

George Ayittey in Nigeria

Thursday, 23 February 2006

NIGERIA I heaved a huge sigh of relief when the Virgin Nigeria flight touched down at 5:53 pm at Lagos International Airport after a short flight from Accra, Ghana on November 9, 2005. The travel agent, whom I bought the airline ticket from, had made me exceedingly nervous about travelling to Nigeria. On our way back to Accra, after visiting the three Ghanaian village communities, we got caught up in a massive traffic jam in the sweltering heat. Our pickup truck had no air-conditioning. The air was stagnant and temperature hovered around the mid-80s. To make matters worse, there was no breeze and the humidity was quite high. The face cloth I carried in my satchel - handkerchiefs are of no use on field trips - was soiled with sweat and dust. Forget the bottled water; it had turned warm and provided no relief. The traffic inched past a travel agency and rather than sit and roast in the pickup truck, I decided that was good a time as any to purchase my airline ticket for Nigeria. Mr. Owusu and I climbed a flight of stairs and entered the travel agency on the second floor. Most travel agencies are air-conditioned as the staff work in enclosed spaces all day. But that day, the travel agent by name of Pat informed us, the air conditioning had broken down and a ceiling fan was furiously circulating hot air at full blast. Booking that flight from Accra to Lagos was a memorable experience I will never forget. Never have I come across a travel agent as the one I dealt with in Ghana. I had wanted to go to Lagos very early in the morning, visit the villages and then get back to Accra later in the evening. Here is the conversation that took place between me and Pat. "In that case, you will have to go with Belleview; they leave very early in the morning from Accra at about 7:00 am and return very late at night" Pat said. "Hein? Belleview? Didn't their plane crash recently?" I asked. "Yes, but only one of their planes fell down and they have not found the cause yet. Besides, all planes fall down from the sky; even the bigger ones fall down too," she assured me. "Thanks but no thanks. Please book me on Virgin Nigeria," I requested. "OK, but Virgin Nigeria hasn't fallen down yet. Who knows; their turn too might come," she added. Some travel agent!! Talk about a sensitive and reassuring travel agent giving you all the information about air travel, including planes falling down! I swear, at that point I didn't know whether to fly to Nigeria or not. But since "The Butcher of Abuja" (General Sani Abacha, a former military despot) was dead, though not from a plane crash, I decided to chance it. The Virgin Nigeria flight for Lagos was fine. The crew was professional and we landed in Lagos without incident. The team of local coordinators - Thompson Ayodele and Thomas Adedayo - were at the airport to pick me up. As I carried no check-in luggage, we hurried out of the airport into a battered white Toyota Hitach van. Thomas Adedayo and Thompson Ayodele After introductions and the exchange of pleasantries, we headed for the Lagos Airport Hotel, where I checked in for the night. We had a hectic schedule ahead of us the next day. At dinner, we went over our plan of action: Names and locations of the village communities we were to visit the next day; how to get there, what to take along with us, etc. etc. After dinner, the team escorted me to my hotel room. We all gathered at the hotel lobby at 9:30 am on November 10. Leaving early would have landed us right smack in the middle of Lagos' infamous traffic jams. I checked out of my hotel just in case we accomplished what we set out to do that day. Then we all bundled into the van for an hour and half drive out of Lagos city. Driving in Lagos is not for the faint-hearted; it requires a nerve of steel. Never mind the air, which is always choked with pungent odour of exhaust fumes, rotting uncollected garbage and open sewage festering in the sweltering heat. There are no traffic lights in Lagos and no lane markers on the roads. Jungle law rules. It is a battle for space between huge trucks, taxis, motorcycles and pedestrians. It is also a battle for survival between machines and frustrated drivers, impatient to get their destination at break-neck speeds. Tempers flare easily, insults are hurled amid wild gesticulations. Every vehicle on the road was banged up or carried a patched up dent on its body - even the new ones. The yellow-painted buses that offer transportation to the public are in such dilapidated shape: Windscreens and doors missing; a hanging muffler dragging along the pavement; a whole side bashed in, etc. The vehicles looked as if they were dug up from Dracula's grave or, better yet, came out of a demolition derby. We drove to the outskirts of the city and exited from the main trunk road. After navigating through a traffic circle, which keeps traffic flowing in lieu of traffic lights, we dropped the van off at a parking lot and trekked by foot toward the shores of the Lagos Lagoon. We trudged through a dirty, make-shift market set up under the road overpass. We got to the shores of the Lagos Lagoon, where half a dozen wooden canoes were berthed. After intense and protracted negotiations between Thompson and a canoe operators, we clambered aboard one. Most were fitted with outboard motors; the rest used oars for propulsion. Aboard a Canoe for the Trip After a sharp tug at the toggle line, the outboard motor roared to life. We sailed over the Lagoon, which was choked with rusting remnants of shipwrecks and other pieces of metal jutting from its depths. We also dodged floating debris and water-borne plants. After a 20 minute ride, the hazy outlines of a village island community poked into view. As we approached, the operator cut the power and we glided onto the beach. The Outline of the Village Communities

