

Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



Next week will mark the 35th anniversary of my arrival at Lagos airport on December 30, 1996. I was supposed to arrive two days earlier, according to my itinerary as worked out by Qantas in Sydney, my hometown and point of departure. The Qantas agent was unfamiliar with flights into Lagos, but according to his 'book,' Nigeria Airways flew from Rome to Lagos.

Rome was my last stop-over after visits to Manila, Hong Kong, Bombay, Bangkok, Athens, and Tel Aviv. This meant I did not have to fly on to London to get a flight to Lagos. Rather, my ticket ended in London after Lagos because this trip to Lagos was in the nature of "Siddon look." I had met Ben Mba, my husband-to-be in New Zealand and we agreed that I would come to Lagos and see whether I could adapt to life in Nigeria. If I decided I could not adapt, I would go on to London where I had gained admission to the University of London to do an M. Phil.

I was just 22: life was full of possibilities.

In Rome, I returned in good time for my night flight to Lagos. The first shock, there was no Nigeria Airways counter at the airport. Eventually, I was referred to the BOAC counter where, the second shock, I was informed that there was no Nigeria Airways flight—there hadn't been one for some time – they had no idea when there would be a next one. Their advice: go to London and take one of their flights. I knew Ben would be waiting for me at the Lagos airport: I had no telephone number to contact him, what was I to do? I asked whether any other airlines flew to Lagos from Rome and found out that Sabena did. So, off to Sabena, I went only to learn that yes, they did fly to Lagos but that the next flight was not until three days. I quickly calculated my money and knew I could not pay for three nights in even a cheap hotel.

What next? In consternation, I just stood there. My pitiable state attracted attention: I knew people were discussing my case. A KLM uniformed man approached me and said that if I was interested, a KLM plane would leave for South Africa, in three hours, with a stopover in Kano. I looked at him blankly: thinking, surely, he's not suggesting I go to South Africa; in those days a deeply hated country. The KLM man saw my non-comprehension and added, "You know Kano is in Nigeria." Revelation. I expressed my delight, apologized for my ignorance, and said of course I was interested. From Kano, I could surely

My Arrival 35 Years Ago

take a bus or train to Lagos. In retrospect, I shudder, at my time, ignorance was truly bliss. So off to the KLM counter I went and had my ticket endorsed to KLM. I did ask whether they knew how I'd get to Lagos from Kano but met indifferent shrugs. Not their problem.

I was disconcerted to discover when I boarded that the passengers were predominantly white Afrikaans. When in the early hours of the next morning we landed at Kano, I and two white male passengers waited for our luggage to be removed and trolled to the terminal. We followed: one of the men introduced himself to me and from then on took me under his wing. Unfortunately, I've forgotten his name but I remember

his kindness. He was Greek, a man-

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ager of the Metaloplastica factory in Kano, returning from leave: I shall call him Andreas. As we walked across the tarmac, I was shocked to see armed soldiers on guard dotted along the route. At the entrance to the terminal, three soldiers stood behind two tables under a handwritten sign 'Immigration'. Andreas handed over his passport and exchanged words with the guards. Then I handed in mine; the soldier asked me what I was doing in Kano. I explained that I was trying to get to Lagos etc. but he didn't seem to listen. Then he asked me from which country I was from and exasperated I replied, "but it's in my passport". The soldier frowned furiously and said something to the other two: I fixed my gaze on my passport and suddenly realized that the soldier was holding it upside

down. A shiver of fear kept me silent: Andreas spoke quickly and cheerfully to the soldier who laughed and casually flicked my passport to me. I quickly followed Andreas through the deserted terminal.

Only two cars were parked outside, and one was for Andreas, the other for the second man. Andreas offered me a lift but where was I going? I explained my predicament and Andreas told me the only solution was to return to the airport at night and join the BOAC flight that stopped over in Kano en route to Lagos. For the rest of the day, I was welcome to be his guest. The following fifteen or so hours taught me a great deal about the country I'd just landed in. I knew there had been a military coup in January, which had overthrown a parliamentary democracy, and that there had been some killings and unrest since then but frankly all that was very remote to me. Ben's letters reassured me that there was nothing to worry about and Lagos was very peaceful.

Driving through what I later knew to be the Sabongari and seeing the burnt-out cars, the smashed windows and doors of houses, forcefully brought home to me that this was where thousands of people had been slaughtered. At lunch at the Kano club, I learnt more than I needed to know from a conversation about the ferocity of ethnic prejudice.

That night, Andres got me safely to the BOAC plane and when I landed in Lagos, Ben was waiting for me there. He had come to the airport the previous two nights hoping I would turn up. These drives to and from Surulere to Ikeja at night had not been comfortable: there were military checkpoints to negotiate, which made Igbo apprehensive just three months after the last pogrom in the north. The exodus of Igbo people from Ibadan and Lagos had begun. Ben's two brothers in Lagos had already sent their families to Onitsha. They had insisted on accompanying their younger brother on his trips to the airport for his safety and also to extend a proper welcome to me from the Mba family.

Six weeks later, they were present at the registry office in Broad Street, where we got married. My "Siddon look" had convinced me I could *waka Lagos well well*. However, three months later, we too felt we had to join the continuing exodus to the East. That is another anniversary and another story for another column.