

Back from Nigeria, 1979 (Part #1):

From Feb. 1977 to Dec. 1978, volunteering under the auspices of a Canadian non-government development organization, I was posted as a teacher of English to a boys' secondary school in Kano State, Nigeria. At the end of my term I was not eager to land back in Canada in mid-winter so took a roundabout journey through West Africa and Europe.

The following is the first of 3 segments of journal notes taken from December 1978 to March 1979:

December 29, '78 (Zaria- Ilorin, Nigeria)



After opening my sticky eyes it took a few muddled seconds to realize I was in a dormitory room at the University of Zaria.

In a nauseous wave I recalled the beers and cigarettes ingested at the CUSO conference reception before staggering back at midnight and flopping out. At the same instant came the jolt of panic for sloppy talk. Did I make a fool of myself?

There were the pretty new volunteers I had eagerly chatted up. In an attempt at comic chivalry I'd even kissed the hand of one girl (a Jennifer, from Sarnia Ontario?). How much did that embarrass her?

Most jarring was the recollection of my boast to Dr. JK, the senior field staff officer, that I plan to hopscotch across West Africa to gather impressions "for comparing and contrasting with my insights about Nigeria."

"Before you shore up your understanding here," he said tartly, "maybe you should consider travelling in Rhodesia."

What cheek that I should claim "insight" before a scholar of African history who has spent time in a Rhodesian prison!

Still, all this occurred within the din of bushwhacked *batures*, all eagerly burbling about their "insights and impressions." Best to think I was fitting right in.

I swooped up the wristwatch from the floor. Hangover be damned—it was already 6:30 AM and I had 500 miles to travel before sundown... After taking 10 minutes for

ablutions, I shouldered the heavy blue duffle bag and stumbled off to catch a taxi to the motor park.



At 9:00 AM, I dropped off the Leyland bus from Zaria outside the Kaduna motor park. Almost immediately, I discovered that I'd overshot the Ibadan-Lagos junction by 6 miles. Cursing, I dragged my heavy bag toward the taxis. As expected, all demanded ridiculously inflated *bature* fares. Adamant to pay no more than the going fare, I took a space in an empty van to the Lagos highway cut off that took nearly 45 minutes to fill.

Once there, I hesitated before several taxis, readying for Lagos, checking out their tires. I settled on a brand new Peugeot 404, and peeled off 15 Naira—the same fare I had watched the driver collect from the Hausa man who got into the back seat before me. By 10:00 AM, the Yoruba driver was gunning the engine for the great leap southwards.

With his polyester suit and felt hat—our ‘pilot’ might well have been behind the wheel of a Miami hack. Yet when he hit the gas pedal, there was no question we were in the heart of Nigeria. For the next 6 hours the speedometer hardly wavered below 130 KPH.

The pinch in my gut and the hangover fog gradually gave way to the growing tensions of highway roulette. Along the twisting road, we flew past everything: the wrecks that hulked at every turn (some rusted relics, some a few hours fresh) while passing load-leaning lorries on blind hills and hairpin curves. The Hausa passengers were assured that by the “grace of God” we would make Lagos by 3:00 PM, and *inshallah*, our Yoruba driver aimed to be His instrument!

We even zoomed through police checkpoints (“Don’t mind them!” said our nonplussed driver even as a rifle butt thudded against the trunk), stopping only at the threshold of spike belts and machine guns.

“He go chop now!” [he can ‘eat’ now] sighed he driver after finally having to slip an unavoidable 5 naira into the palm of a bullet-bandoliered guard.

At 1:00 PM, we made our only pit stop at the Kontagora truck stop where I sat on an upturned crate under an awning with my 3 Hausa travel mates. Therein I supplemented the day’s nutritional intake of 4 bottles of coke with 2 boiled eggs and a dollop of yam. Looking down the line of open food canteens where mamas stooped over boiling cauldrons of stew and little girls pounded yam pestles and babes tottered underfoot, I picked away at tin plate. Meanwhile, I noted with alarm that our driver, while eschewing lunch, was quaffing a Double Crown.

“Is that beer?” Trying to be nonchalant, I sauntered over with my query.

“I just take small-small,” he said, toasting me.

“This is a long and dangerous drive,” I said, trying to stay composed. “Beer is very dangerous to take while driving.”

Wiping forehead, he generously smiled.

“I’ve been driving this road since 1947. I don’t smoke. I don’t touch *kola*. Just beer. Small-small.”

Gritting teeth, I waved to the mama to set a plate of food before him. If at least I could hold him to one...

Back on the road, the morning’s fuzziness was supplanted by a head-reeling clarity. As we raced closer to the Niger River, zooming through a gauntlet of ever more hideously twisted wrecks, I gripped the seatback.

The heart jumped to mouth as we rounded a bend to witness an upended car with a European family huddling round it. As we slowed in passing the overturned car, the white woman by the road, catching a glimpse of another white person, stared directly into my face.

“Stop, please!” I yelled in the panic of karmic damnation.

“You want make Lagos by 5:00 PM?” asked the driver, twisting round to fellow passengers. My seatmates remained silent.

We pushed towards Illorin in the late afternoon heat. Instead of looking out the window, I stared at the *Newsweek* magazine (picked up at the Jebba Petrol Station) open on my knees, haunted by the report of a terrible commuter jet crash near San Diego. (‘*This is it, baby!*’ were the recorded words of the pilot, one second before oblivion). I was imagining the doomed passengers’ terror when the driver suddenly slammed the brakes.

Flat tire! As we bumped to the shoulder, I rolled eyes to the damp sky in thanks to Allah (if not to 'Ogun'—god of iron) for designing the tire to blow on a straight stretch at only 100 KPH.

“*Shege, bature!*” [‘bastard, white man!'] grunted the driver as he jerked the tire iron. He had used the common Hausa curse when anything technical goes wrong. Despite his alleged 30 years on the road, he was thwarted by the devilish *bature* frustrations of tire changing. After stewing a half hour in helplessness, we were rescued by a Good Samaritan who came puttering along in his Suzuki. Both driver and passengers watched uneasily as the motorcyclist deftly cranked the jack.

With the delay, the sun was dipping before we roared off towards Ogbomosho.

Although I had paid the fare through to Ibadan, I certainly did not fancy being dropped off with heavy bag on a strange city street after dark. I got out 45 kilometers before the big city on the outskirts of the town of Oyo. Slinging up my big load, I self-consciously trekked back towards the roadside sign proclaiming the Decent Hotel.

The lady who was holding a dripping bucket by the side door, looked at me in astonishment as I came forward dragging my bag. Still, she showed me her Decent Hotel offering—a windowless cement cubicle with a dirt-packed floor. Exhausted, I was in no mood to argue over her charging 8 naira for a 2-naira flop. No doubt I was the first *bature* to ever stumble in off the road, and she was not going to miss the opportunity to exploit the opportunity. All but hallucinating from hunger and fatigue, I tried to take notes before blowing out the smoky candle and crashing on the straw mattress.

