

NIGERIA TODAY

Viewed from the outside, Nigeria has the appearance of being a hugely exasperating country. Exasperating in its astonishing ethnic diversity, that pullulating conglomeration of "tribes" (a term that should be banished from the vocabulary of political commentary, unless we are also going to apply it to, say, the United Kingdom and talk about the English, the Welsh, the Scots and the Northern Irish as "tribes".) Exasperating in the confusion of its politics — how difficult it is to remember what all those party initials — NPN, NPP, UPN, GNPP and so on — stand for. Exasperating in the country's descents into violence: at least a million Nigerians died in the Civil War of the late 1960s; the little-reported urban riots that erupted in the great northern city of Kano in December 1980 led to at least 5,000 deaths — so that this outbreak of urban violence must be regarded as one of the very worst incidents of its kind in the bloody history of the twentieth century. Exasperating, finally, in the rampant corruption that has become an endemic feature of Nigerian life, a corruption that has led to the wanton squandering of the country's most easily exploitable resources, its wealth in mineral oil. Add to all this the fact that Nigerians in their dealings with outsiders, both in their own country and abroad, have often displayed an abrasive arrogance that provokes deep resentment and dislike, and one can begin to see why Nigeria is a country that has not inspired a particularly warm feeling from those who have made only peripheral contact with its peoples.

FROM THE INSIDE

Viewed from the inside the spectacle looks rather different. In the first place there is the pride that Nigerians take in the fact that their country is Africa's "giant". Look at the estimates of population — there are no accurate statistics, population counting being a process that carries with it profound political implications. Current estimates put the country's population at about 100 million, almost four times that of South Africa. In area Nigeria is about three quarters the size of South Africa, yet taking the population of the continent as a whole, one African in four is a Nigerian.

Nigerians have other, even more deeply rooted, reasons for pride. Their history is the richest of any state in black Africa. Long before Van Riebeeck landed at the Cape, there were great kingdoms flourishing in the territory that came later to be known as Nigeria: the imposing sultanate of Bornu dominating the country to the West of Lake Chad; the cluster of Hausa kingdoms, Kano, Katsina, Zaria and others, their urban settlements soundly founded on the economic base of efficient agriculture and vigorous trade; the constellation of Yoruba polities, of which Oyo and Ife were the most prominent, with their elaborate systems of political organization and their marvellous tradition of craftsmanship — it is no hyperbole to compare the naturalistic bronze and terracotta heads revealed by archaeological research in Ife and now dated to the fourteenth century, to the greatest works of classical sculpture: the forest-kingdom of Benin that so impressed the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English when they made contact with it in the sixteenth century: the diversity of Ibo polities, 'stateless societies' to the historian and the anthropologist, that

colonized the dense tropical forest east of the Niger and produced among other things the fabulous bronze artifacts found at Igbo Ukwu (dated through the radio carbon process as early as the ninth century AD) — these and many other early states and communities provide Nigerians with a sense of historic greatness that is an enviable quality for any people to possess.

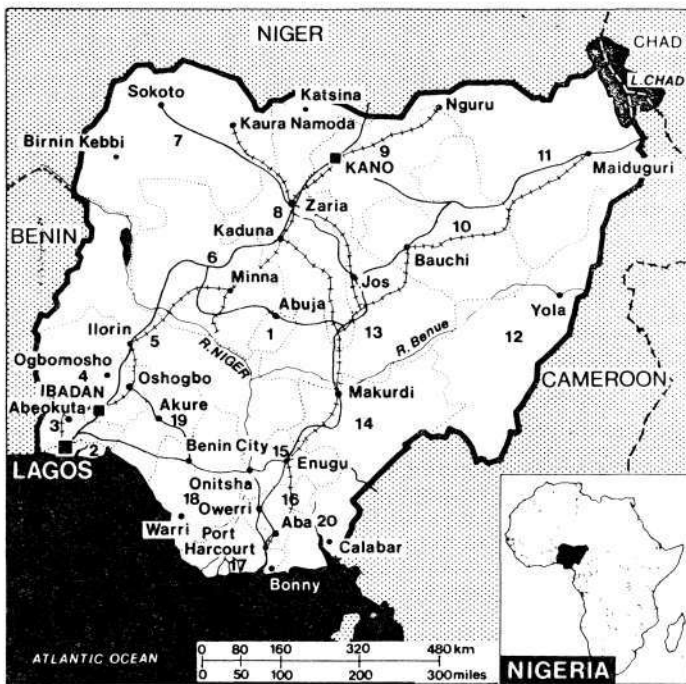
DIVERSITY

So it can be seen that the obverse of ethnic diversity is cultural richness — a richness that the visitor to Nigeria can most easily perceive by engaging in that highly pleasurable process of wandering around the great open air markets in such towns as Kano, Ibadan or Onitsha. But a political price has to be paid for this creative opulence. The difference between Nigeria's different peoples runs very deep. Difference in language: Hausa, for example, something of a lingua franca in the north, is as different in linguistic terms from Yoruba, the main language of the south-west, as English is from Urdu or Chinese. Differences in religion: much of northern Nigeria is clearly part of dar-al-Islam, the land of Islam, while much of the south has been profoundly affected by the work of Christian missionaries. Differences in political experience: there is a world of difference between the egalitarian communities of the Ibo and the socially stratified, almost feudalistic structures to be found in the old Muslim emirates of northern Nigeria. Differences in the economy: the north a land of grain and cattle, the south of root crops and fish. Differences, as any one who has the opportunity of meeting a great range of Nigerians, soon comes to perceive, in personality patterns: the contrast, putting it at its simplest, between the reserve and sense of decorum of Muslim northerners and the extrovert bonhomie to be encountered so often in the south.

