

## NIGERIA II

**Gary James**

*GaryJoseJames@gmail.com*

During the spring of 2014, I penned a piece entitled “**Bring the Girls Home**” referring to the more than 200 girls kidnapped from their school by *Boko Haram*, the Nigeria based extremist-Muslim military cult. This horrific, egregious and willful act of brutality and barbarity executed by proponents of a perverted ideology they connect with Islam caused me to reflect on my visit to Nigeria in October of 2001. I arrived one month following the infamous 9/11 incident that raised the *Twin Towers* in New York City and killed thousands of people. During the two months that my visit embodied the northeastern region of Nigeria began to erupt as *Boko Haram* began attacking Christians and churches, burning communities and killing residents with unspeakable barbarity. I was there as a professional consulting on a faith based *HIV/AIDS* project focused on education, and counseling in at risk communities.

The project “*SAC-AIDS*” featured a unique interface between health care professionals and institutions in Nigeria and the United States. Apart from the usual project development scenarios, I was profoundly impacted by the general dysfunction of the largely binary (*rich or poor*) society that characterizes Nigeria. And profound political corruption is the categorical characterization in terms of how the government and politics operates. The experience was everlasting therefore I felt an emotional connection to the abducted students and with their bewildered and suffering parents, when I first learned the dreadful news. If I were to describe my visit to Nigeria in a few words, it would be a *dramatic lesson in street justice...*

I spent eight weeks in *Nigeria*, traveling between *Lagos* (the big city), and *Abuja*, the newly constructed capital of the most populace African country. As soon as we deplaned in *Nigeria* and moved to the baggage claim area, the language problem confronted me and I could immediately appreciate that it would be a major challenge for me to exit the airport to the parking lot. I essentially followed the crowd to the baggage claim and waited for my suitcase. Fortunately my contact arrived as my bag swung around the carousel and he

instructed me to follow him outside to the parking lot, and not to respond or react to anyone if I’m approached. When we reached the parking lot four other dudes joined in and escorted us. Two were on my left, front and back, while the other two were similarly situated on my right side. Despite being flanked by obvious strong arms on each side, with a self-confident looking big dude in front riding point, I could see aggression on the faces of some people we passed or obliquely encountered them. It was obvious that a strident body language was an important component of how you need to comport yourself in Nigeria. Nigeria is not tourist friendly by any stretch of the imagination, I concluded immediately, and without the strong arms surrounding me it would have been quite a challenge to reach the parking lot and exit the area without the four buffers, led by my point man.

I want to share some of my experiences on the ground in country, as it is relevant to the unfolding events in Nigeria wherein thousands of people are being slaughtered in a most brutal fashion, and hundreds of young girls continue to be kidnapped. And the perpetrators of this chaos and mayhem continue with impunity and without any meaningful resistance from the government and military. I was actually waiting for a break in the case, based on pronouncements of *President Jonathan* that he was negotiating the release of the girls with *Boko Haram*, before I wrote a second article on my observations and experiences in country. I am not persuaded that there will be any prospect of justice for the relevant people in this matter, and the situation is exponentially worse since last spring. But signs of Nigeria degenerating into a free fall were emerging thirteen plus years ago, in my view, and the cancer has metastasized, and it may be too late for radical corrective surgery.

However, my project met with success on one level, but failed to complete the second phase dealing with marketing on the ground. Programmatically the project was a success as we were able to secure the support of the First Lady of Nigeria, *Mrs. Stella Obasanjo*, which was helpful to getting sponsorships.

But the project was designed to be launched with a major concert that featured international entertainers. The names of the various artists that were positioned to participate were impressive and

the proposed venue, in *Port Harcourt*, Nigeria was on board with the concept. However, in the final analysis the project was aborted because major security issues emerged based on the fact of the escalating back and forth scenario between *Muslims* and *Christians* that was sporadic but escalating. Therefore, project outcome amounted to six of one, and half a dozen of the other.