December 30, '78 (Ilorin- Epe)

Still wet from a chilly bucket bath I was out to the roadside by 7:00 AM. I soon caught a 504 to Ibadan, grateful for the cautious speed of the gum-chewing baseball capped driver. By 7:45 AM, I was in another taxi headed southeast for the Mollete Motor Park. At Mollete, I squeezed into the rear-most seat (claustrophobically doorless) of a portly old Yoruba's station wagon that bounced slowly on sagging springs towards Ijedu Ode.

Dropped next near the marketplace at Ijedu Ode, with backache (stirrings of an 8 year old horseback fall injury) and empty belly nausea, I sweated in the unfamiliar humidity. Amid staring market mammies and calls of "*Oibo, oibo!*" [white man] at my back, I bargained a surly taxi pirate punk down (merely double his initial asking price) for the fare to Epe.

Around noon, we reached our destination on the swampy Lagos lagoon. The immediate concern was to find the home of Mr. Dada, my former teaching colleague who had extended his invitation in letters exchanged since his departure from in GSS Hadejia last June.

Yet only after the 30-hour journey to Epe did it strike me: what if Mr. Dada was out of town for a few days? What if he has other visitors? Although I had a CUSO volunteer's address in nearby Shagamu—that alternative was awkward at best.

As for directions to Mr. Dada's residence, the Government Teacher's training School, where he worked was empty except for the *maigardi*. The old fellow, who knew no English (and me knowing no Yoruba), walked me to the caretaker's corrugated bungalow.

We met the white-haired caretaker sitting on his porch in undershirt. He kindly offered me a plate of rice and fish which I ravenously consumed. Afterwards, he hailed a taxi from the muddy road and accompanied me to Mr. Dada's apartment building.

Apprehensive, I walked up to the 2nd story landing. My first knocks were unanswered. Just as I was asking the caretaker about how to get to Shagamu, the door opened.

“Mr.. F.!”

Mrs. Dada, with eyes shining, extended her hand. A moment later Mr. Dada, emerged from the living room and enveloped me in a bear hug. Among friends, I was instantly relieved of all doubts.

December 31, '78 (Epe, Lagos State)



I woke up stiff-backed—alarmed by the stabbing back muscles from carrying the awkwardly heavy duffle bag. (Why in hell didn't I look for a knapsack in Sabin Gari, Kano?) Fortunately, the back was spared further strain with most of the day given to browsing Mr. Dada's college textbooks in the bookcase at the side of living room.

Meanwhile Mr. Dada and his wife sat on the sofa. Mr. Dada's 7-year-old daughter by his first marriage, Dupe, sat with a colouring book on the floor.

Staring blankly at the TV through the afternoon, we chatted in the comfortable manner to which we were accustomed back in Hadejia. He told anecdotes of his sojourn in New York City where he drove a cab and met Mrs. Dada, originally from Puerto Rico. We talked about some of the same books we had read and I told him of my impressions of my sojourn in Hausaland.

Periodically we were interrupted by the “*tweep-tweep- twee-o*” of the next-door neighbour's *ju-ju* oracle, sounding out (according to Mr. Dada) its prognostications.

“It cost 20 naira just for one question.” he scratched his bald pate with a shrug. “I would never pay that much!”

In late afternoon we took a walk around the swampy, sweet-rotting town of Epe. We saw white-winged Seraphim and Cherubim folk hallelujahing by the river before setting on the porch of the local bar to share a bottle of yeasty palm wine (wincing against the faintly vile under taste).

Despite the occasional taunt from behind (“*Oibo, uku-uku*,” translated by Mr. Dada as: ‘white man, white man—white as a sea gull’) I felt entirely at ease. Meanwhile after the months of Sahel aridity, the tropic humidity felt like a warm bath. Even the cracked skin of fingers and heels was healing.



New Year's Eve was unfortunately dreary. Back from our walkabout at dusk, I picked up '*the letters of George Jackson*' from the bookshelf, while Mr. and Mrs. Dada played backgammon. The Lagos Disco dancers on the snowy tube did nothing to boost the enthusiasm in the room, even though little Dupe set off a few sparkers and firecrackers on the balcony and provided a momentary buzz of excitement.

Staring soberly at the Lagos disco revelers on TV, Mr. Dada joked lamely:

“The idiots out killing themselves because it’s New Year’s Eve. This is just another day. This 1979 is just a human— just a *western* thing. The almighty God sees no difference between yesterday and today. I just ask God to give me a little more life—that’s all.”

He squirmed in his armchair—guilty perhaps, about denying the missus a little fun. She sat with eyes downcast, her mind likely on Christmases with her Puerto Rican family in New York.

“So how do you usually spend New Year’s Eve?”

While Mr. Dada was in the shower, she confided that this, her first Christmas in Nigeria, was the “saddest Christmas she’d ever spent.”

By 10:00 PM, with Dupe in her cot and the 3 of us still staring glumly at the TV, I felt as stupefied as Igbo buddy, Celestine, reputedly did after a meal of sheep brain.

“I’m just gonna lie down,” said Mr. Dada... “Let’s all just be around for midnight though, in case anything starts happenin’.”

Welcoming the opportunity to exit the living room, I lay down on the spare room bed with light on and watch propped beside me on the night table. 9:35... 10:50...11:10... 11:40...’ Groggy and nervous, I looked up every few minutes, cursing the dragging minute hand.

“Hey, Mr. F. —It’s New Year’s!”

Duty bound, I responded to the yell of Mr. Dada and made my way to the living room. The TV was on, and there was a bottle of Dubonnet sherry on the table with 3 glasses. Mrs. Dada was over Dupe’s cot trying to nudge her awake. Taking my glass, I turned with the Dadas to the sound of a few banging firecrackers followed by the sound of a siren from the balcony door.

“It’s 12:00 midnight. That’s the plywood mill siren.”

“Happy New Years, 1979.”

We mechanically clinked glasses. Forcing my self to drink the nauseously sweet stuff, I tapped my glass while Mrs. Dada sat silently across the table, her eyes shut tight.

January 2, 1979 (*Epe-Lagos-Epe*)

New Year’s Day was largely spent lazing around the living room reading more of Mr. Dada’s textbooks and skimming though his LSAT practice exams. Stymied by most of the logic exercises, I concluded that law must not be my calling.

In the breaks between pushing books back into his shelf, Mr. Data and I engaged in our usual jaw-wagging on a host of subjects—carefully avoiding disagreement... The only break from the living room was a short walk in steamy mid-afternoon through the Epe market.

In anticipation of the long day visa hunting in Lagos, I excused myself from the living room at 8:00 PM and fell asleep with the brilliant speeches of Malcolm X on lap.



This morning I was up at 4:30 AM and out the door by 5:30 AM. I groped my way through the warm foggy pre-dawn to the Epe Motor Park and hailed a battered WWII style bus roaring up Main Street. I climbed through the rear door and took a claustrophobic seat squeezed beside the ‘window’, which was welded over with tin.

