

An anarchist report on Nigeria

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1.

Have you ever wanted to visit Africa? I have ever since I was about five years old. I think I wanted to be Tarzan! Hanging out in the jungle, living on bananas, and befriending all the animals. Of course since I began studying African History at UIC several years ago, I realized that I, like a lot of other Americans, had a pretty distorted vision of what Africa was really like. I what I knew about African life was informed by old Hollywood movies and missionaries' tales. I had to unlearn all of that rubbish and begin again with real history. History that examined the cultures, events and lives of real African people; Kings, Queens, farmers, traders, fishermen, coal miners, slaves and immigrants.

On May 8th, after two years of Grad. school at UIC I finally had my chance to actually go to Africa and see the continent for myself. This trip was no safari, I was going to Nigeria, a country which has almost no tourist infrastructure. A country that has suffered under many long years of military dictatorship since independence in 1960.

Let me preface this with some background for my readers. Africa is a continent, not a country, and it is three times the physical size of the US. Because of unequal rates of development, the Island of Manhattan, New York, has more telephone lines than the entire African continent. Nigeria, the country I visited, is twice the size of the state of California, and is the most populous country in Africa, with 100 million people.

I was on a mission of sorts. I came with a low powered radio station that I helped to assemble, which was to become Afikpo Community Radio. I also wanted to visit my email penpal Ngozi, at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka. I wanted to meet as many people as possible- to be open to the learning experience.

I was met at the airport by my host Sam Mbah, who works in Lagos as a journalist and author. He gracefully hosted my stay for the entire four weeks as we visited cities, villages, and Universities all over the southern part of the country.

I have hundreds of stories from those four weeks, but for now I will write about the meeting with my penpal Ngozi. Sam had given her my email address because she is also a history student, and was interested in corresponding. At the University of Nsukka, there are only two offices to send email from. One handwrites the message, then hands it to the office staff. They in turn type it up, and send it. It costs about \$1.50 (150 Naira) per page to send the email. To receive a email costs 50 cents. This is a huge contrast with UIC which has 20 computer labs, some open 24 hours! Ngozi doesn't have a phone, so it was a real surprise when we arrived! She shares a small dorm room with 2 other women students.

Many times they eat only twice a day at the cafeteria in order to save money. The dorms (like the rest of the country) has severe electrical supply problems! In some areas the power will only be on 25% of the time.

Ngozi and I became friends, and she showed me around the campus. I visited a few classes, and even DJ'ed a party in a classroom one night before the 11pm curfew. Luckily we had power, so we borrowed a stereo system and set it up. The students loved dancing to American Hip-Hop and Makossa music from Cameroon. Ngozi, like many students doesn't know what she will do once she graduates, since unemployment is so high. She wants to get a job with the United Nations, perhaps UNESCO or UNICEF. She showed me their swimming pool. It is a large olympic size pool with a triple decker high dive. Unfortunately there is no water in it. The funds allocated for

the upkeep of the pool have gone missing (stolen). The groundskeeper told me that it may be functioning again in the Fall, but Ngozi was doubtful.

Corruption has really sabotaged a lot of projects in Nigeria. Unfortunately public officials seem to think that public funds were meant for them; there is little or no accountability. Until this changes, infrastructures will keep on deteriorating. While hanging out in the Faculty club with a few lecturers (teachers) drinking Star beer (at 40 cents a bottle), I realized that the lecturers had the same complaints that the students had. They were underpaid, and often had to go on strike to get back-pay, or cost of living increases in salary. The people at the top were pocketing all of the money, and none was left for the good of the common people.

One evening I was walking back to the dormitories with Ngozi. The power had been out for five straight days. All of the sudden the lights began to come on again. Radios sprang to life, fans began turning again. All around me in a five story dorm buildings cheers went up from joyful students! No longer did they have to study by candlelight or kerosene lamp! They could listen to music now and iron their school clothes!

Students were celebrating as if their prayers had finally been answered! Weeks later, when I was back on the plane heading for the US, I really began to appreciate things like steady electricity, good roads, computers that work, phones that work, the variety of foods we have here from all ethnicities. (I can find Nigerian food like Fufu and stew here in Chicago, but you couldn't find pizza over there). We have a lot to be thankful for here. We are a rich country and life is easy here for most people. It is easy to forget how good we have things.

2.

In my last article I ended with a statement to the effect that we have it real easy here in America compared to a lot of ordinary people who are struggling to get by in Nigeria. It is true that around 30% of Nigerians live in Extreme poverty, which is a larger percent than here in the US. This is not to deny that there isn't extreme differences between rich and poor in America as well. Poverty here is very real as we all know, and even more scandalous, since this is the wealthiest, and most powerful nation on the planet right now! On the other hand, many Nigerians I talked to didn't believe poverty existed here- they thought all Americans were millionaires. The idea of someone living on the streets and eating out of dumpsters in America seemed ridiculous and unbelievable to them. The minimum wage of \$5.25/hour seemed like a fortune to the average Nigerian who might not make that much in a day!