HISTORY

Historically Nigeria in its present shape is a highly artificial construction. It lacks a deep organic sense of unity: in the past a city such as Kano was more closely in touch, through the trans-Saharan caravan trade, with the Mediterranean world than it was with the Atlantic coast. Nigeria came together to form a single country through the accident of conquest at the time of the European 'scramble for Africa'. Had the French and the Germans moved more vigorously from their bases in Dahomey and Cameroun then the map of West Africa would have taken a very different shape. As it was the British found themselves burdened with the task of establishing the 'iron grid' of the colonial superstructure over an astonishing diversity of political communities, ranging from highly sophisticated Muslim states to tiny independent communities set in remote, almost inaccessible areas.

In the late 1940s the British decided that Nigeria must be prepared for independence — and educated Nigerians, their number rapidly increasing with the expansion of schools and universities, found themselves embarked on a political debate that can be said never to have ended. For how does one govern a state like Nigeria — a state made up of as great a diversity of peoples as some imaginary European state that contained in its population sizeable numbers of Germans and Spaniards, Englishmen and Russians, Greeks and Swedes,



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| 1 Federal Capital Area | 9 Kano State | 17 Rivers State |
| 2 Lagos State | 10 Bauchi State | 18 Bendel State |
| 3 Ogun State | 11 Borno State | 19 Ondo State |
| 4 Oyo State | 12 Gongola State | 20 Cross River State |
| 5 Kwara State | 13 Plateau State | |
| 6 Niger State | 14 Benue State | |
| 7 Sokoto State | 15 Anambra State | |
| 8 Kaduna State | 16 Imo State | |

with sizeable minorities of Albanians, Swiss, Irish and Basques thrown in? This is the basic problem of Nigerian politics. Only when one has grasped this problem in all its complex implications can one begin to understand Nigerian politics. What is the right answer — a Federation based on the Westminster tradition of parliamentary democracy? That was the system laboriously worked out in constitutional conferences in the 1950s and tried, only to be found wanting, in the first Nigerian Republic overthrown by military coup in January 1966. So what about a federation with a greater number of units — nineteen states as opposed to the four regions of the first republic — and a system of central government copied from the constitution of the United States? That too has now ended in failure, as was demonstrated by the ease with which the soldiers again seized power on the last day of 1983. Under the British Nigerians became familiar with a mild system of authoritarianism. The soldiers who ran Nigeria between 1966 and 1979 can be seen as the natural successors of the old British governors, residents and district officers. Now the soldiers are back in power. But many Nigerians have a natural relish for democracy, for a system that allows freedom of association and freedom of expression. Military rule offers some assurance of stability and a possible end or at least restraint on corruption — but it lacks the necessary sanction of popular legitimacy. This the soldiers know very well: sensible men, they have no desire to be in power for ever

PROBLEMS

Cross cutting these political difficulties lie the country's mounting social and economic problems. The fabulous oil boom of the 1970s allowed many Nigerians to indulge in the illusion that they were not essentially a Third World Country, with all the horrendous problems of deepening poverty that Third World Status now implies. But now

there is a glut of oil in the world, Nigeria's oil revenues are falling, the burden of indebtedness is growing heavier, life for all but a favoured few is becoming more and more difficult. The capital city of Lagos has come to assume a nightmarish quality of urban squalor and violence. The squatter settlements increase, the neglected countryside sinks deeper into listlessness and stagnation. In the 1950s the Nigerian economy was based on the export of agricultural products, groundnuts in the north, palm oil in the east, cocoa in the west. Export prices in those halcyon post-war years were riding high, and though much of the wealth derived from these products was syphoned off by marketing boards and used to benefit the urban areas and so provide lucrative opportunities for enrichment to the rapidly emerging national bourgeoisie, nevertheless a fair proportion of the proceeds still came back to the producers themselves, the farmers and their families in the rural areas. 'Now' — to quote from the 'survey of Nigeria' published in the *Economist* of January 23, 1982, the frankest and most penetrating report that I have seen — 'Nigerian export agriculture is dead and the communities it supported are dying'. Now one-sixth of Nigeria's import is made up of items of food, and the proportion is steadily increasing.

So too is the population —. Nobody knows quite how fast, but population growth rate could be as high as 3.5%. That would mean that by the year 2000 Nigeria would have a population of 200 million. After meeting the fuel needs of this doubled population, Nigeria would have little oil left to export. Without oil, which now accounts for 95% of its export earnings, Nigeria would have almost no foreign exchange — and therefore no money to buy the additional food that the country would certainly require. 'A formula for catastrophe' as the *Economist* grimly remarks. It is a sombre prognosis, especially when one reflects that growing economic hardship is bound to provoke increasing political turbulence. To many Nigerians the era of the oil boom must begin to look like a fool's paradise. Yet Nigeria with its range of universities and centres for higher education, has produced in recent years the largest professional and managerial class to be found anywhere in black Africa. There are many able and concerned men and women in the ranks of this new elite. They have a hugely difficult task before them — but a task no more daunting than that to be faced by realists in any African country including South Africa.

SOUTH AFRICA AND NIGERIA

Between Nigeria and South Africa the barriers have long been up. When the day comes that South Africa acquires a ruling class with a proper sense of priorities, a proper awareness of the deep demographic and ecological threats that face what seems to be the richest country in Africa, then Nigerians and South Africans will be able to get together, compare notes, think about the best ways of tackling similar problems, pool their expertise, lay through a proper devotion to the land of Africa the foundations for a mutually enriching camaraderie. But do not let us indulge in facile optimism. Educated Nigerians hate the apartheid system with peculiar intensity. There will have to be massive changes in Pretoria — not trivial 'reforms' and deceptive constitution-mongering — before a Nigerian-South African accord becomes even remotely possible. □