We lurched recklessly towards Lagos, hitting the outskirts by dawn and then crawled for upwards of an hour through the districts of Maryland, Anthony, Palm Grove, Mushin and Surelese... (Lagos is a megacity, fo’ sure!) After the mudscapes of northern villages, such views of factories, flyovers and big hotels were faintly dazzling.

It wasn’t until after the Carter Bridge that I saw the steaming guts of old Lagos. It was like Kano’s *Sabon Gari* magnified a thousand fold. Amid the stench of diesel fumes and raw sewage, there were legless beggars, by the score skittering like cockroaches though muck and filth.

Dropped at a taxi rank near Ikoyi, I hailed a taxi (2.50 naira) to the Togolese embassy. By 8:30 AM I’d filled in my forms.

In the 3-hour wait for the visa (feeling a little naked sans passport), I walked back towards Lagos Island, stopping to marvel at the triad of up rearing bronze horses by the

Racecourse. After walking through Tafewa Balewa square and the adjacent shopping mall, I then wasted an hour in a queue in Nigeria Airways trying in vain to confirm the flight time. Afterwards, I took a quick tour of the National Museum.

Even given that the ‘history’ that such a museum was supposed to represent remained a living embodiment of local culture (eg the *ju-ju* medium across from Mr., Dada’s apartment building; the countless talismans sewn into garments) the very modest collection of “dead” or pilfered artifacts was still quite impressive. Most noteworthy were the ancient Benin bronzes, which offered any tourist (most particularly black Americans) a powerful source of affirmation.

After my 45-minute museum walk-through, I picked up my passport with the Togolese visa and taxied to the Ivorian Embassy on Victoria Island. Slightly thick-thumbed, I wielded through the sheaf of papers. Yet again, luck was with me—I was early enough to get the visa by 2:15 PM. Nearing lunchtime, I walked around the corner to behold another legendary Lagos edifice—the Federal Palace Hotel.

I exchanged a few words in Hausa with the Hausa petty-traders on the pavement in front, disappointed that my attempt to chat in the Hausa language (not to mention that I had spent 2 years teaching their lads), cut no ice. Insisting on *Naira tellatin* (30 naira) for a shoddy leather purse, they (predictably) regarded me as just another fleeceable *bature*. So it was no sale.

After a plate of stale sandwiches in the lobby of the Federal Palace (overpriced at 4 naira) I collected the Ivorian visa then walked a few leafy blocks to Bar Beach. From the crest of a garbage-strewn sand hill, I caught my first sight of the blue Atlantic. A little guilty that I was not more stirred by the first glimpse of Mother Sea, I was nonetheless moved by the spectacle of two old Hausa men, holding their sandals and rolled *rigas* at the edge of the surf.

“*Al hamde Allahi!*” intoned the two old fellows out-gazing, perhaps for the first time at the sea their ancestors had failed to reach in a potentially extended Hausaland...

“Suc-cess, maan!”

...On the way back to the bus stop for the trip back to Epe, I briefly conversed with a Jamaican-born Nigerian TV producer by the bus stop. Then in the 504 taxi back to Epe, there was an interesting exchange with a Christian businessman...

But best recalled from the day in Lagos was the ‘yellow’ girl (a Nigerian complexion hue description) with the red dress standing by the racecourse bus stop. Pinned in her hair was a fresh red rose. So overwhelmed by her beauty as I momentary stood beside her but dared not even catch her eye.

January 3 (Epe)

After Mr. Dada left for the start of his new school term, I used his cassette radio to record from the balcony the strange *ju-ju* chirping and then read some of his American history texts on the U.S. Civil War and Reconstruction periods. When Dada came back from classes, we visited his friend's medicine store and chatted about varieties of tropical hardwood, the relative merits of various European roads and the trustworthiness of international construction contractors. Mundane fare—but chewed in the spirit of friendship.

Meanwhile, I'm feeling increasingly ambivalent the upcoming travel and taunting myself with the possibilities missed: Given that buying the homeward air ticket was the only way to spent naira which will be worthless once I leave the country—I could well have purchased a round the world ticket—returning to Canada through South East Asia. At least I could have booked a return through Europe via a stopover in Egypt.

Even if I hadn't bought an air ticket, I might opted for a *real* adventure—travelling back overland across the Sahara... But no, I had to be a good scout. Admittedly it was the comment of the CUSO field staff Officer, Ms. B., in her last visit that swayed me: "You really must see another country in West Africa. Something to compare with your Nigerian experience."

So it is, with only lukewarm interest that I set about on this hopscotching by plane across West Africa. The question at the outset is: how can I work up some enthusiasm?

January 4-5 (Epe- Multala Muhammad Airport)



I was up at 6:00 AM in the dark—frightened in the soreness of my spinal disks before impending weeks of heavy bag toting. I might as well have the body a 70-year-old!

In this dark thought, I packed up and did tentative knee bends in the living room while the Dada family creaked round me in slippers (Hard to think of the old proverb: '*after 3 days fish and house guests begin to stink*') After kindly making us breakfast, Mrs. Dada bade goodbye and took her little stepdaughter to school. Around 9:00 AM, Mr. Dada taxied with me to the motor park. Profusely thanking him and promising to write, I clamped his hand goodbye.

I taxied out at 9:30 AM towards the Maryland airport. We had a damn close call, too, the driver hitting the brakes as an oncoming taxi shot over a blind hill directly in our path. The driver squeezed his rearview mirror *ju-ju* in gratitude for salvation and I gave a silent thanks for being spared in what could have been fate's most tempting opportunity: my

last car ride in Nigeria. Again, I shuddered in thinking of the passengers of that doomed flight in San Diego.

I made it to Murtala Mohammed airport by 10:30 AM and headed immediately to the Air Afrique desk. Quite as expected, there was no sign of activity. Piecing together reports from a few surly clerks and loiterers, the impression was that a 24-hour wait would not be surprising. It occurred I had best make ready to for a long encampment.

With indeterminable time to kill, I dropped into the bar and found there—hardly to any coincidence—a fresh-faced CUSO lad— bidding goodbye to his fresher-faced Canadian frat-pals.

Thus followed several hours of dispiriting chatter. Layered between the customary: ‘*this country/ these people*’ sniping were drawn out opinions about Vietnam movies, ‘the Israel question’ and hockey paraphernalia (my blue duffel bag apparently a “a goalie’s bag”). J.P. Sartre in ‘*No Exit*’ could hardly have described a more mutually loathing foursome trapped eternally in hell...

Finally flaking out long past midnight on a hard bench amid scores of trapped travellers, I woke in the grey dawn with an exquisitely macabre start: Rubbing eyes against the “bodies” of scores of curled sleepers around me—for a few seconds, I imagined I was in Jonestown!



Yet there were 12 hours still to endure. The stares at the empty-sleeve from passing travellers were interrupted only by a long conversation with a blond Baptist missionary, and a brief greeting from another fellow CUSO ‘cooperant’, on the way home to Saskatchewan from his posting in Makurdi. Having had a mere 3-hour wait, he was hurrying to catch his flight to Nairobi (Why in Allah’s name hadn’t I thought of an outward ticket though East Africa?)

