

AFRICA REPORT
The Spirit Movement in Nigeria: 1975

I have always associated the bow with Eastern Society, so I was shocked to discover in Lagos, Nigeria that the Africans bow. I bring you greetings from your colleagues in West Africa in probably the most appropriate fashion for me to greet you (bowing). You notice I touched my ankles; that was a sign of high respect and honor. I was shocked, sitting in the airport in Lagos, to see old gentlemen in traditional garb being greeted by younger people, businessmen, soldiers, and women, who would come up to them and bow in various ways, anything from bending slightly to touching the knee or touching the ankle, and on one occasion I saw a well-attired businessman about thirty-five or forty years old walk up to an older man and actually get down and do a kind of push-up. I was even more shocked later on to have a young man in his teens do the same for me. The moment I stepped off the plane, I knew that I was in another world that did not match my expectations.

I want to read a poem.

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre
the falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

William Butler Yeats

A contemporary Nigerian writer named Achebe has taken one of the lines out of that poem to characterize the interior and external atmosphere of Nigerian traditional culture. The title of his book is Things Fall Apart, one of the lines from Yeats' poem.

Imagine what it is like to take a political reality that is super-imposed by the West and has no grassroots meaning. It's almost like trying to make one nation of Scandinavia, the British Isles, and France, except the cleavage is more dramatic. In 1966, it looked to the rest of Nigeria as though the Ibo people in the East had made a move to capture the government. Whether that was actually the case was hard to say, but everywhere you went in Nigeria the people that ran things were Ibo. In the small villages, the mechanics that you could depend upon were Ibo, the people that ran the telephone exchange were Ibo, all the civil service were Ibo. In 1966, in the west, but especially in the north, the northern peoples began to slaughter the Ibo peoples for no reason other than their current position in the society. Eighty thousand or more people were killed in that blood bath. That began a great return where people began to flee from the cities and the villages across Nigeria, back across the Niger river to Ibo land. Following the second coup, which was a bloody coup, General Ojukwu went on television and announced the secession of Eastern Nigeria, and proclaimed it Biafra. That was the beginning of the Biafran war in which over two million people died. Fantastic suffering was occasioned in the midst of that conflict.

That kind of political instability gives you a feel for the characteristic evidence of the waves of resurgence in Nigeria. Tribalism set the stage for the Biafran war, but the trends that occasioned it were not tribalism, but the wild political and economic dynamic of our time that has affected the entire globe.

After the Biafran war, General Gowon was a national hero, and moved very quickly to bind the wounds of the war. He effected a conciliatory policy toward the east, to the dislike of many of his own officers. Being a rather popular man, over a period of nine years, he built a government. Recently, it has been marked by paralysis and galloping corruption at every level of the government. Thus, in July, when General Gowon and his advisors were in Uganda for the meeting of the Organization of African States, the Army pulled a very well-orchestrated bloodless coup. General Gowon did not return, and his decision not to try to return probably prevented bloodshed from happening.

It is a milieu of paradox, and to get a feel for it, put yourself in the city of Ije-Ode. It's a small city between the two major cities of Nigeria, Lagos on the coast and Ibadan, both of which are basically Yoruba cities although Lagos is neutral because it is the capitol. In Ije-ode, a city of about sixty thousand, you encounter wild, stark, dramatic contrast between traditional folkways and contemporary society. For example, about a month and a half ago there was the Festival of the New Yams where all the village people came into the city, and, rehearsing the old animistic practices which some people call JuJu, they initiated a whole series of week-long celebrations climaxed finally by a grand parade of the shrines of fertility. It has nothing to do with the Christian faith, it has to do with the ancient animistic undergirdings

