

MEMORIES OF NIGERIA

by Kathleen Whitney

My first memory of being in Nigeria is of the bus ride from the airport into Lagos. (September, 1965) All 92 of us, who talked to each other nonstop during the 3 months of Peace Corps training, were completely silent during that ride. Our senses were assaulted. There was that very red dirt; there were the women walking along the sides of the road with enormous loads on their heads: trays with yams or cassava or a pig.....and there was their incredible posture. There were the smells: cooking fires with palm oil, goat meat, and dried stockfish, the smells of rot and decay (it was the rainy season), the smells of animal and human feces, diesel fuel, sweat... and when I got to my little house in Awgu there was the overwhelming odor of mildew, which for years I associated with anxiety.

There were many other strange things to get used to, like vultures jumping around on my tin roof. There were army ants, scorpions and geckos. There were what I called sausage flies, those fat-bodied noisy flies that fluttered around the lights at night and which the students would grab and eat. (I guess they didn't get enough protein; market day was only every four days, and I don't think the school had refrigeration.)

The hills behind Awgu:



My school, Rosary High School for Girls, was run by Irish nuns from County Cork. I'd never met any nuns before, so this was new, too. I really liked the principal, Sister Thecla. She had a good sense of humor and didn't take herself too seriously. Once, at the very end when we were preparing to leave, a couple of days before the Biafran War started, I asked her, "What are you nuns going to do? Are you going to go home? Are you going to stay here?" She answered, "Well, I don't fancy bein' a martyr, now." She did, as it turned out, go back to Ireland. My mother remembers that when she came to visit me in Nigeria, Sister Thecla led us to a favorite picnic spot in the hills above Awgu, Ma has a vision of Sister jumping out of her car and leaping over a fence, her habit flying. (In actual fact Sister Thecla wore a "modern" habit, which was much less restricting than the old ones, and probably a lot more comfortable in that hot climate.)

We had a week's vacation for St. Patrick's day. Every time there was a vacation, and even on weekends, I would take off, and usually go visit fellow Peace Corps volunteers.

Me, Eric Glass, Bob Jackson, and ? at Eric's house in Onitcha:





Oney Stewart, Steve Vincent, Eric Glass, Mary Blocksma outside my house in Awgu

I asked Sister Thecla what the nuns were going to do for this week of St. Paddy's day. "Oh, we'll be makin' cakes for the Fathers," she said. There were two Irish priests who lived just down the hill from me. One was an older man, and one was the youngish Father Devine (Divine?), who had a shock of red hair and twinkling blue eyes. It was said that several children in the village resembled him, and he was so handsome it was hard to take him very seriously. But he stayed behind in Nigeria (Biafra, as it became) during the Civil War, so I had to revise my impression of him as a lightweight. There was another priest named Eddie who lived in a town to the south. I can't remember how he knew me, but he took to visiting me every few months. Once, I came down the hill from the school to my house to have lunch, only to find Eddie there, having instructed my steward to cook

us a huge slab of beef he'd brought. My steward generally didn't cook for me; I preferred to do my own cooking, but he was obliged to cook on this day. Eddie was obsessed with women and sex. He was smitten with a Peace Corps girl who lived in his town, and he couldn't understand why she seemed to be romantically involved with the African American PC man there. He told me once that there were 10,000 Italian priests who had mistresses. "Wow! How many priests ARE there in Italy?" I asked. "Well, there can't be many more than that, now can there!" was the response.

One of the places I went on vacation was Cameroun. I went with a couple of PC friends. We took a plane from Calabar or somewhere near there. It was one of those little planes that sits at a 45 degree angle to the ground. We were going to Victoria, on the coast. When we landed at the airport in Cameroun, we found that the road was not finished. There were no cars at all on that road. We had to walk 5 miles through the bush in the blazing sun in the middle of the day, lugging our suitcases. (This was before suitcases had wheels.) We grumbled and complained and sweated. When we got to the main road, we stopped, and, looking up at the huge trees, we saw a whole tribe of gibbons swinging gracefully from branch to branch. It was a glorious sight, one I have never seen before or since, and was well worth the five mile walk.

Another place I went during the two December breaks, with one or two other PC women, was Calabar, to work in the mental hospital there. (The Peace Corps strongly encouraged us to do short term work during school holidays.) The only thing I knew about mental hospitals was from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. This one also had a big nurse; she was big and she was the head nurse, but, unlike Kesey's character, she was very nice. I don't think she had much direct contact with the patients. She seemed to mostly do administrative work. We would sit in her office every morning for a half hour or so drinking coffee and chatting. The doctors were very proud of their new electric shock treatment setup and made us watch a man getting shocked.



Me in Calabar:

There was a men's ward and a women's ward. We PCVs took turns spending time in each. The men were very quiet and serious. We persuaded them to sit in a circle and take turns talking about whatever they wanted. I remember a couple of young men who were very intelligent and articulate. It seemed to me that they were almost too sensitive to be able to handle the occasional frenzy of daily life. I remember being surprised that I felt such a connection with them. It was perhaps the first time I experienced how some human emotions and reactions transcend cultures.