Finally, after nearly 40 excruciatingly boring and hungry hours at Murtala Mohammed, the flight to Lome was finally posted. Greasing the last Nigerian palm (a green uniformed Yoruba informing that my visa had expired) I got through Customs and found myself in the air-conditioned departure lounge staring at the finality of my exit-stamped passport. As I boarded the Air Afrique Caravelle, there were particular pangs of sadness for nursing student Tamar O. in Hadejia and the Dadas’ little daughter, Dupe.



I landed in Lome in late afternoon, half-starved, with food intake over the last 2 days having been only an exorbitantly priced hamburger at the Lagos airport. I peeled off my first traveller's cheque and changed money into CFA anxious to find out just how far my limited funds will go in reputedly pricy French West Africa. The taxi fare into the city (approx. \$10) did not augur well.

Still, after the squalor of Murtala Mohammed airport, the spotlessness and ultra-modernity of the Lome airport was impressive—as was the modern highway into the city. We passed under archways bannered with political slogans (*'Victoire sur le mal'*) and portraits of the *citoyen* president in military uniform. It was obvious that the ‘real’ Togo lay just a few meters beyond this ‘showcase’ corridor.

I was let off at dusk in front of the Hotel de la Plage—apparently Lome’s best alternative for backpackers or volunteers on slim budgets. Its seedy mildewed rooms were hardly a bargain at more than 15 bucks US a night.

January 10 (Lome, Togo)



The foregoing events all transpired a week ago—since which time I have effectively fallen into torpor. A boring and expensive week in Togo had left me feeling retched out, sucked clean and refilled on Novocain drip. At this moment, it feels like being lobotomized back in my native village in New Brunswick could only be worse!

The glimpses of a former French African colony would be curious enough—if it weren’t for this suffocation of unavoidable fellow-honkies—most notably, the fellow ‘volunteers’ at the Hotel de la Plage.

A decade ago, it would have been Greece or India—these days, Africa is apparently in vogue for exotica. Along with the pageantry of blonde Peace Corps from upcountry, there were Yankee missionaries and skinny-bearded English twerps. There were even a few college finishers taking a mandatory year of travel before settling into daddy’s business. Then there as the pair of Westmount Jewish girls seemingly unsettled by the empty sleeve.

Sitting in the patio café, smoking and drinking before the windy grey combers of the Atlantic (too dangerous for swimming here, little natural beauty to behold), I obliged

them all in mutual teeth-set-on-edge sharing of common impressions. (“*So how long were you in Nigeria? Teaching English? O, you must know-*”) Yet as I glibly chipped in my 2 kobos worth of ‘insights’, it seemed I was effectively heel-twisting snot-gobs into my loyalties to African friends. Still it felt I had no choice but to take part in degrading chatter.

At the same time, there was a jab of regret for essentially submitting to a blood-letting (“*You really can’t leave West Africa having seen only Nigeria, F.*”...). There was also envy for those like Mr. Dada, who have found a purpose in struggling humbly for a wife and a sweet kid.

The only escape from this glib chatter was to take circuitous walks around General Eyadema’s palace and the Bon Marche supermarket.

Yet after hesitating before a bank on the walk back from a bar downtown on Saturday night, there was less inclination to stroll. That was the moment when a soldier leapt out the shadows, cocked his machine gun and shouted: “*Arretez vous!*”

“*Pardon,*” I faltered stumbling backwards with hand up.

Hurrying away, I was reminded of the similar scare in Santiago Chile, in 1976. In the atmosphere still heavy with the military coup, 2 ½ years earlier, I was being shown around El Centro by Paty, the sweet Chilena and her younger brother. When I stopped up to tie my bootlace in front of the Moneda palace, a soldier leapt forth, pointing his weapon. Again, it was a close call until the soldier perceived that the right hand—which failed to thrust up—wasn’t reaching for a grenade...

Yes, with the soldiers guarding the airport public buildings, fancy hotels and especially banks—Togo is sharply reminiscent of a Latin American military dictatorship. Yet unlike so many *Generalissimo* counterparts, this General Eyedema strangely fancies himself a populist of the left. Rushing past his seafront palace of the way back to the hotel, I imagined the likely outcome of stopping to take a piss on the massive iron gates...

So it has been that I have spent the last 4 nights sitting on the saggy mildewed bed with nothing to read. Staring at the burglar-bars over my shoulder, I realized that if I was any different from the fellow white monkeys hooting on the patio—I’d have been clear of this cage by now. Yet the earliest plane out, booked today at the Air Afrique office, is not until Thursday.

January 12 (Hotel Madani, Treichville, Cote d'Ivoire)



Let me backtrack from the last entry:

After my clothes dried last Tuesday morning on the balcony railing of my Hotel de la Plage cubicle, I packed up and trundled off to the motor-park across from the Bon Marche.

In the motor park there was less chaos and garbage than in their Nigerian counterparts. Also, it was telling that the few beggars shuffling about were all Hausa (“*We’re all over West Africa,*” Mallam Dauda in the GSS Hadejia staffroom used to boast). A sad spectacle, indeed, were the Hausas in the south of Nigeria bedded down by the mosque doors, dumb-stuck by the modernity roaring on beyond their prayer mats.

A few minutes after climbing into the front seat of a Ford half ton (the back packed with burlap sacks and market mammies), I was bouncing off for a peek of upcountry Togo.

After 20 kilometers of sandy laterite, the landscape turned emerald green with pineapple and oil palm plantations and forests of teak. French neo-colonialism or not, the evidence along the main road suggested that that *les paysans* of this country were faring somewhat better than their counterparts in Nigeria, however more yoked to the former colonial master. But again—this was only the view from the paved ‘showcase’ highway. No doubt *citoyen* President Eyedema would make sure that that *les paysans* tilling the fields by the roadside would look contented to the UN bureaucrats and heads of state looking through the tinted windows of their passing limousines.

During the final few kilometers to Kpalime, we passed through lovely mountainous countryside. The town itself, 160 kilometers north of the capital, seemed to be about the size of Hadejia, however tidier and better organized. I took a room in one Concordia Hotel then poked about for a little sustenance. For days now I have survived on a few bananas, boiled eggs and cokes.

After picking at a plate of *oeufs avec patates* (stomach stabbed 4 days now by nauseous contractions) at a little dive at dusk, I headed back to my room in the Hotel Concordia to squint squirmingly at my French grammar, trying in vain to shut out the disco blaring from downstairs.

I dozed off, then woke up at in a sudden blare of quiet. Checking the time (only 10:00 PM) I stepped out into the street to find the lights off, the disco dead and only a few

stragglers moving off. Was there an early curfew? I turned on heel and headed back to the room. I then stepped out to the balcony and watched the last standing cocks scratching after the last pullet or two flapping away into the darkness...

“*Ca va, monsieur?*”

Emerging out of the darkness directly below the balcony was a woman, staring up. As I stood tingling, she moved closer.

“*Me voulez-vouz venir a haut?*”

In an instant of rash calculation, I found my voice—if not my grammar...



