

Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



How to survive Victoria Island

Survival is the name of a very popular television docudrama shown in Europe, the USA, Australia, South Africa and maybe elsewhere. A varied group of people are placed in a real potentially life-threatening situation such as being cast away on a deserted island in the Pacific. The ensuing real-life drama is filmed by an accompanying TV crew. It is a struggle for survival of the fittest: one by one, members of the group drop out until only one person remains as the survivor and winner of the prize money. In Nigeria, there is no need to fabricate life-threatening situations since we are all confronted with them from morning to night, seven days a week.

Armed robbers, dangling live electric wires, leaking gas cylinders, contaminated kerosene, adulterated diesel in generator tanks, kamikaze Okada cyclists, homicidal maniac molue/danfo/bus drivers, faulty brakes, no car lights, poor steering in speeding, overtaking vehicles, treacherous potholes/gullies in the roads, faulty rifles issued to the police by the Defence corporation which discharged accidentally, shoddily built buildings which collapse on their inmates, planes trying to land at night or in a storm without lights on the runway let alone radar; instruments used in female genital mutilations and abortions, contaminated foodstuffs and water.... These are only the manmade dangers to life. Then there are the natural (and unnatural) diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, typhoid, meningitis, guinea worm infestation and AIDS.

There are also dangerous situations that are less immediately life-threatening but more life-limiting. One such thing is the traffic logjam, go-slow to no-go which paralyzes and pollutes Victoria Island and Lekki.

Lagos has been infamous, globally, for its traffic snarls since the early 1970s. Just as a century earlier, Lagos-harbor had been notorious for its perilous access. Up till 1908 when the Lagos bar was dredged, the only way in was a surf boat. Mary Kingsley in her Travels in West Africa (1895) famously describes the hazards.

"Lagos is a marvelous manifestation of the perversity of man coupled with the perversity of nature, being at the same time one of the most important exporting ports on the West Africa seaboard and one of the most difficult to get at. The town of Lagos is situated on the Island River, a river which is much given to going into lagoons and mud, and which has a bar about two miles out. The entire breadth of the channel through this bar is half a mile, at least on paper. On each side of this channel is the worst set of breakers in West Africa, and its resident population consists of sharks whose annual toll of human life is said, by some authorities to be fourteen, by others forty, but like everything else connected with Lagos Bar, it is uncertain but bad. This entrance channel, however, at the best of times has not more than thirteen feet of water in it.... (and) instead of sticking to its governmentally reported thirteen feet it is prone to be nine feet, and exceedingly prone also to change its position...."

This was a real threat to survival. As for the letter hazards of land traffic, a brilliant professional analysis of the traffic problem in Lagos is given by P.O. Sada and A. A. Adefolalu in Lagos: The development of an African city (A. B. Aderibigbe 1975).

In Lagos, traffic congestion and hazards also owe their causes to physical and human factors. The physical factors include narrow roads made still narrower by indiscriminate parking and all sorts of obstruction; the paucity of public parking spaces; the absence of sidewalk on virtually all roads, absence of official stops for sub-urban vehicles operating into the city; lack of traffic separation between the heavy slow-moving and lighter fast-moving vehicles and of the pedal-and motorcyclist; absence of alternative route for leaving or arriving at the main traffic destinations; absence of alternative media of

transport like water, road and rail which could be well integrated; the insufficient number of bridges across the lagoon; absence of traffic light, pedestrian crossings, underground passages at major road intersections and overhead bridges across busy streets in all but a few places; and absence of street lights on many major roads in the city, which means that drivers at night put on their headlight which dazzles others with unpleasant consequences.

The human factors are those relating to the motorists and the general public's lack of knowledge of proper road use, impatience on the part of motorists, the

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various obstruction created along the roads through inconsiderate parking, dumping of road building and house-building materials on a considerable portion of the road space instead of along the road margins, as well as by invasion of a certain street sides by 'squatter' petty traders; the slow slovenly manner in which road repair and reconstruction works are affected; negligent and reckless driving; obstruction caused by vehicles that have been broken down as a result of old age, overloading and ill-maintenance; obstruction caused by accidents, inefficient traffic control by the traffic police; ineptitude of the police; speedy handling of cases of road accidents and traffic offences, including violation of traffic regulations and byelaws; the dubious manner in which certain drivers obtain driving licenses and vehicle roadworthiness certificates and, very significantly, the concentration of work, business and administrative places in the island parts of the city which results to tremendous poll of people and traffic into these parts all day."