Of course we know that the wages paid here must be compared to the cost of living index (how much one has to pay for housing, food, transportation, clothing, etc.)

Some of you may be wondering what lead me to visit Nigeria in the first place. Why would I voluntarily go to a country that has such a reputation for corruption, high crime rates, and a legacy of military rule, when I could go to some other more stable West African country like Ghana or Senegal? The reason is that my main goal of the trip was to deliver the parts necessary to build a community-based, non-profit radio station. This was to become "Afikpo Community Radio" in the town of Afikpo, Ebonyi state, South-Eastern Nigeria.

It all began when my friend Sam Mbah, author of the book "African Anarchism" (See Sharp Press), came to visit Chicago two years ago on a book signing tour. He stayed at my house and was interviewed on a local community radio station operating at that time called "Free Radio

West Town". He decided then that a locally owned micropowered radio station would be a great thing to have in Nigeria.

The term "micropower" refers to a station that is using a transmitter that has 1-100 watts of power. The transmitter that I delivered has 20 watts, and can reach a radius of about 5-7 miles. Some people from New York, Chicago, and Atlanta donated the funds (about \$1000 for all of the broadcasting equipment), and I bought my ticket and was off.

Shipping the transmitter cost \$125 plus \$180 to get the package out of customs in Nigeria. The antenna cost about the same. The audio equipment (Cd player, cassette deck, mixing board, coaxial cable) I brought along as luggage. I was right at the weight limit for the airlines- around 80lbs!

In Nigeria on our way to Afikpo from Enugu, our taxi driver took the back roads in order to avoid having to pay bribes to the police at the checkpoints on the main road. Unfortunately, the back roads were back breaking! Red dirt roads with massive craters in places which had filled up with rainy season water. The road was so bumpy that I worried about the audio equipment getting damaged. Earlier that day we had gone to the main market in Enugu to buy a turntable. The one we picked out of the three used ones for sale (there were no new ones since most people with money enough for home stereo equipment have long since switched over to CD's) cost \$40. The salesman would not allow us to test it until he had the money in his hand! When we went into the back alley to test it where there was an outlet, the turntable would not turn!! We had purchased a broken turntable, but there was no going back on the deal- we would just have to find someone to fix it ourselves!

By the time we reached Afikpo it was nighttime. The next day we took all of the equipment to the site of the future radio station located high upon a hilltop. The workers were putting the last part of the corrugated tin roofing on the building. There was no electricity, window panes, doors, or even floor poured for the building yet. We would have to test the radio equipment using car batteries and a rented generator. Our technician literally popped up the hood of his car and removed the battery for us to use to power the transmitter!

During the series of tests, a mistake was made connecting a negative wire to a positive power output. This was a costly mistake that delayed implementing the project for several weeks. When the power surge entered the transmitter, it destroyed the fuse, some capacitors, and the FM amplifier.

These parts cannot be bought in Nigeria, so an alternative transmitter had to be shipped from a friend in Canada. At any rate, the project is going forward and they are probably on the air by now - Nigeria's first community controlled micropower radio station.

The community has lots of ideas for locally generated programming. There are womens' groups, age-grade groups, dance troupes, who all want to do radio shows. Also, they want to bring in the elders of the area to tell local folktales, and stories from their own Igbo traditions. Igbo is the name of the largest ethnic group in that area, and is also the name of the local language. The station will be bilingual, broadcasting in both English (Nigeria was a former British colony until 1960), and Igbo.

Afikpo Community Radio will be the first non-profit radio station in the countries' history. It has only been since 1994 (6 years) that there have been privately owned radio stations in Nigeria. Before then there were only state owned radio stations, usually controlled by the military. Even after 1994, the military would sometimes come in and occupy privately owned radio stations for days to broadcast whatever they felt like. In these situations (such as happened to large stations

in Lagos) employees were held as virtual prisoners for days. No one could enter or leave the premises while the military was occupying the station. Employees had to sleep overnight in their offices.

Hopefully those days of military dictatorship are gone forever. When I was there in early June, Nigeria celebrated "Democracy Day", one full year of civilian rule. Let's hope it lasts, so experiments in real grass roots direct democracy, like Afikpo Community Radio, can flourish.

3. GENERAL STRIKE.

This is the third and final article about my trip to Nigeria. In the first two I discussed my visit to the University to see my email penpal, and the setting up of Afikpo Community Radio.