...I woke at 8:00 AM in a welter of guilt. Without further delay in self-laceration, I packed up my bag and headed for the market, eyes peeled for *une pharmacie*. Halfway down the markets stalls between rows of bananas and yams, was a table filled with boxes and vials of medicine. Prominent among the display was a jellybean jar of yellow and blue capsules labeled ‘tetracycline’. I bought a handful and looked for *une boisson* to wash them down. 2 blocks on, I found a European style *brasserie*. I sat at a table and ordered a Fanta orange (the only soft drink available). A few minutes later, I was getting up to leave when there came from another table a greeting in English:

“Enjoying your tour?”

Across the room were the same young American doctor and his lawyer wife whom I’d met a few days earlier at the Hotel de la Plage. On the way home from a volunteer stint in Tanzania, the pair seemed to be funneling through a similar itinerary as was I. After a chat, we walked together back through the market.

“Most of this is expired medicine,” the doctor fumed in passing the pharmaceuticals table, “It’s outrageous!”

With grit teeth, I nodded my assent.

We then browsed a handicraft center on the outskirts of town (souvenirs were ridiculously priced) and then went to the motor-mark to share a taxi back to Lome.

Back at the Hotel de la Plage by mid-afternoon, I bade *adieu* to the American couple then picked up the hockey bag stored 2 days before. Even though the ongoing flight to Abidjan was not until 9:00 AM, I was determined to avoid one more costly night in the Hotel de la Plage.

I began killing the 18 hours until flight time with an extended meal at the Escale restaurant. I ordered the cheapest omelet on the menu, while challenging the Ghanaian waiter who tried to overcharge. The pair of friendly bar girls at the table beside even defended my protest:

“*Le prix est clair sur le menu!*” said one of the girls. Her businessman consort nodded.

The waiter relented but frowned continually from the bar corner as I picked at my plate. Soon tired of the pressure to order drinks, I dragged my hockey bag outside and hailed a taxi to the airport.

The friendly bar girls had opined that there’d be no problem with my staying all night at the airport (as at Murtala Mohammed in Lagos) but no sooner had the taxi driver lifted his trunk in the near-empty parking lot than a uniformed airport guy ran out, waving his hand. Flights are finished for the day, he barked, “*Retournez vous a votre hotel...*”

In dread of the enormous expense of going back to the city, I kept my cool and pulled out my ticket in rehearsed incredulity. “*Cinq a la matin a Abijan? Ne ce pas cinq aprez midi? O, non!*” *etc. etc.*”

The attendant and the *le soldat* on duty finally gave in to my pleading and allowed me to spend the night in the lounge. Despite the spacy modernity, the hard-wooden benches there were no more comfortable than the sagging cushions at Murtala Mohammed. In any case, I stretched out in the eerie emptiness. Hockey bag under head, I stared up at the maze of 200-watt nipples (these arty French!) that adorned the dome. The 14 hours passed in painful slowness. With nothing to read, I shut eyes and like an arthritic old Muslim fingering prayer beads—recounted in as much detail as could be mustered, the events of the 2 years past...

Despite the heel clicking (and subsequent dice throwing) of the soldiers who trooped in after 9:00 PM for guard duty and the army of ants that speckled my hand and feet with pink bites—I managed a couple of hours of sleep.

January 14 (Lome- Abidjan)



After climbing into the anus of another Caravelle, I left Lome on schedule. I took a seat beside a French businessman, born in Senegal, one of the 38,000 Europeans of Abidjan. In careful English, he touted Ivory Coast's accomplishments: its political stability and sound export economy dominated by the trade on cocoa and coffee smuggled in from the "barbaric" (not to mentioned formerly British-colonized) Ghana. He spoke glowingly of the president, Houphret Boigny, who was not only Sorbonne educated, but married to a European lady, a relative of Valery Giscard D'estaing...

"Abidjan is a civilized city," he said, "modeled on Bordeaux... Nigeria? Hah! They are *sauvages*. Even with their oil, give them 5 more years... Back to bloody revolution."

Changing the subject to more practical matters, I asked about a hotel— whether there were decent ones in the neighbourhood of Tricheville, which I'd heard was an alternative to the exorbitant room rates of downtown.

"Ah, you can't stay in Tricheville. It's just not for whites. The blacks—the police don't like it."

Tempted to point out that I was enquiring about Tricheville—not Soweto—I wisely kept my mouth shut. Despite this introduction to colonial Cote d'Ivoire, it was still a jolt to have the passport stamped by a white customs officer and see marching outside the airport a column of white French soldier boys.

Hesitating in taking the French businessman up on his offer to share a taxi into the city, I was drawn in by the first pirate who accosted me. I asked him to take me to a "*deux milles hotel dans Tricheville*, but get driven (predictably) to a fancy hotel downtown.

"*Deux mille? O, je pense vous me dit dix mille!*"

Trapped in my beginner's *Alliance Francaise*, text, it was no surprise that I was 'taken for a ride'. After paying \$6 above the regular airport fare for my tour of Abidjan luxury hotels, I was finally dropped at the Hotel Madani in Tricheville—"cheap" here being 20 bucks for the bare room and cot.

After dropping my hockey bag, I took a walk through what seemed a meaner, surlier version of Kano's *Sabon Gari*. Walking along the dusty stalls, glancing towards the phalanx of downtown skyscrapers shimmering like a mirage across the lagoon, I silently cursed French arrogance.

Son Excellence, Eyedema, back in Togo, at least had Africans in customs' uniforms and allowed few black faces at the banquet table. It seemed that *Monsieur* Boigny, having so shamelessly sold out his people, deserved to have his ass kicked all the way to Paris.

Pow!

Suddenly, my glasses came flying off my face; the lenses popped out and rolling into the dust. After the moment of confusion, I realized that I had absently walked into someone's momentarily outthrust arm. Rubbing a slightly puffing lip, I stooped over to retrieve the lens, while the boy who accidentally struck me stood by shocked. Probably no small matter here in French West Africa to strike a white body, however accidentally.

“*No probleme, no probleme*,” I said wiping the lens on my sleeve. Still, despite the effort, I couldn’t help sighing and frowning. Although the accident was due to my own clumsiness—I walked off feeling somewhat magnanimous for not making a bigger deal of it than a ‘European’ could have. Fortunately, that feeling abruptly turned to shame. For an instant, had I not given in to the Ivorian ‘apartheid’ mentality?

Back on my cot in the Madani, I stared up at the bare light bulb and sympathized more than ever before with just what the Nigerians are up against. They’ve every right to be proud of running their own country. It was just sad that they could muster a little more self-discipline... If only they could get their lights and water and offices working a little more efficiently—they’d have an argument against these arrogant French neo-colonialists.

As for the evidence of the moment—my Air Afrique seatmate is unanswerable.

January 16 (Abidjan-Freetown)



Shocked by the costs in Abidjan, after just 2 nights stay, I took the Nigeria Airways flight to Freetown via Robertsfield, Liberia. In the 2-hour delay at Robertsfield we were allowed to disembark to the duty free shop and browse through the well-stocked electronics offerings where American trinkets was showcased.

