

Christmas in a Nigerian Village

Nyankwala is an ancient village now on its third site. It used to be a sizable community with its own walls for protection against the enemy during former days when the colonial "*Pax Brittanica*" ("Peace of Britain") had not yet been extended to the north of Nigeria. Then, in search of better farm land, the elders decided to pull up their roots and move up the Donga River and across. Being unable to come to a unanimous agreement as to exact site, the people split into two groups, one of which settled some ten miles from the original village and retained the name Nyankwala, while the other group moved on further up river to establish what is now known as Suntai.

Whether this second Nyankwala ever had its own walls, I cannot tell, since I have never set foot on the area, though I have passed it several times by canoe. The old mango trees still testify to the presence of a sizeable population, but that is the only remaining witness, at least from the vantage of the canoe. Because of the successive riots during the 1960s by the Tiv people who were and are spread all over the area, this second Nyankwala village was burned to the ground and the population fled across the river and settled on its present site, only a mile or so from a nearby all-season road.

It was in this village where my wife, Frances, and I celebrated our first Christmas in Nigeria back in 1966. We had intended to go there by a Chevy Carry-all, but the road was too rough and the Carry-all too beat up and so we had to admit defeat after only eight miles. Then we decided to resort to public transport – a mammy wagon. This meant we would have to stay for at least five days, since transport to Nyankwala in those days was available only on market days.

On hindsight, I wonder why we did not just walk home for those 30 miles. We would have missed out on some of the Nyankwala celebrations, but it would have enabled us to join in other village celebrations along the way. Oh, well.... Since we

were new to Nigeria, it might have been the first 30 miles we walked, but it certainly would not have been the last.

The lorry stopped at the end of the road at Gindin Dorowa, a sizable town about a mile from Nyankwala. That town's name suggests that the original compounds were built in the shade of some huge locust-bean trees. From here we had to trek the remaining mile. We had our regular trek equipment, of course: a trek bed each, blankets, mosquito nets, a supply of boiled drinking water, a bush lamp, a flashlight and the rest of a trekker's paraphernalia. However, we did not have to carry all this ourselves since there were plenty of eager youngsters ready to carry our loads on their heads.

Upon our arrival we were met by Iliya, the leading evangelist of the Nyankwala congregation, who showed us our quarters, a two-room mud-brick building with a corrugated roof. At the back a small area had been enclosed by a six-foot high grass mat in order to give us bathing privacy. Buckets of water were carried from the river so that we could scrub off all the dust we had collected from our journey. Food was brought: rice and chicken deep-fried in palm oil, generously endowed with red pepper, a dish that to this day remains my favourite African chop. xxxx

It was Christmas Eve. At about quarter after eight, the church bell, a two-foot chunk of railway iron dangling by a foot of wire from a tree, began calling the Christians to the grass-roofed church. After about a dozen worshippers had arrived, the song leader, Reuben Abubakar, called out a number from the *Littafin Wakoki*, a collection of European hymns translated into Hausa, and haltingly the congregation slurred with Reuben through the Hausa version of "Silent Night." They were hardly familiar with it and it was quite obviously a meaningless exercise for most of the men, while the women, with one exception, did not participate at all because of their illiteracy. Slowly the church began to fill up as the singsong dragged on. There was little of the enthusiasm these songs evoke in our home churches and it was not until they switched to their songs in the native Jukun tongue that the singing became more animated, but these songs had little to do with Christmas.

Iliya Danjuma entered together with his elders and the service began – after the pressure lamp was given an extra boost. A few more unfamiliar and uninspiring songs, a short sermon and a few prayers offered by various members of the congregation and the service was concluded.

The people were only too eager to be dismissed in order to get on with the next point on the traditional program: drumming, dancing and singing, their most favourite form of entertainment, but all of it quite unrelated to Christmas. The Gospel has not sufficiently been embodied in their culture to have special Christmas dances and songs. But the neighbours knew what it was all about. Slowly the dancing procession moved forward till they arrived at the chief's compound and there they danced till the roosters welcomed the early morning.

It was natural enough for them to have their dances in front of the chief's compound, but this year there was a sort of challenge attached. The chief, a Muslim, had asked the Christians to join the Muslims in their celebration at the end of their month of fasting, but the Christians had refused. He consequently threatened to prevent the Christians from performing their Christmas dances, but nothing came of his threat, though the elders were worried enough.

Fran and I watched the proceedings and even joined them briefly, but African rhythm constantly eludes the European. Nevertheless, our clumsy attempts were appreciated. A song is repeated twenty times and then another and yet another and ... till the rooster crows. Not unlike contemporary praise songs. Needless to say, we did not last this long.

Christmas morning. We rose early, determined not to miss anything of significance of our first Nigerian Christmas, but we did not really have to worry, for the late night dance was taking its toll. The morning service was set at the traditional nine o'clock, but by the time the bell was rung, it did not appear that anyone had heard it. By 9:20, however, the first few faithful struggled into the church, soon followed by others, but no one looked particularly refreshed or inspired, let alone joyful! Few were prepared to enter the spirit of Christmas. Iliya did his best to arouse some enthusiasm, but sleepers simply are not enthusiastic; they need first to be awakened and that was no mean task. However, when he closed the *Littafin*

Wakoki and led them in a few rousing Jukun songs, the atmosphere did improve. In his sermon he dwelt on the virgin birth and his unproblematic approach was delightful – there was no trace of the kind of rationalizing one might expect as in a more secularized western setting. By the end of the sermon the congregation had been sufficiently aroused to the point that a number of worshippers were able to offer prayers filled with thanksgiving and praise to God for such a wonderful birth. And all of it so delightfully certain and unproblematic.