I enjoy extensive contacts in *South Africa* and *Ethiopia*, but had never visited *Nigeria* or developed contacts in any other West African country. Therefore I was looking forward to the visit and to be able note comparisons between southern, eastern and western Africa. But Nigeria proved to be comparatively unique, and the political, economic and social facts on the ground, brought to mind the “jungle” metaphor relatively speaking. However, the fact remains that the law of the jungle pervades on the ground on one hand, and governments response and responsibility is dubious and inept at best on the other hand. Government agencies and institutions do not work well, such as the police department, and electrical blackouts are a daily occurrence requiring the purchase of generators for those that can afford the expense. Moreover there is no social network infrastructure to assist poor families and children.

I was intimidated by the police officers soon after I arrived because they all carry machine guns, and their body language I perceived as menacing. When my contact was pulled over by a police officer for speeding I sat in the passenger seat as stiff as a board, biting my teeth, as my man became irate and began cursing at the officer. I was stunned speechless and couldn't tell him to cool-out before he exited the car staggering, and talking out of side of his mouth as though what spoke was truthful and correct. I was petrified as he stumbled to the officer as though he was bullet proof. I was riveted and couldn't take my eyes off the machine and the cop. It was about 3 or 4 AM and nobody was on the highway but us, I was scared stiff, as never before. He came back in the car after a few minutes and we sped off just reckless as before we were stopped. On the next day he informed me that he hit the police officer off with a *20 US dollar bill*, and that the chances of us getting shot by him were zero. I was still shaken by the experience.

Having been raised in New York City, I comport myself with a “healthy paranoia” when interacting with police officers therefore, the unfolding scenario being instigated by my guy was utterly unsettling. But this introductory episode with officers of the law proved to be my first real culture shock. If a similar situation had occurred in New York City he would have been arrested right away, and he wouldn't have been unscathed when he arrived at the police precinct... But in Nigeria the underpaid police force is 100 percent black and so is the population, which is a complete inversion from the police and community demographic in *Harlem*, and other black communities in the *United States*. Moreover, there is a culture of police bribery which is how business in general is done in country...

The next occasion wherein I observed interactions between police officers and the local population was during my visit to *Abuja*, capital of Nigeria. What I found striking in *Abuja* from the outset, was that everything as far as the eye could see looked relatively new, and very impressive. We traveled from *Lagos* by car to the capital where one of my associates operated a small business that facilitates business transactions with the *United States* and *United Kingdom*, particularly. His office is located on the second floor of a two story commercial building that covers about one square block with a rectangular construction. The office was located in the front portion of the edifice somewhat recessed and located across from government buildings and separated by a six lane road. A parking lot was situated in the middle of the cubic construction and a colorful fruit and produce outdoor market dominated the front pedestrian area, which also accommodated other entrepreneurial and service outlets. I found the optics of the local business interaction and commerce engaging as well as entertaining. But some observations were informative, educational in addition to being culturally shocking.

While observing the marketplace from my second floor porch perspective one afternoon, I noticed a man navigating and negotiating his way across road, dodging traffic with great dexterity. When he reached the sidewalk he came directly to the fruit stands and helped himself to some fruit than immediately took-off running. It seemed as though half of the other vendors stopped their work and

joined in chase after the thief. He rounded the corner while a virtual mob of people were hot on his tail. I was curious enough to go down to the street and follow the crowd to observe the outcome. When I arrived around the corner the man was encircled by the crowd and he was being beaten by three people as others were highly animated and yelling in their common vernacular. The police had already arrived but they seemed to be controlling the encirclement as opposed to being directly involved to stop the beating and arrest the man. But what I anticipated happening never occurred but rather, when the man was almost unconscious and a bloody spectacle the men stopped beating him and the police then called for an ambulance. They never intervened to stop the man from getting beaten.

