you have been taking the air outside in the yard and re-enter the house. And more often than not, it is accompanied by a handshake. This man has the genuine self-assurance you will not easily find in an African headmaster in the South to-day. He doesn't live in terror of being sacked if he says anything the Government does not like. In any case, there is no Bantu Education for him to administer. He talks to you, and you—you are half-listening. Because you are trying to find your mental bearings. You see the beauty of Nigeria's national dress: not painted with dazzling colours, and yet bright and Oriental. The gestures of the people strike a familiar chord as they speak, because you too are African.

As you travel through the suburbs of Lagos, you are struck by the number of whites living among Africans; by the vigorous life of brisk trading; and by the lust for life that is not, as it is among my people in the South, brought into relief because someone is trying to beat it down, because it seeks to vindicate itself. And you cannot help thinking of the suburbs you yourself come from—drab and neurotic except on Thursdays, when African domestic workers are off duty and inject a new life into the streets.

You enter Lagos and there is the same feverish life you're used to seeing in other cities. But people are milling about in narrow streets, crowded to a constant jostle. There is the

island portion of the town, a vast lagoon caressing its shores. This is the metropolis, joined to the mainland suburbs by a long and sturdy bridge. It is a fever of trading and bargaining. Women sit in endless rows on the edge of the street, selling their lengths of cloth and groceries and haberdashery. And in the vast markets, again women predominate. And you wonder what is coming over Africa! In one respect women in South Africa are more emanicipated, and then in another the illiterate and semi-illiterate women of the north reach an almost frightening stage of self-reliance. Then again you remember that African women in South Africa are at this very moment revolting against tradition and Government bullying.

Still more trading! Scores of bars and bottle stores, licensed to sell beers, wines and spirits to anybody. Several of these bars will carry slogans like "God be with thee" or "The Lord loves everyone." The African-owned buses running between Lagos and the provinces will carry similar slogans—"Thy will be done, O Lord."

The town is badly planned. Because there is only one bridge, lines and lines of cars and buses crawl like great snakes every morning into the business centre, flanked by swarms of cyclists who stream into town with a vengeance. There is not a single straight street in Lagos.

The Mosque is in the heart of the town. On Fridays you see myriads of African Moslems spill out of it. They cling to the walls outside, sandals off, listening to the big booming loud-speaker.

You drop in at any hotel or bar or club and you have to shake off any bravado you may be thinking of exhibiting, because it isn't needed! But as soon as you have been introduced as a South African, you are treated with something like special consideration or indulgence. A few come around you and want to know if it is true what they read about in the scanty news reports concerning South Africa; if things are as bad as Alan Paton paints them in the book which they heard read over the wireless. You fill in the details, but there are always too many for any one sitting. And you have now unleashed unending recitals about the grandness and virtues of emergent Nigeria. . . .

Some parts of the town are ugly slums, glorified Sophiatowns and Shanty Towns. But it has its beautiful sections, like the magnificently laid-out civil servants' suburb of Ikoyi. A place

until recently the preserve of the whites, now Africans have entered. And a number of blocks of flats here are occupied by both black and white.

A "Nigerianization office" is in existence. It promotes consciously the entry of Africans into government departments to displace white colonials. A few whites still retain their jobs, as in Ghana. A few whites own large departmental stores. But they don't get in the way, because they are here only on lease terms. Recently, I am told, a white man was charged with inciting a dog to bite an African. He was found guilty and sentenced to a large fine and a stroke with the cane by a black magistrate. The incident aroused indignation in the expected quarters. On appeal, the corporal punishment was scrapped.

Impulsively, I should applaud the former sentence. For I don't see anything in it that is disproportionate to the charge. But I have suffered too much and seen too many people suffer even more in South Africa to applaud. If I thought at any time that the magistrate was being vindictive, I'd understand. But I would not approve it.

And so you go from one experience to another. Yes, you're a foreigner; but then justly one, not a foreigner in your native land. Soon I shall be visiting Ibadan in the north, the centre of Nigeria's intellectual and cultural life. I know that I am in for more startling experiences. The contrasts are very sharp between the black man's life in South Africa and in Nigeria. They act violently upon me. Here I am, moving where I like at any time of day or night, without the fear of being stopped by a policeman who will shout at me for my pass; or a policeman who will rummage my pockets and bag in search of something illicit—that policeman whom I learned to fear and later to hate when I was twelve in the slums of Pretoria; that policeman whose shining badge and handcuffs have always spelt for me the terror of police stations, cells and prison forts, and the forbidding faces of magistrates and clerks of the Court—all ranged to destroy me. No, there is no fear of meeting that policeman of whom my youngest son, aged four, asks, "Is he coming to arrest me, Daddy?" when he sees him pass in front of our house. Here I am, breathing the ordinary air of freedom and testing its salty freshness as I stand on the bridge, looking out across the glistening ripples of the lagoon. I am in the midst of a friendly people whose temperament has nothing to do with

the romantic idea of the savagery, the torrid mood of the Equator.

It is a terrible thing, this importing one's prejudices into a community where they are even now already contraband, or have always been. For instance, when I am asked, as I often am, "are you natives in South Africa doing anything . . .?" my sensibilities are jolted. I find myself explaining the offensive use of "native" in South Africa (with a condescending capital 'N' in the white press). "We the natives of Nigeria" is a common phrase here, and an innocent one, too.