of African religion. During that last night tradition says if any woman steps out of her house and sees the shrine, she will be cursed and will instantly go barren or mad. On the night of this final procession of the shrines of fertility, we were visiting a colleague and left his house late, about 10 o'clock. We made a wrong turn, and ran into that procession--hundreds of men, carrying this strange looking shrine, and several characters dressed strangely, mounted on horses riding in the midst of them. We tried to back up and could not and finally just waited until it passed us. We did not know what to anticipate, because we were clearly outsiders. In some parts of the world, if you are a Westerner and have white skin, that still carries a bit of symbolic power, and you can count on it getting you out of tight spots. In Nigeria, because Nigerians have always been in charge of their own destiny, even in the midst of the heyday of the British Empire, white skin does not mean anything, except that something happened to you when you were born. If you are a Yoruba, you know that to be a man is to be black, and if you turn up with white skin, that is probably because somebody peeled your skin off. The word for white man is "oinbo" which means "peeled skin" and people call you an "oinbo."

So here were two "oinbos" sitting in a car in the fever pitch of this final great blastout. We sat there holding our breath, and about half-way through the procession, they began to crowd around the car and beat on it with their hands. We had heard all the stories of vigilante justice. In Nigeria, if you are a thief, you never get caught, because, even if you just steal a purse and they catch you, they kill you, they tear you to pieces. We were sitting in this car not knowing what to expect, and when they started beating on it with their hands, we knew that they were going to turn it over, and take us out of there, and tear us limb from limb. But after beating on the car for about ten minutes, they left us frightened, terrified "oinbos," and went on down the road.

You contrast that with the number of Mercedes Benzes you see driving down the highways, and the sophisticated people with their university degrees, and the fantastic cosmopolitan cities coming into being, and it gives you a feel for the paradox where folk society on the one hand, and contemporary society are both existing. In the midst of that, as the African writer has said "things fall apart" and the center doesn't hold.

The religious heritage of Nigeria, West Africa, is something like this. Africans think of themselves as a religious people, and in a strange way that is true. There is a kind of immediate sense of the mystery in life that is amazing. People can spin stories that set you on your ear. At the same time, there has been a kind of paralysis of the imagination in the church over the last decades. Currently in Nigeria the population is about half Moslem and half Christian with a strong strand of animism over and through both. In the north, the population is primarily Moslem. In the west it is about half Christian and half Moslem, "and the East it is all Christian. In

the Biafran war, you had the Christian east against the Moslem north and the Moslem-Christian west. In the current political coup, to the people in the east, it looks like the north and west have joined forces to squeeze them out. The people in the east are not particularly optimistic about the future right now.

The church is experiencing itself paralyzed to deal effectively with the social milieu. British and American missionaries established the foundations of the church in Nigerian society, and over the last hundred years or so, the church has built the educational and medical structures in Nigeria. Currently, the government is making a move to take back all the educational structures and the hospitals. There is a kind of deep paralysis. As one churchman put it, "we are not prepared for this hour." People are sensing that this is a key moment for the church, with a kind of special role coming into focus. And yet, at the same time, it is clear that churchmen are not prepared for this hour.

I was sent to Area Lagos to assist in setting up an International Training Institute. What preceded that particular ITI was a series of consults and courses in West Africa in 1968, some of which were in Nigeria. Last year in ITI: Nairobi we had ten West Africans; five of them were Nigerians. It was their urging that led us to assign staff to Lagos last November to begin to set up the Lagos Religious House. In the midst of that kind of a foundation and the urgings of colleagues there, we decided to go ahead and do an ITI without having carefully discerned the structures of sponsorship that were necessary to build the church in Nigeria.

We had been working for about a month and a half to get that ITI off the ground when, without consulting us ahead of time, the army staged a coup. As a result of that coup, foreigners were reluctant to travel in Nigeria from surrounding nations. Also the visa processors and consulates around the world closed temporarily, so no visas were being offered. We also discovered that our materials had been left in Germany, and had not been delivered to Nigeria at all. About a week and a half before the ITI was scheduled to begin, we had a radical situation on our hands. In consultation with a number of colleagues we decided to postpone the ITI, and instead hold a one-week training program which we called a Parish Leaders Training Lab that was several things carefully woven together. We had twenty-five people show up representing six nations, including the African nations of Nigeria, Ghana and Chad, and six denominations.