By contrast, Lungi airport in Sierra Leone looked like the airfield of a Caribbean backwater. It was basically a primitive hangar with an open shed lined with bare wooden counters for customs' inspection. I hauled my bags from the airport freight cart along with the other passengers then walked out towards the taxi-hustlers who beckoned in their lilting *crio*. After the Franco-cultural fascism, the loose and lazy Caribbean feel was

welcome. After the exorbitant prices of the French west Africa, it was also a relief that the airport bus into Freetown cost only 4 Leones— about 4 bucks.

We juddered along red laterite past zinc-roofed shacks with kids and chickens scratching in the dust. The plump matrons in Baptist bonnets holding dowdy purses staring after us, again evoked the Caribbean. One could almost hear steel drums and marimbas!

The bus dropped us at the ferry terminal for the boat-ride across the inlet to the Freetown peninsula. It was a lazy 20-minute crossing through green islets and emerald green cliffs that dropped to the water's edge. It was the most spectacular African scenery thus far witnessed.

On the way, I chatted with a Nigerian-Leonean schoolgirl leaning against the upper-deck rail. Behind us, a black American college kid from Tennessee harangued a Leonean tour-guide about white-perfidy. (“*They gotta pay! They gotta pay!*”) I had to wonder whether it was his zealotry or irrepressible honky instincts that raised the hairs on my neck.

Off the ferry and on another bus, we wound down past the Kissy market into Freetown. As on the city streets in Nigeria there were kids, goats, petty traders, beggars and all varieties of loiterers milling everywhere. This typically African urban scene lay amidst run-down wood-frame houses on hilly streets with familiar names: Garrison, Bathurst, Sackville and Charlotte. With the harbour just a whiff away—for an instant it felt like the south end of Saint John, New Brunswick. It was then that a critical snippet of history was recalled: the *crios* here in Freetown, were descended from former slaves loyalist shipped back to Africa from Nova Scotia.

Off the bus, I made first for the legendary City Hotel, the local Peace Corps hang-out not only recommended back at the Hotel de la Plage in Lome—but immortalized as West African expat watering hole in Graham Greene’s “*Heart of the Matter*”. At the American-style bar, the white bartender in black vest was leaning across the counter dealing cards to a patron while an old mutt stretched under his feet. The only room available, I was informed, was a cubicle in the shed-like annex across the street. Under the sniff of a blonde Peace Corps adjusting his backpack, I politely declined.

Foregoing “atmosphere” for a little privacy and better sanitation, I took a double (only room available) in the Lido Hotel, proprietored by a grotesquely fat Lebanese, a guy who proved to be no less sleazy than Graham Greene’s wheeling-dealing Yusif. It cost \$10—3 times the City Hotel cubicle, but a worthy sacrifice for the moment’s needs.

After cleaning up, I took a stroll around Freetown.

Up on Parliament Hill, there was the “*Israeli Rotunda*” and the hushed veneration of Siaka Steven’s Presidential chair. Everywhere I was tagged by staring kids, some of whom stuck out cupped hands: ‘Gimme 10 cents, I beg you!’”

I sensed a vague hostility to honkies not so open as in Southern Nigeria, but definitely more so than in Togo. Also, I was also getting more than the usual quota of stares at the empty sleeve.

Later over supper at the Paramount Hotel, I thought of just what a relief it will be to get away from this bubbling cauldron of racial politics. I reflected that when the time comes for the 'mastas' to get their comeuppance, 5 centuries overdue—at least this one honky would be long gone.

January 17 (Freetown, Sierra Leone)



Print-starved for weeks, I spent the evening gorging on two paperbacks: Mishima's *'Thirst for Love'*, and Camus', *'A Happy Death'*, both picked up in the local GMC (Christian) bookshop (I regret to give Yukio a C+ and Albert only a C-).

After breakfast, I hiked up the steep hill to Fourah Bay College. On a stumble coming back down, I cracked my watch crystal.

Around noon, I took a local bus out to Lumley Beach, a palm fringed lagoon replete with a hotel casino with slot machines. From the nearly empty beach, I had my first swim since the layover in St., Andres Island, Columbia, 3 years ago.

What on earth can be more pleasurable than the caress of tropical waters? After 30 minutes of floating in warm blue-green bliss, I took a walk up the beach, waded an inlet and picked my way around a basalt point, getting a few photos of net-mending fisherman. Later back at the near empty casino bar, I had a hamburger and coke, which left me as serenely sated as the Hemmingway character in San Sebastian café in *"The Sun Also Rises..."* How easy to understand the travel bum addiction to tropical beaches!

Hungry again after the bus back to Freetown (a 10 cent fare) I went off in search of supper. The only decent prospect was the Paramount where the restaurant didn't open until 7:30 PM. During the long wait in the lobby, hunger twisted into gastric pain, which became so severe that when the fish and chips were finally served, I barely managed to avoid vomiting on the plate. Fortunately, back in the Lido the pains subsided. So much for my reveries over a tainted lunch!

January 18 (Banjul, Gambia)



Since my watch was stolen yesterday here in Banjul, I had to check the date from my Senegal visa. Considering the number of stolen watches over the last 2 years, think I must be getting close to a Guinness record. More on the latest episode, later... First, back to Freetown:

I dropped into the CUSO office on East St. and chatted briefly with the FSO—a bright-eyed English professor on leave from McMaster U. As awkward as it would have been to show up at the door of a stranger (albeit a fellow Canadian volunteer), I regret not taking the opportunity of visiting a school or a clinic upcountry.

By mid-morning, I was on the ferry headed for the airport. On the top-rail again in the gentle drift across the inlet, I chatted with a *Crio* market mama who told of her sacrifices in sending her boy to study in the USA. “If God spares,” she said, “he’ll be back in 1981.”

In waiting for the Ghana Airways flight at Lungi airport, I stood in the shade watching the arrival of the motley of West African fellow travelers, including a Malienne Mopti woman, with fist sized ear-rings of pure gold.

20 minutes after takeoff, we descended to Conakry airport for an airplane window glimpse inside Seke Toure’s socialist ‘utopia’. When I took a covert snapshot in the open hatch of wrecked biplanes beside the runway, I risked becoming a “long-term guest of the regime” as a fellow westerner on the seat behind me warned.

Fortunately before I was dragged off, our craft hopped back up and down again in Yundun airport, Gambia. There, I boarded the airport bus for the 5 *Dalasi* (approx. \$2.50) ride into Banjul town. Stepping into cooler and drier air than that of Freetown, the first impressions were of a Hausaland with a cheerier and slightly cleaner face.

I checked in to the City Traveler’s Lodge, a long zinc-roofed building consisting of a bar in the middle of two rows of cubicles, the partitions between which extended only halfway to the ceiling. For my 13 *dalasis*, I got a center room, which shared the single light bulb with the adjoining cubicle. With the assurance of the mama at the bar that my things would be safe, I left my bag and took a stroll along the seashell-speckled streets. The town seemed no bigger or no busier than Fredericton New Brunswick. In my half-hour circuit, I got no fewer than 4 offers to buy *ganja*.

