

# Oyinbo pepper

## Experience of the white man in Nigeria



•Former British Prime Minister, John Major, (with former presidential aspirant, Chief Olu Falae at 10, Downing Street, London) lived in Jos in the 60s and is believed to speak Hausa language

IN late November, 1999, I went to St. Louis, Missouri, USA to attend the funeral of Paul Mueller, a childhood friend from Nigeria who died tragically in a freak accident in his apartment. A month later, I traveled to Charlotte, North Carolina, USA to attend the wedding of Tabitha Payne, another childhood friend from Nigeria. At both events, the one tragic, the other joyous, there were a significant number of people in attendance who had Nigerian connections.

What was interesting is that most of them were white (*oyinbo*, *bature*, *onyeocha*), an invisible and nearly forgotten part of the Nigerian diaspora. Because of that fact, it would have been unlikely that a casual observer would have been able to figure out that what these people had in common was the experience of living in Nigeria. A little bit of eavesdropping would likely have made our hypothetical casual observer even more confused? What kind of unusual English are these people communicating in ('broken English'), and what strange language are they speaking (Hausa), he may have wondered.

Ever since January 1, 1900, when Lord Lugard declared Northern Nigeria a British protectorate and all Nigeria was officially colonized, there has been a steady stream of *oyinbo* people living and working all over Nigeria. Motivated by a variety of factors, they came to serve as colonial officers, missionaries, business people, and, more recently, as diplomats and oil company employees. Much has been studied and said about the impact these people had on Nigeria and Nigerians, but, what about from the other side? What impact did Nigeria and Nigerians have on them?

It has been said that the colonial encounter between Europeans and Africans, while certainly having a profound effect on Africa, also had a transformative impact on the colonial power. The same could be said of those expatriates, who over the last century, were opportunized to live in Nigeria. They might certainly have educated Nigerians, converted them, built roads for them, and so on, but they also left Nigeria as very different people than what they had arrived as. This was especially true for their children, born and/or raised in Nigeria.

For some, Nigeria (or Af-

rica generally), remained forever a passion and defined their ensuing careers and lives. For others, even though they settled down outside of Africa, their dress, their food, their friends, their manner of speech and interaction, how they decorated their houses, and more were for long influenced by the fond memories of their Nigerian experience. There are also those who attempted to put Nigeria behind them and to settle down to a completely new way of life. The latter, it must be said, was usually the hardest to achieve.

Allow me to tell some stories of the *oyinbo* experience in Nigeria. The following is a description of a little girl born to Baptist missionaries in Yorubaland around 1890:

"In this home baby Ruth was born and brought up, loved and adored, not only by her parents, but by all the natives of the town. She was named by them 'Alake'; 'the petted or cherished one.' She was the friend and favorite of the native children. She played their games; ate their food, and even learned to call down the vengeance of the

### Wiebe Boer

Perspective of a Nigerian-American



heathen gods on any who hurt her feelings.

For many years afterwards, all white children seen in the streets of Ogbomoso were followed by crowds of admiring people calling, 'Alake! Alake!' Had this little American girl transcended the boundaries and become Nigerian? Perhaps in the hearts of her and her friends, but, alas, society would never allow that, then and now.

In 1916, C. Gordon Beacham went to Nigeria as a missionary under the auspices of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) to work in Kaltunga, presently in Gombe State. A decade later, George was born in Jos to Gordon Beacham and his wife. George grew up in Nigeria, and returned to become a missionary. In 1954, his son Steve was born, also in Jos. Steve followed in his father's footsteps and returned to Nigeria as a missionary. In 1986, seventy years after her great-grandfather had first

arrived in Nigeria, Lacey was born to Steve and Beaj Beacham in Jos.

Fourteen years later, Lacey Beacham, a fourth generation Nigerian, is still in Nigeria attending secondary school in Jos. She, like her Nigerian-born father and grandfather, is still not legally permitted Nigerian citizenship because of a lack of Nigerian ancestry. How many generations does it take?

Dorothy Roberta Kitch-McMeens was the daughter of missionaries in Jos, and was forced to leave Nigeria in the late 1950s for educational purposes. Over forty years after leaving, she is yet to return to Nigeria. This does not mean the country is not still close to her heart.

She describes her attachment to Nigeria thus, "I am an African, born to American parents in Nigeria, expected to fit into a culture that is not really mine, bonded to my 'native' land in an indefin-

able way, always adapting to fit, with a core of restlessness, a hunger for home. It is the song of many souls." She is known widely simply as 'Mama Jos'.

There are so many stories out there like this, of people who lived in Nigeria and were greatly influenced by the experience. Different people take advantage of the experience in different ways. John Major, who lived in Jos in the late 1960s, went on to become the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Even while Prime Minister, however, he was still known to speak in Hausa from time to time. Steven Lucas, now the Africa regional marketing director for Voice of America (VOA), is well known to listeners of the VOA's Hausa broadcasts.

He did not learn his fluent Hausa through intensive study as an adult, but rather through growing up in Nigeria in the 1950s and 60s. Samuel Ritter, known to listeners of Radio Plateau 2 (90.5FM) as 'Likkle Sammy' or 'Professor Lynchpin', is now based in the United States. He is presently recording a hip-hop album in which he is fusing Nigerian styles, rapping in 'Broken

English' and Fela samples into a unique mix. When his songs hit the big time, listeners will certainly be confused about how an apparently white American musician picked up such influences.

Those who read this will not be confused at all. Like many other *oyinbos* before and after him, Ritter lived in Nigeria, loved it, and continues to be profoundly influenced by the experience.

There is more to this article than just to tell interesting stories about *oyinbo* Nigerians. It is partly to give an opportunity for readers to see that I am not unique in being an *oyinbo* born and raised in Nigeria who still feels a strong love for the country that gave me so much during my upbringing.

More importantly, it is a challenge to the very Nigerian *oyinbos* I am talking about to understand the important role they could play as bridges between Nigeria and the rest of the world. It is also a challenge to Nigerians to permit them the opportunity to do so.

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