The women's ward was much more fun. The women were much livelier and more talkative. There was one woman who did a terrific job of getting everyone together to have our daily meetings. We PCVs participated as well, and we all talked about our lives, our families, our hopes and fears. The patients also talked about why they were in there. Everything had to be translated into at least four languages, but thanks to that one woman, this was handled efficiently. The hospital was located on a city street and the women could go out into the fenced-in yard whenever they wanted. Every day the snuff seller would come by and the women would run eagerly out of the meeting to buy some snuff from him. "Why do you like snuff so much?" I asked one of them. "It gives me the happies!" she said.

I was very busy at my school. I taught 6 levels of French, and sometimes volleyball. I put all the books in the school library on the Dewey Decimal System, and I directed a play. The play was a one-act by Wole Soyinka---a Nigerian version of Everyman, based on the medieval Everyman. In both versions Everyman is dying and hopes to go to Heaven but since he has neglected Good Deeds (who takes human form and chastises him for his selfishness), he is bound to go to Hell. The old version is pretty grim; in Soyinka's version Everyman has a daughter who is pregnant, and there is the likelihood that his soul will be reborn into the body of the baby, and he will have another chance. It's a very nice play and we all had a good time doing it. We won some prizes and got to travel around what is now Enugu State performing it.

Some students fetching water from the spring:



I also taught ESL in the village in the evening. So I was pretty busy, too busy and tired to go down to the village during the week, but I do regret that I didn't spend more weekends at home so that I could explore the village more. I was very fascinated by the simple farmers who lived there and I did form a sort of friendship with a woman named Elizabeth who sold a few tomatoes and okra pods by the side of the little dirt road. We couldn't talk to each other because neither of us spoke standard Igbo. I didn't go down to the village very often. There

was one memorable occasion, however, that I did spend an afternoon there. I was in my house and suddenly heard some very powerful music wafting up the hill. There was the sound of drums, flutes and perhaps thumb pianos. "I'm going to take my tape recorder down there and record this music!" I said to myself. I got my large reel-to-reel tape recorder and stuck it into my knap sack. It was hardly disguised. You could see the rectangular outline very clearly. I walked down to the village, found the source of the music----a large clearing with a lot of people, mostly men, sitting around in a circle. I crouched in the bushes, not wanting to interfere with the party, but of course I was spotted at once. "Onye oca!" ("white person!") came the cry, and suddenly I was the guest of honor. I was mortified but tried to be gracious. I don't remember how I knew it was a funeral; perhaps there was a body. I was taken into a room where women were wailing. I was introduced to the wife (or the head wife), but she paid little attention to me. Then I was taken back outside, seated in the only chair and given some palm wine. I was very embarrassed. Someone pointed to my pack and encouraged me to turn on my tape recorder, which I must have done, though I don't remember ever playing the music later. Suddenly a man got up to dance. He wasn't wearing a costume, just ragged shorts and bare feet, but around his neck was a freshly-killed chicken. As he danced the chicken's wings flapped up against his cheeks. It was very compelling in a kind of creepy way. Perhaps the wing-flapping represented the soul trying to leave the body.

A few months later my father died suddenly and I went home for a few weeks to help my mother with his memorial service. It was a very moving event; people spoke lovingly about my father; a trio played Bach and Mozart; tears were shed quietly. (I cried all night alone in my room.) No one wailed, and certainly no one danced with a dead chicken around his neck! The contrast was striking. On reflection, although I do prefer the Bach and Mozart way of mourning, I have to admire a culture which has built-in traditions that allow one to actively and dramatically express his feelings of grief and devastation in the face of death.

On the whole, my experience in Nigeria was one of the most important ones in my life. I find that I still have a great deal of affection for that country and its people. I feel a lot of sadness about all the terrible things that have happened there. I also feel bad that I succumbed to a certain colonial attitude that was common among Americans and Europeans, a tendency to roll our eyes at the way Nigerians pronounced English or the way (Ibos anyway) seemed so eager to adapt western attitudes and dismiss their own traditions. It was as if we (I) felt superior to Nigerians, when in fact our more privileged status was a mere accident of birth.



Me near Awgu:

At the recent Friends of Nigeria gathering, a Nigerian ex-patriate spoke about his impressions of Peace Corps volunteers when he first met them in the sixties, and later, in retrospect, when he moved to the United States. He was awed by the high standard of living and material wealth in the U.S. He marveled that those young people in the Peace Corps were willing to leave “all this comfort and wealth” and go spend two years in the much poorer Nigeria. But of course material comfort and wealth had nothing to do with it. For myself, I think that what I gained in terms of understanding from my two years in Nigeria definitely outweighed what I gave, (and I gave quite a lot). I feel very fortunate to have had that experience, and I fervently hope that things will become much better in Nigeria. They deserve it!