The first 18 years of my life was spent in the South Bronx, New York and in that environment I learned what street justice means, but the level of street justice that I witnessed in Nigeria was unimaginable to witness in living color. The parkway in central Lagos is usually jammed with traffic and intermittent groupings of markets and vendors that pepper the roadside are typical. Donkey carts transporting various goods and products help to keep the traffic at a slow crawl. I was not surprised when we could do no better than creep along in the middle of traffic. But when traffic came to an abrupt halt and a great mob of people crossed the parkway in a mad rush in front of us, followed by a contingent of police officers, it got my attention as well as my partners. He blurted out an expletive then pulled over to the side of the road and stopped to observe the developments. I was happy he did because my curiosity got the best of me when I saw the police behind the mob. I was exiting the car at the same time as my friend did, and I followed him through the crowd. Smoke was billowing, thick, blue and smelled like sweat noxious burning rubber. When we reached the perimeter of the circular crowd I could see a person on his knees, screaming and rolling around with a burning tire around his neck and another around his legs. I was horrified, shocked and had to throw-up my lunch. I was so shaken up and weak that I had to be helped back to the car, I was uncomfortable for a couple of days thereafter.

I learned later that the victim had shot and killed and robbed a cab driver as he stopped in front of the market area. When the robber exited the cab some

people in the market began chasing him as he ran across the parkway. They ultimately caught up with the man and began beating him with sticks and stones in a mob rule atmosphere. When three policemen attempted to intervene the mob turned on the police officers and intimidated them. Ultimately the police officers backed off and became crowd controller and spectators to the unfolding events. I watched the coverage of the incident on the evening news and they showed the charred remains of the man being removed. Needless to say, street justice at this level was a dramatic revelation to me, and it established unforgettable memories.

The sum of my eight week experience in Nigeria, thirteen plus years ago, enables me to understand to some extent, unfolding events in Nigeria and Africa in general. Consequently, the present and foreseeable future in Nigeria and the African continent is precarious. It was obvious then, there was an insidious and malignant disease lurking in local politics, the local economic elite and global macro-economic interests. On balance, the people and the environment continue to be brutally and wantonly victimized. As today's news reports that more than 2000 people were massacred in a single event by *Boko Haram*, it is obvious that Nigeria is on the border of a failed state and is currently the free fall of civil war. Nigeria's nefarious international reputation as a country of sophisticated economic and political corruption is renowned and well deserved. But conventional economic and political crime and corruption cannot be compared or associated with the diabolical nature and utter barbarity of *Boko Haram*, with their abominable masquerade presented in a pernicious Islamic deception.

Nigeria is unique and replete with irony, but as a practical matter the state of Nigeria, is to a large extent mirrored in many other emerging democracies and developing economies on the continent of Africa. Nigeria has always been the most populous African country but, it was only recently that Nigeria emerged as the largest African economy, finally exceeding South Africa. Although 6 of the 10 fastest growing economies in the world are in Africa, the respective governments need to move beyond the post-colonial legacy of political and economic corruption. Although African countries have removed the occupation of their colonial masters by armed revolution, indigenous

leadership has essentially mimicked the absolute rule characteristic of the colonial paradigm. Unfortunately, there are no obvious signs that Nigeria is on the road to stabilization and recovery in the foreseeable future. The current government seems completely inept to effectively deal with the manifold problems that indicate Nigeria is currently beyond the category of a civilized society.

Nigeria continues to stand out among the most corrupt governments on the continent of Africa. When I was there the Vice President of Nigeria was ultimately identified as the source of the one hundred thousand dollars found the freezer of a member of the US House of Representatives. The US Congressman was successfully prosecuted for corruption in this matter, but the essential facts in the matter are apparently esoteric, and unknown to the general public. The current president of the country has not departed from the political legacy of poor leadership, but he may have compounded his problem with his sublime level of buffoonery...

The presidential election in Nigeria is weeks away therefore it remains to be seen how presidential politics and the ultimately outcome will impact the unfolding crisis. Although President *Good luck Jonathan's* administration has proven to be totally inept by any standard, he is seeking re-election... Despite being completely hopeless and apparently untruthful, in the face of the widespread lawlessness, murders and abductions of by *Boko Haram*, the president somehow believes that he should be re-elected. At one point the president represented that he was negotiating with *Boko Haram*, and that the girls were going to be released soon. That representation turned out to be a complete fabrication as the exploits of the military-terrorist has escalated to the odious and diabolical slaughter of thousands of innocents. The ineffectualness of the Nigerian military to contain *Boko Haram* or successfully defend against their advances or to protect the people from *Boko Haram* demonstrates the unequivocal failure of the *Jonathan* administration. And his patent failure to effectively govern, coupled with the black western type formal hat which he wears everywhere, outdoors as well as indoors and at formal international assemblages distinguishes him as a parody...