After a mutton burger, I head back to City Traveller's, very conspicuously moving past a row of bar patrons before entering my cubicle. Much to my apprehension I discovered that the door didn't lock from inside. Exhausted, I had no difficulty snoozing off amid the hoot and gibber and blazing light from the bar. Sometime towards the middle of the night I vaguely heard a pounding followed by a jarring of the door ("Wrong room, idiot!" I murmured) In the lulling spatter of rain, I sank back to sleep only to bob back in sudden awareness that something was amiss.

I groped the surface of the bedside to check the time. The watch wasn't where I'd left it. Expecting that it has fallen on the floor, I groggily felt for it. Then I turned on the light. Nothing! Quickly I dressed and stepped out to rouse the night boy from his bedroll under the bar.

"Sir, I'm doubting this very much," he mumbled. "There are no thieves here. The missus said in 7 years—no stealing."

Outside, thunder rumbled and rain drummed on the zinc roof. It was apparently the first January rain in half a century. It would be less freakish then for City Traveller's to have its first theft in 7 years. Just my luck!

January 19 (Banjul, Gambia)



In the morning the hotel madam gave hell to the night watch boy and the Senegalese whores who slept on the bar sofas.

"Had to be those bad boys from up river!" She tsked, feeling genuinely sorry.

I felt a little guilty for bringing suspicion into City Traveler's Inn, but still stewed through the day over the loss. The watch had cost about \$35 in Kano—almost as much as I earned from rating 'O' Level scripts at Adamu Bello University wherein the previous watch had 'walked' from the dormitory room where I was staying during the marking session.

Still, I had to be thankful that I had put my money pouch around my neck before turning off the light. Imagine losing my money and my passport!

Walking in a grey morning through the streets of Banjul, suffering from the wristwatch withdrawal ("Do you have the time, please?" I kept asking). I resolved to waste no more time in getting to Dakar, and from there, catching the flight to the Canary Islands. While waiting for the Senegalese visa, I loitered over a coffee in the Roots Café.

No surprise that I was jumpy when 4 young men descended upon my table. *What's the hustle?* Yet was no cause for alarm—the guys were just curious to know where this latest stranger in town hailed from. While they quite nonchalantly passed a joint and asked the usual questions. There was no hint of the politics that complicates so many Nigerian encounters.

One of the guys spoke of his own brief sojourn in money-hungry Lagos where he saw bodies bobbing up on Victoria Beach.

“Naira go kill ‘em”! He said, using the standard Nigeria expression describing the fate of so many of the unlucky drawn to Lagos.

In hearing this detail, his 3 buddies shivered in horror. I noted that the friendly lads were all wearing shirts, trousers and head toques. Even though 90% of the population of Gambia is Muslim, such western attire seems more common here than the *rigas* and *fulas* of Hausaland. Moreover, the local version of Islam seemed to be more tolerant than that of the Hausas.

It occurred that Gambia would certainly be a fine place for one’s ancestors to come from—as Alex Haley would agree.



By noon I picked up the Senegalese visa and headed down to the Gambia River dock. Declining the tout’s offer for a day’s excursion upriver to Juffaure, Haley’s “Roots village”, I hopped the ferry across the river to check out whether accommodations might be less touristy on the Barra side.

There were some striking characters: such as the copper skinned Mauritanian who was standing by the railing holding his Koranic tablets, his gold teeth glinting and dirty white gowns billowing around him like Moses. Then squatting on the deck a few feet away was a young man with flipper arms with “*please help me*” inked across the back of his blue jean jacket.

Discouraged by the mucky motor-park at the Barra dock, I decided to return to Banjul to pick up my bag and then head back to Barra to catch the early taxi for Dakar the next morning. I took the same ferry straight back across the grey river, and collected my hockey bag from City Traveler’s Inn.

Back at the dock, the ticket-taker girl informed that the main ferry had broken down. It was 90-minutes later before a vessel resembling both Noah’s ark and the African Queen listed into the dock. With the hockey bag swinging from my shoulder, I pushed forward

in the melee and leaped from rickety dock to listing deck. I squeezed in beside a fellow *bature*, a grizzled travel-bum who told me on the crossing he was a Hungarian musician living in exile in Sweden. He said he was wandering West Africa to absorb “African vibes.” Our chat was cut short in the melee scramble for the Barra dock.

A little forlornly, I cast about the motor-park asking after accommodation when a young man in blue overalls offered to show me the local “Rest House”. Trusting in Gambian hospitality, I walked with him along the river west of the town center. He told me in his competent “O”-Level English, that he was a medical assistant with a WHO team, charged with providing vaccinations to Gambian villagers. After 10 minutes we reached the bluff above tidal barrens commanded by a decaying stone fort. Unexpectedly, he offered to let me stay at the bungalow beneath the fort along with his vaccination team members:

“I say ‘you’re my friend,’ and they’ll go-gree,” he said.

I was torn between suspicion of a hustle and the eagerness to make up a little for the money hemorrhaging of late. Taking the gamble, I dropped my bag in a corner of a room half-filled with the scattered contents of WHO stenciled boxes.

My new ‘friend’, Mustapha, then suggested that we go back to the village for some “chop”. The oyster stew from a canteen across from the motor park turned out to be the most delicious meal eaten in the last 2 years in Africa. The nursing Mandika mama who served it, chuckled and nursed her infant as we ravenously spooned it up.

“Will you marry my daughter?” she smiled as she rocked her babe.

Later back at the Rest House, I met the rest of the vaccination team—all easygoing and friendly lads in their early 20s, crouched with girl friends amid peanut shells, bread crusts and half-opened tins of food listening to reggae in a blue haze of *ganga* smoke. I was rather reminded of good ole boys from the New Brunswick native village who afforded many hitchhikers a tale of local hospitality.

While I was still settling in, the Hungarian freak from the ferry came by, stoned silly. After I introduced him to the Gambians, he invited me to accompany him to the local club in the evening to “check out the Reggae scene”. However wary of ganja smoking (the last thing I needed) later in the evening I did make a half-hearted effort to stumble up the dark path to the agreed rendezvous at the Texaco Station. The zonked Hungarian doesn’t show, so without qualms of conscience I headed back to crash on the floor of the bungalow.

January 20 (Barra, Gambia)



In the morning, when I greeted in English old Musa, the watchman, he exploded in laughter.

“What’s so funny?” I asked Mustapha.

“‘Good morning’ in Wolof”, Mustapha explained, “sounds like ‘sour milk.’”

Meanwhile, rather than immediately heading overland to Dakar, I decided to take up Mustapha’s invitation. I would stay another day and join the vaccination team on their operation up-country.

By mid-morning we were bouncing by Land Cruiser over packed laterite tracks (packs of monkeys leaping across our path) towards a riverside village.

Hailed by a greybeard Headman, we pulled up under a spreading mango tree and waited as rough tables were hauled forth from thatched huts. While the team set up the vaccination equipment, the villagers came forth from huts and dutifully lined up.