However, in 1975, Victoria Island, part of the coastal sand bar, low-lying and swampy, was in the process of reclamation. The preliminary survey for its development was completed only in 1958. Before that, the only transportation to Victoria Island had been from 1907 to 1914 when the track of a sanitary tramway was laid. This went around Lagos collecting human waste which was delivered into the harbor at Dejection Jerry on Victoria Island. This was later adapted to take passengers until 1914 when it was closed.

In the 1970s, Victoria Island was designed to be a low density, residential area: in the 1980s began its conversion to Lagos Wall St. Even then, the traffic was much lighter than Lagos Island and the mainland. Today, the traffic explosion in Victoria Island has generated a sea change (pun intended), in the lives of all Lagosians who work, or reside in or visit Victoria Island whereas, before we could all plan our activities based on a reasonable estimate of the length of

time it would take to get from point A to point B, now, we all have horror stories of spending two hours on Falomo bridge, or on Ozumba Mbadiwe to get to Mobil or Lekki. The problem in the latter instance is that there is no other way to take it. In 1959, Awolowo, as premier of the Western Region, proposed to the Federal Government a bridge across the lagoon from Ikoyi to Lekki. Because of the political conflict between AG and the Federal Government, this very sensible and long-sighted proposal was rejected. So, now all of us (myself included), who live beyond Mobil petrol station, have to crawl along the only access road.

To survive this life-limiting immobilization, one develops strategies such as leaving home earlier and earlier, forgetting lunch at home, taking clothes to change into so you don't have to go home until it is late, when the traffic eases, having lots of reading materials on laptop computer in the car to occupy oneself and if you're fortunate to possess a cellular phone, spend the time telephoning

These are just personal survival tips but there must be long term, overall strategies put in place by the police, state government and the private sector to restore some degree of normal traffic flow. I commend Platinum Bank for sponsoring traffic wardens and Lagos State for employing traffic directors but there are not enough police on all the road junctions. When they are in place, traffic does move. Even when heroic amputees take over the job of 'yellow fevers', they make a difference and should be recompensed. As the population expands from Lekki to Epe, the amount of traffic along the stretch expressively increases. The only solution is that the bridge from Ikoyi, which was mooted in 1959, has to be built to relieve the congestion. Otherwise, one day the whole of the reclaimed land of the Victoria Island and Lekki peninsula will sink under the weight of hundreds of growling vehicles backed up for miles. Then we'll see who will survive that catastrophe!

Immediately after the civil war, there was a very poignant and popular highlife song, Happy Survival, celebrating the end of the war for those who had been in Biafra and lived to tell the tale. Some of those survivors, especially the soldiers, experienced what we now called post-traumatic stress but was then known as shell shock. They needed skillful psychiatric treatment to restore their mental health, and this was provided by the few dedicated heroic psychiatrists and psychiatric nurses working in the east-central state. One member of that group has just died: Irene Ogbolu, the very first Nigerian psychiatric nurse, at the age of 75. She had retired as the chief nursing officer of Anambra State and also as a Girl Guides' commissioner; she will always be remembered for her compassionate insight into the mental suffering caused by the war and for the articles she wrote documenting the experiences of the psychiatric teams during the civil war. Irene was my very close friend and I mourn her passing. May her soul rest in peace.

Postscript: I had the pleasure of attending an unusual wedding last weekend. My younger son needed the services of an orthodontist, Dr Amy Binta Traore, and over the many months of treatment, we became so friendly that she invited us to her wedding. Amy is Mauritanian on her father's side and Nigerian on her mother's side. The groom is Lambert Shumbusho, a Rwandan lawyer assigned to a multinational company in Lagos.

The presence of many Mauritanian and Rwandan guests endowed the wedding with a special grace and je ne sais quoi, the chairman of the occasion, Prof. Ojo spoke in English and French: the bride's father in his language and French, likewise the groom's mother (the father is dead). As the witty M.C., Ali Baba observed the occasion and the marriage represents a model of that 'cooperation and integration in Africa', which the new ministry of that name, under the bilingual medical minister, Dr Bimbola Ogunkelu, advocates. I congratulate the handsome pan Africa couple and wish them a bonne chance of a successful, peaceful future and happy survival.