At the end of the service, the children of the *Kungiyar 'Yan Kirista*, a children's group for studying the Bible, came forward and recited a few verses and sang a few songs. They performed quite unabashed and had little trouble with self-consciousness. Whether they actually understood what they were reciting in the Hausa trade language is another question, of course. The point was to recite and that they did well.

After the service the people once again lined up for the inevitable dance, but this time they headed for Iliya's compound, rather than that of the chief. The dancing was of short duration, for the sun was rising high and no one had as yet had his breakfast. We were brought our Christmas dinner, the menu being identical to that of the previous evening, except that there were beans mixed in with the rice.

About one o'clock or thereabouts the Christian women came to Iliya's compound, each with a tray on their head and on each tray was placed the traditional combination of two enamel pans, one of which contained pounded yam or guinea corn or corn, while the other contained the sauce into which the food is dipped. This sauce consists of either palm oil or peanut oil and some kind of meat with plenty of spices. It turned out that this food was to be distributed among the non-Christian neighbours of the village. Iliya and his elders carefully considered where each portion should be sent and then a young girl would be assigned to carry it to the designated compound with the regards of the Christians. The poor were given special consideration. In this way the whole village participated to some extent in the celebration. Whether the Muslims actually ate food prepared by people who were until recently pagans, I never did find out.

After everyone had his Christmas fill, the village fell into a deep slumber for a few hours. Only a few children and chickens scuttled about until the sun lost some of its glare in the late afternoon. When the people came out of hiding once again, it was time for *gaisuwar Kirismati* –Christmas greetings. People would come to our house, squat on the floor, bow somewhat and then the exchange of greetings would begin:

How is your tiredness? No matter, there's no tiredness.

How was your trip yesterday? Fine, we encountered no trouble.

How is Christmas in our village? We are grateful that God has brought us here.

After some more small talk, they would rise and go on to the next compound. A number of them left us some local gifts and by the end of the greeting sessions we had collected a bottle of milk from the court president, ten pounds of rice, some eggs, two pigeons, a duck and some bananas. That was our take for Christmas. Apart from the bananas, we gave it all to Na'omi, Iliya's wife, our main cook for the weekend, who used much of it to feed us.

At about sunset the drummers re-appeared and it did not take them long to have all the young Christians and many Traditionalists form a circle around them and once again pursue their favourite dances. It was again to go on till the *gari ya waye* – till the town wakes up.

The next two days were rather uneventful. Every evening till early morning the young folk would be dancing and the day would be used for catching up on their sleep. The third day was designated as the final day of celebration.

This time the young people appeared early in order to go to the bush and collect sticks and grass ropes in order to indicate the borders of the *filin dina*, the field where they were planning to hold their communal Christmas banquet. Tables and chairs were brought, a throne was improvised for the master of ceremonies whose official title was "governor." Towards evening the women began bringing the by-now-familiar trays of food and covered them with colourful cloths to prevent the food from getting too cold. Various home-made uniforms began to

appear, all indicating the wearers' official function at the banquet. Some were policemen or soldiers to keep order. There was a health official to ensure hygienic conditions. At the single entrance two young men were selling banquet tickets for six pence. Those who could not afford this or who were not interested in participating could stand outside the ropes and watch the proceedings.

After the proper opening procedures had been conducted and the food had been eaten, it was my turn to perform. I had previously been instructed that I was to preach at this banquet, paying special attention to the Traditionalists and Muslims watching us from the outside. My Hausa was still quite elementary so that the people had to be very sympathetic if they were to understand anything at all of what this White Man had to say. But Europeans were sufficiently scarce at Nyankwala that most would be willing to go the extra mile(s). I cannot boast any conversions, but, then, I did not expect any either. My reader may judge whether this lack of expectation was lack of faith or whether perhaps it had its cultural justification.

After the preaching session, the fun began. People were arrested by the mock police and hauled before a mock court for alleged offences such as infractions of proper banquet etiquette. I was brought before the court myself and fined one shilling. After much laughter and fun, the people wandered back to their compounds and the celebrations of 1966 were over.

Postscript

This article was originally published under the title "Kirismati a Nyankwala."

Over time, we developed intimate relationships with the Nyankwala congregation, especially with the family of Iliya and Na'omi. In fact, they "gave" us their daughter Lydia, a sickly 6-year old at the time. Lydia is now (2014) in her fifties and the mother of three adult sons, two of whom are well-known singers, one of them at high international level. Lydia, though living in Nigeria, remains part of our family and visited us in 2014. You can read all about our relationships with

that family and Lydia in volumes 2-3 of our Memoirs. See Bibliography in Section 2 of this Boeriana page.

At the time of our story, the Nyankwala church was a fairly large but primitive building of a grass roof supported by poles without walls. The pews consisted of rows of mudbricks covered by a thin layer of cement. They are now in their third building, a rather modern one holding several hundred people.

As to the town of Nyankwala, it is now in shambles. Nomadic Fulani and Boko Haram have invaded the place several times during 2014, killed many people and destroyed many buildings. Very few people remain there, mostly angry young men guarding the place from further vandalism, eager to kill any Fulani or Boko Haram who dares to show his face in the neighbourhood. Na'omi, long a widow, fled to the homes of her children in nearby towns and is currently a refugee in her own state. At the moment, the place is in a pitiable state. Whether it will ever recover this round of violence as it did those earlier Tiv attacks, remains to be seen. We are reduced to earnest pleas and prayers.