When I meet a white man I unconsciously get on my guard and over-emphasize my sense of independence. Many of the whites I have met here—on an intellectual level—don't encourage one to talk about South Africa. There is about them a mixture of righteous aloofness or indifference and a British dislike of anything that is regarded as distasteful or distressing. Not that it would matter one way or another what they thought about the South; they are such a small number anyhow. Still, their attitude cannot evade a foreigner.

Recently, I asked an African to do my laundry at his own fee. He also washes for a group of whites on the premises where I live. When they found out that he was doing my washing in the same bath he was using for theirs, they told him he must come and wash for me in the building I am occupying. When I was told of it, my temperature went skywards. It had touched the sensitized tissues of my response mechanism. I thought if it were a problem of soap and other things they would have given the washerman a hint. My intention was to say to them incisively if they ever broached the matter: "Being from South Africa, I understand." They haven't said anything about it yet. While I am about it, I want also to ask them and other whites if it is common in Britain to call men-servants "boys"—a word used freely here when a man is referred to. See what I mean?

I enter a European store, and, of course, I am confronted by a crowd of black assistants, placid, obliging, if rather non-committal, and all on their toes. Ah, what a difference—the whole atmosphere. But I'm itching for an encounter, such as is the lot of many non-whites when they enter a store in Africa's Deep South. There is a European manager in a cubicle there. Incidentally, I must see him about a radio I want to buy on a hire purchase agreement. I'm all keyed up. But there he sits

and talks to me, innocent as an egg, exasperatingly neutral!

Again, as I speak to the intelligentsia I notice the complacency and solid sense of security with which they say, "The mosquito helped us, they're on the move. Such things (South African "things") used to happen here. Now they're on the move. See Ikoyi, the civil servants' quarters? Only whites used to live there. It's all changed now. They're on the move. Nigerianization is working. Here you're free to move about, to work where you like. Pity your country is so healthy for them. . . ."

True, the emblem on the flag of the Action Group, the Government party in the Western Region, is the mosquito. Ikoyi is the pride of everybody. Nigerianization, in spite of many difficulties, is moving fast. It is estimated that over 1,000 Nigerians are studying law, medicine, nursing, dentistry, engineering, or are in other professions and trades in the United Kingdom, the U.S.A. and on the Continent. There is constant movement of students and qualified men and women between here and oversea countries. Against the vast population of some 36 million, this number is small. And then none of the four regional governments has yet initiated a high-powered literacy campaign or primary and secondary education with half the requisite intensity. This should be a priority programme in any progressive state.

There are problems like tribal and language divisions which run deeper than many people here care to admit. There are Yorubas, mainly in the Western Region; Ibos, in the East; Hausas, in the North; and quite a mixture in the Southern Cameroons. The North is the biggest region, with some 18 million, Islam being the predominant religion there. There are several dialects, much farther apart than our southern vernaculars. Again, West African communities are so feudal that one doesn't know what changes independence will bring in the distribution of the country's income. At present the wealth of the country is in the hands of a small minority. Government members are paid extra-huge salaries and plum allowances, while the rest of the civil service groans discontentedly. This is a legacy of the colonial system. The British Colonial Service has always been the curly-haired boy of British administration, and its members seem to have had their pockets well lined against mosquito bites. So the Africans have merely jumped into their shoes. It does not seem as if independence will better the lot of the average worker for a

long time after 1960.

Naturally, the politics of a black nationalist state do not have the turbulent clashes that characterize the South African scene. Government and opposition in each region here tend to quibble about vague differences. The fundamental thing with them is independence. Such a set-up produces a totally different leader from that we are used to among the South African oppressed. The African leader in the South is made by the very conditions that are ranged against him and threaten to crush him. He has (or should have) a more definite and uncompromising basis of struggle. Up here freedom of association, of negotiation, of organization and speech, are abundant. So there is time and place for orthodox politics and an appeal to people's overwhelming religious sense.

Nigerians, generally, are anti-Communist. Their trade unions and political leaders, their press, often speak of removing "Communist elements." A number of people I have met don't have the slightest idea what Communism is—or socialism. They simply have a religious belief that it is something to be rejected. Yet I am also told that people don't starve to death here, because communal living still exercises a powerful influence on Nigerian life, as it does in the rest of Africa.

The students I teach here are much more stable emotionally and mentally. Nothing like the pupils I taught in Johannesburg. They are not harassed by the police, by hunger, by a constantly disintegrating community about them. They are not members of unsettled communities which are forever moving with baggage and all, impotent of any cultural stability. I've taught pupils in Johannesburg who hadn't had a meal for several hours.

All these aspects of Nigerian life strike a South African like me most forcefully. The windmills don't cause me sleepless nights. Still, I do often feel a little impatient at the next fellow who has a more contented disposition than South Africa has ever given me reason to have. I know the therapy of being away from it all will do me good. And that smouldering anger I mentioned earlier: that will continue. In the meantime, what an exquisite sense of release! No policeman to frighten me; no white man to push me off the pavement; no one calling me "boy", or "Jim" or "John"; no reference book required; no influx or other controls. Just a little trembling after the nightmare. . . .