The program that we held, which was a combination LENS seminar and RS-I, was met by the people who participated in it with a great amount of enthusiasm. On the other side of this, we find that we have an invitation to do an ITI in January in Nigeria. We also have invitations to do ITI's in the Cameroons, in Sierra Leone, and in Ghana. That means that next year, if we wanted to, we could do four ITI's in West Africa. Our colleagues there are going to have to sort out the need for next year, and how we deal with all of those invitations.

Now a word about the future. In West African society there are some fundamental challenges that have to be overcome. The first is the tribal schism that characterizes Nigerian society. If Nigeria is to move into the future, she has to overcome the deep, generations-old schism between the major tribal groups. Second is the isolation of local man. One of the things that excited the churchmen in our program the most was getting hold of methods of planning in the LENS seminar that enabled them to see how the man on the street could participate in decision-making and creating social vision. Right now, local man in Nigeria senses himself utterly isolated, and is very cynical about government. One of the reasons the coup was bloodless was that local man felt he did not participate in it. It was a military thing. He had nothing to do with it, and he believes that in a matter of time it will be the same old story. Third, is the vacuum of social vision which has to be overcome. In the midst of runaway economic development, there is literally no sense of direction. There is widespread criticism of the third development plan that is currently the guiding vision of Nigerian society.

The fourth thing is the inadequate infrastructure. The waves of resurgence today in Nigeria are evident everywhere, and they are evident in strange ways. As soon as I touched down at the airport and began to make my way to Ije-ode, I became aware that I was in an unusual situation. It first struck me while sitting for three hours in a traffic jam in Lagos. I have never seen traffic jams in my life like those in Lagos. Lagos is the most cosmopolitan city in West Africa, and yet it comes to one as a strange blend of tribal slums and cosmopolitan city. To get to Lagos from Ije-ode, you have to travel at least two and possibly from six to eight hours: one hour to traverse the countryside through the jungle to the outskirts of Lagos and then another one to six hours to get into the heart of Lagos, depending on the time of day. You can imagine what that does to businessmen's plans. One Lutheran pastor told me that he has given up trying to plan congregational meetings during the week because they never happen. People leave work heading for the meeting and do not get there until midnight. After that happened a couple of times he gave up and now holds all of his meetings after the church service on Sunday. Starting out for a noon meeting, you would probably leave around nine or ten o'clock, and if you are fortunate, you would be there by lunch time.

This is an illustration of the kind of inadequate infrastructure, because of the impossibility of keeping up with runaway development. Among the peoples of Nigeria, there is a strange kind of resistance to operating structurally. People operate on the basis of personal relationships, which means that everything works through the back door. I think probably that is an erosion of the traditional folk ways that society used to operate out of that are now inadequate to the urban scene. Somehow, that has to be overcome to move to structural care if Nigeria is to keep up with runaway development.

Finally, the church has got to find a way to overcome the "holy community separatism" that characterizes much of its life. Doctrinalism and denominationalism prevent the denominations from working together at the grassroots level. However, the fundamental contradiction the church has to overcome is methodological ineptitude. That is also characteristic of the social structures. There is no way of planning effective engagement in the social milieu. Churchmen are suspecting that this is a key moment in the history of Nigeria. Nigerians are seeing that Nigeria is probably the key to West Africa, if not to all of the continent. Simply to move ahead, the necessity of overcoming these contradictions is before the Nigerian society and the church. The church has begun to see itself as the teacher and shepherd of society.

In the midst of that, this is the time when the Movement is present like an underground river. Probably the time has not yet come when the Movement is going to break loose as it has in Asia. We cannot do ITI's in Africa, particularly in West Africa, the way we could in Asia now, but that time is coming. The time will come very soon when the Movement will move like wildfire across Africa, whereas now, it is like an underground river just flowing and waiting its time.

So I bring you greetings from your colleagues in West Africa, and say to you that the Movement is alive and well, and waiting for the time when it shall become explicit. There is evidence that that time is coming soon.

James Addington