*Boko Haram* continues to assert their violent rejection of western influence in Nigeria and the thrust of their military advances, murders, and burnings are designed and implemented to eliminate and destroy western influences, and to rid the country of *Christian infidels*. In view of *Boko Haram's* war against western influences in the country, the fact that *President Jonathan* sports a western styled *black fedora* hat may be viewed as an albatross around his neck... But he has resorted to wearing a more conventional hat on the campaign trail. Campaigning for re-elect to the presidency wearing his *black fedora* is obviously the wrong political tactic, but the change may be too late to bring him success. But on the other hand should he win re-election, what would that say about the *Nigerian electorate*, assuming it is a free and fair election. I am certainly curious about the immediate political future of the largest African economy.

Notwithstanding who ultimately wins the presidency, Nigeria will remain a basket case for the foreseeable future. Hence, the grim reality on the ground in terms of the basic health and welfare of the people going forward, as the super class and political elite wrestle for political control and to be economic interlocutor for western interests. In addition to the general plight of the people, the toxicity of the environment may have already crossed the Rubicon. Decades of a virtually unregulated hydro-carbon industry has contaminated the water and land to the extent that the potential of developing a sustainable fishing industry or agriculture industry are decades away, if remediation was started now.

Multi-national corporations, various mineral extraction industries, and the military industrial complex are the current beneficiaries of Nigeria's status quo. And the ultimate political outcome of the presidency will not be relevant to the economic and geo-political interests and objectives of the former colonial masters that monopolized the economy of the country by remote control. Moreover, instability in the country, such as it is, may provide an optimal scenario for the advancement of the objectives of the existential western forces. Ever since the Berlin Conference of 1884, wherein Africa was partitioned into 50 countries and divided up between the European colonial masters, the raw materials extracted from

the country, particularly oil, provided for the economic wealth and industrial development in the West. The respective boundaries of the Africa's 50 countries were determined at the Berlin Conference, as different ethnic groups, cultures and people were cobbled together, and divided between Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Italy, etc. But since the 1960s by way of arm struggle, revolution and bloodshed, one by one the independence movements of African countries removed the occupation of the European masters.

At the end of the day, Africans gained political control of their respective countries, and for the five decades hence, the indigenous political leaders have failed to establish a stable and sustainable economy and government process. Similar to the African American civil rights leadership following the successes of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Act's respectfully, the African leadership following the success of their independence movements became fascinated, if not preoccupied with the intoxication and perceived power associated with political and government leadership.

Concomitantly, the former colonial powers retained the economic controls associated with the resource wealth of the countries and open access to the land in order to continue with mineral extraction operations. Therefore, the emerging free market democracies have little if any control of their mineral and economic resources requiring the indigenous governments and politics to be relegated to the largess of multi-nationals and military industrialists.

As the largest economy in Africa, and the most populace country, Nigeria to some extent represents a template for others countries on the continent. But the unfolding barbarity and wanton killings by *Boko Haram*, the extremist-Muslim terrorists in the region are positioning Nigeria to be a failed state.

Therefore, other regional states must be supportive of the Nigerian military offensive against *Boko Haram*, because the Nigerian people are not being protected from the ravages of the extremist-Muslim terrorists. At this point a regional military coalition is the way forward in order to halt the territorial advances of *Boko Haram*. Also, it must be understood what the limitations are regarding destroying *Boko Haram*. While a western African military coalition can bring the territorial advances to a stop, the military is not capable of defeating the

perverse ideology that they assert as Islam, which mimics and associated with the war underway by ISIL and the Islamic state. A worst case scenario seems to be unfolding and Nigeria may at the end of the day be the lead domino to fall in *West Africa*. We will continue to follow events as they unfold...