With the vaccination guns loaded, the line of villagers pressed forward. Mamas stuck up their arms for a jolt, then turned round for the babes swaddled on their backs to receive their squirt (Can’t resist the word “charming” here). Some kids flinched, a few took the needle stoically, others shrieked and resisted. One mama daintily wiped the drop of blood from the babe’s arm with a bit of filthy rag. Then there was the yellow-eyed “mad” boy who had to be forcibly held by 2 vaccinators.

Sitting at the wooden table along with a Gambian female student back on holidays from medical school in Milan, I smiled and nodded encouragement as the pressure gun squirted through more than 600 Gambian arms. In watching the 600 reactions to receiving an injection it seemed that the whole gambit of humanity was witnessed!

The squirt guns and the vaccines held out for 4 villages after which the team quit for the day... On the bounce back towards Barra, Mustapha sighted a dead monkey on the road.

“Monkey’s a good chop!” he said, urging the driver to stop...

Stepping on the gas, the driver warned Mustapha in Mandinka of Allah’s offence against such unclean meat.

Meanwhile, some interesting tidbits were picked up from Mustapha and his co-workers on the road back Barra: In contrast with Nigeria, tribalism is not much of an issue here in Gambia. Practically everyone speaks Wolof and Mandingo as well as a little English, and mixes them in running speech... While theoretically Gambia is 100 % Muslim, *Purdah* is rarely practiced and western clothes, education and habits widely accepted. There is apparently no social divide between Muslims and non-Muslims, as in Hausaland.

Indeed, if I were searching African ancestry, I would be pleased to find it here...



Back at the Rest House, Mustapha persuaded old Musa, the watchman, to open the slave fort for us (I slipped him a ‘one *Dalasi* dash’).

We spent the hour before dusk poking about the ruins of the hellhole where, Mustapha matter-of-factly informed, “they kept my ancestors”, ready for transportation to the New World. Even shutting eyes amid the doom-like echoes in the piss-clammy cells, it was impossible to imagine the extent of the horrors experienced therein...

Later by candlelight, we dipped fingers into a common plate of rice and tinned chicken (I was embarrassed in using the left hand) before a couple of the lads retired to the corner to smoke *ganja* and play chess by candlelight. In mid-evening (frustrated not to have the exact time) Mustapha asked if I would like to accompany him to the disco. While declining to join him, I gave him 5 *Dalasis* immediately regretting not offering him 10—given his hospitality and 2 night free accommodation.

As soon as he left, I retired into the room scattered with open WHO boxes and fell sound asleep.

January 21 (Barra, Gambia- Dakar, Senegal)



Up at dawn, filthy from days without bath and shave (no running water in the “guest house”), I had a cup of *chai* with the lads as they waited for the first Banjul ferry. We walked out to the balcony periodically to scan across the bay. Only at 9:00 AM did the ferry appear on the grey water. With its arrival, the Barra motor park roared into activity.

After goodbyes and sincere thanks to Mustapha and his co-workers, I took a seat in a creaky 504 and forked over 1800 CFA for the trip to Dakar: not bad considering that the

Abidjan airport taxi, one way, cost 2200. No doubt about it—I'd have had a far richer experience and got by at half the cost had I travelled overland all the way from Lagos...

It was a 5-hour bounce to Dakar. After 3 weeks in the coastal forest with baobab, date palm and thorn bush, we were back into familiar Sahel. Still, in the faint smell of the salt flat expanses—there was no doubt that the ocean was just over the horizon. The village folk (100% Muslim) we passed were dressed very much like Hausas, minus the *fula* caps. One little snippet of local colour was in the painted horse carts clipping about the streets, reminiscent of the Columbia-Ecuador border town seen from a bus window 3 years ago...

We reached Dakar about 2:30 PM amid a threatening thunderstorm (Informed by a Gambian fellow passenger that such storms in January were freakishly unseasonable).

With the clutters of concrete buildings slowly increasing from several kilometers on the outskirts, there was no doubt that we were approaching a big city. In passing through the tacky development, I was reminded of the poem by West African George Awooner Williams: '*the old shrines defiled/ by the weaver's excrement*'. Even 45 minutes out from the center, we passed 'Elaine's Patisserie', 'Samedi Soir Disco' and *pour les enfants*, even a cowboy theme park called *le Sioux City*.

So how did this landscape jive with the vision of President Leopold Senghor, the father of *Negritude*? Could this be the land of the same Senghor who wrote: '*Lord, I would especially pray for France?*' The same Senghor who married the cousin of George Pompidou?

In any case, the impression was that Senghor's clone of an imagined Paris (Plato would smirk at the effort) was *un peu moins* perverse than the monstrosity spawned by Boigney's vision in Cote d'Ivoire. It seemed that the Senghor, as charter member of the 'Socialist's International', was at least aiming for Francophilia with a human face...

After dropping from the 504 in the motor park, I took a taxi to the 'Marche Carmel', supposedly the cheap hotel section. Hotel Metropole, as basic as I could find, cost 2430 CFA. Nearly as expensive as Abidjan!

I spent the rest of the afternoon clogging about the European quarter. There was a market modeled on Les Halles, cobblestone streets, cafes, bistro; poodles and Porsches. I took a few touristy photos. Only the petty trader flitting past or the occasional mama sitting setting hen fashion before a basket of trinkets reminded that this was still Africa.



January 23 (Dakar, Senegal)

I was ready to head down to the hotel café for breakfast when the strap broke on the new plastic tote bag bought just yesterday afternoon. Clutching the damn thing to my side as I walked along, I got directions to a repair shop. I was predictably directed to a “European” leather shop, ran by a white mustached old French shoemaker watching over an African apprentice. For sewing on a simple strip of leather, *le bastarde vieux* charged me 1000 CFA—about \$5.

With the obscenely overpriced plastic bag back on shoulder, I walked beyond the downtown core and stumbled upon an African market. There I picked up a couple of African charms (200 CFA each).

Slogging still further (grey sky ever-threatening) I got to the university museum just $\frac{1}{2}$ hour before closing. It was a pity that I had to rush through—the impression being that the collection was much larger and far better organized than that of the National Museum in Lagos. Most appealing to my bleary eye among the West African collection were the masks from Haute Volte and Mali (Dogan). Strikingly similar they seemed to Aztec artifacts. As in Lagos, I again reminded myself that ‘artifacts’ only come into being when they are taken away from a living culture.

After the whirlwind museum tour, I trekked back to the Metropole, passing enroute, Senghor’s palace, and the outlandishly “classical” French architecture around it. *Mon Dieu*, I would especially pray for Leopold Senghor!

Around 3:00 PM I picked up my hockey bag and caught the airport bus. After just $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours in Dakar international my number came up: Iberia to Las Palmas.

Farewell, Africa! In 3 weeks of glimpses—largely through taxi windows (if not airport runways)—have I any credible basis for comparing Nigeria to the rest of West Africa?

While there were twinges of regret for travelling north instead of west across the Atlantic at this most narrow passage to Brazil—there were no tears.



Continued in Part #2

From blue checkered hard-cover notebook (transcribed 2015)