Thursday June 7th, 2000 was the date the entire country of Nigeria grounded to a halt as the Nigerian Labor Congress implemented a one day General Strike that effectively shut down the government, and all commercial businesses. I was supposed to visit Benin Republic that day, but I felt like travelling (besides being dangerous) would be like crossing a picket line, so I and my host Sam observed the "stay at home". Why was there burning tire barricades on all the major arteries leading into Lagos and other major cities? Why were ordinary people venting their frustration at the government of Pres. Obasanjo? Because earlier in the week the President had unilaterally decided to raise the price of petroleum products by 50%. This includes Gasoline, Diesel, and Kerosene. In one day, the prices would go from 20 Naira per litre, to 30 Naira per litre (roughly 30 cents US). This raising of the gas prices would set off a domino effect- immediately raising the prices for the average Nigerian worker for food, transportation, etc. This very undemocratic decision (the Congress was not consulted supposedly for fear of gas price speculation) was made by the Democratically elected government after only one year in power.

What makes it absurd is that Nigeria is an oil producing country and member of OPEC. There is currently an oil boom in prices and OPEC has allowed Nigeria to export even more barrels of oil than before. Clearly the average citizen - let alone the residents of the oil producing Niger River Delta area, are not benefitting in the least from these developments. Instead they are being squeezed by "structural adjustment" policies pushed on them by the IMF. (International Monetary Fund).

My last day in the country was the day following the General Strike- Fri. June 8th. I wanted to visit the Museum which housed antiquities of the slave trade in Badagry, close to the border with the Benin Republic- about 20 miles away. As we headed out early in the morning, my hosts didn't know what to expect. We saw the remnants of all of the burnt tires on the roads, the internal wires exposed looked like charred pine needles.

Sam and I mounted an Okada (motorcycle taxi) and zoomed down the highway. Sam explained that sometimes during strikes so called "Area boys" (young unemployed hoodlums) would set up impromptu roadblocks and extort money out of passing motorists, threatening them with physical violence if they didn't pay up. Soon enough, on the highway ahead of us I spotted 3 youths armed with long sticks and machetes surrounding cars and yelling excitedly. They had pulled tree branches into the road to stop traffic.

Our Okada driver thought we could outrun them on the small motorcycle. He was wrong! As we came close the bandits threatened to knock us off the bike with their long sticks, or possibly jamb them into our spokes. Sam ordered the driver to stop and give them something. Luckily

they were bought off with a bribe of about 40 Naira (40 cents) and let us pass. They were almost as nervous as we were, because the cops could show up at any moment, or someone could easily pull a gun on them...I was particularly scared because I had on my person my passport, about \$200 in cash, and my airplane ticket for that night. They would have to fight me to get these things!

Once we got past our first roadblock encounter, there were 2 others in between us and our destination of the sleepy riverside town of Badagry.

These were more organized. Mobs of youths (maybe 20 or so) set up roadblocks under overpasses, and we were forced to get out of our taxicab, as the driver negotiated a price to get through. It felt like a panic mentality had taken over the crowd, and even though we stated that we were journalists sympathetic to the strike action, my very presence as a white person was a borderline provocation because I represented wealth and privilege in their eyes. The final situation happened further down the highway, but this time when the bandits beckoned us to stop the taxi driver floored it, roaring right at them at about 80 m.p.h.! We all ducked as we were expecting a rock to come crashing through the windshield at any moment.

I kept thinking to myself (and out loud) Is this bravery or stupidity? Is visiting a museum and a market really worth getting robbed or killed?...Over the taxis' radio we heard the voice of Mark, a DJ I had met earlier at Cool FM, one of the big radio stations in Lagos. "Real Men don't steal, let's stay Cool"!!!

The amazing thing was when we finally reached our destination, the town was entirely calm—even oblivious to the unrest a few miles down the road. We visited the museum and the market, and people were friendly and relaxed, as if we had suddenly stepped into another time zone! I tried to buy a traditional Igbo knitted stocking cap at the market, but all they had were used clothes from America!! (go figure). The one room museum was pretty simple, but fascinating. In one corner was the tomb of the first chief of Badagry who sold slaves to the Brazilians and Portugese. Some of the original chains and instruments of torture used on the slaves were still there. They were there not behind glass, but sitting there on tables so the visitor could pick them up, feel their weight. For me the most disturbing items included leg irons made for children, and a stake that was driven through the feet of slaves who attempted to run away. Before being shipped out to the Americas, the Chief forced the captives to work on his plantain plantation across the river. To keep slaves from eating plantains on the job, their lips were forced through a iron lip clamp. Then a padlock (!) was pushed through both the top and bottom lips. It was an exhibit of unusual cruelty that I won't forget anytime soon!! That night after my cold water bucket shower, on the way to the Murtala Mohammed International Airport, sipping on Swan bottled water and munching on Akara fried bean cakes, I thanked Sam my host, and my guardian angel who was definately working over-time that day!

I had made it back to the airport in one piece with my souvenirs and memories to take back to Chicago with me.

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<http://struggle.ws/africa/nigeria/report2000summer.html>

This text was originally three separate articles on Nigeria published by "DL Nevin", a North American anarchist. He says "They were published in Streetwise magazine in Chicago. Any non-profit anarchist newspaper/magazine should feel free to re-publish them. There is no copyright, and the 2nd article deals specifically with the Anarchist Awareness League's radio project."

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