ITU-AGON (NIGERIA) Itu-Agon This was our first stop: Itu-Agon, one of the three village communities in the Amuwo-Odofin Local Government Area of Lagos State. The other two are Igbo-Alejo and Shagbokogi. They are all village communities on an island in the Lagos Lagoon but separated but inlets or channels of water. All three villages lacked basic essential amenities: Clean piped water, electricity, sewage, schools, sanitation, etc.

At Itu-Agon, we alighted from the canoe around 11:30 am and an escort took us to meet the baale (the chief) by name of Lot Ijuesan. Garbage was strewn everywhere. Bleating goats scurried across garbage dumps and naked children played nearby. A few village councillors joined the chief and we were seated in his hall. Thompson explained the purpose of our mission to the chief in Yoruba language, which I do not understand. He then presented the chief with a bottle of gin and a bottle of whiskey. It is a customary tradition to present an African chief with such token gift to signify friendship and goodwill. It is not mandatory but customarily accepted as an affirmation of the authority of the chief. Through an interpreter, I explained the purpose of my visit: That the Hedge Funds community on Wall Street, New York, in collaboration with the Free Africa Foundation, seek to establish a "Malaria-Free Zone" in one the villages. They asked what are hedge funds, who are the people in the hedge funds community, what does the Free

Africa Foundation do, where are the Hedge Funds and the Free Africa Foundation located, etc. I asked myself: "How do I explain all these in a language I don't understand?" But Thompson came to my rescue and they seemed satisfied with his answers. The chief then thanked us for considering his village for the malaria-free zone project. He affirmed the endemic infestation of mosquitoes and malaria. He then led us on a tour of the village, after posing for photographs with us.

The Baale's Place of Business

The Baale (Second From Left) and His Councillors/Advisors The village was a collection of dwellings constructed out of rusting corrugated iron sheets. There was a scattering of cement structures. Open, dirt pathways crisscrossed the village. I snapped pictures as we went along. There were no schools or piped water. Clean water is brought in by canoe and stored in large plastic containers. I was told a few enterprising individuals sell water from their storage containers.

A Typical Dwelling

The Village Environs Plumes of smoke enshrouded the village, giving an indication of its primary economic activity: Fishing and fish/shrimp smoking. Shrimp and small fish are caught in the Lagos Lagoon using nets and then carefully laid out on mats to dry. Upon drying, the mats are placed on elevated wooden bars, supported by short beams that have been hammered into the ground. Under the mats, stacks of special type of wood are placed and lit but never allowed to flame - only to smoulder and produce billows of smoke. It is for this purpose that a special type of wood is used to produce the desired results. Some of the smoking was done in the open but most were done under short thatched roof structures - about 3 to 4 feet high - with the aim of trapping as much smoke around the fish/shrimp as possible.

Fish Smoking

From Left: Fish Smokers, Interpreter, the Baale, and Me (George Ayittey After the tour, we headed back to the chief's residence. We thanked him for taking us around and assured him that we would give due consideration of their plight. We bid them farewell, boarded the canoe and headed for the next village.

Recommendation/Assessment: The source of the mosquito infestation problem was the ebb and flow of the Lagos Lagoon. During high tide, parts of the village are flooded but when the tide recedes or ebbs, it leaves behind large pools of stagnant water which allow mosquitoes to breed. Again, the supply of insecticide-treated bed nets, sprays and anti-malarial drugs would ease the problem but a viable long term solutions will entail the construction of an earthen dyke to keep high tide water out of the village - as in New Orleans or Holland. This dyke can be constructed by "communal labor." The village chief could lead a community development effort, mobilizing the young men of the village for this effort. Further, shallow standing pools of water can be covered with sand from the beach. Such sanding operations can be done once every six months or so under the direction of the chief. Similarly with garbage disposal and clean up. A site can be designated as garbage dump.

The Children of Itu-Agon