

Nigeria in American eyes



•Departure Lounge at MMA. Inset is MMA Terminal Building

FOR today's article, I will not be reaching deep into Nigeria's historic past. Rather, I will be discussing the present, and at most, the recent past.

One of the purposes of this column is to inform Nigerians back home about different aspects of the role of Nigeria and Nigerians in the international arena. In a previous article I discussed the involvement of Nigerians in the entertainment industry in the United States.

In this article I will discuss other ways people outside of Nigeria become acquainted with the country, focusing mostly on the United States.

Nigeria is certainly one of the most important black nations in the world. Although many might not think of it in that way, so is the United States. Americans of African descent make up about 12% of the population, amounting to some 30 million people. This entails that only Brazil, Nigeria, South Africa, Congo DR and perhaps a handful of other African countries have more citizens of African descent than does the United States.

One might suppose that based on this fact there would be a strong connection between Nigeria and the United States. After all, a significant portion of the Ameri-

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Perspectives of a Nigerian-American



can population should be able to trace their ancestry back to Nigeria, the giant of Africa.

However, even those Americans of African descent for some reason do not often look to Nigeria for their cultural, linguistic, or ethnic roots. Instead, they focus on places like Ghana, from where African-Americans have adopted kente cloth as an important aspect of their tradition.

Similarly, rather than finding their heritage in languages like Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, which represent the types of languages many of their ancestors may have spoken, African-Americans look to Kiswahili to reconnect them with their lost African past. This is in spite of the fact that Kiswahili is a language that predominates in East Africa, where few African-Americans originated.

For some reason, the giant of Africa is barely on the radar of the consciousness of African-Americans who look elsewhere to find links to their African past. Be-

cause of this, there was no Nigerian on *Ebony* magazine's (an African-American publication) list of the 100 most influential black people of the last century.

Furthermore, Nigeria is completely neglected in the recent six episode television documentary *Wonders of the African World* produced by Dr. Harry Skip Gates, an African-American professor at Harvard University. This documentary series on Africa did receive much criticism, so perhaps in this case Nigeria's absence is not a bad thing.

However, its absence does provide a clear illustration of my point.

So, then, how do Americans hear about Nigeria? Most of them do not know that a good portion of the petrol in their cars comes from Nigeria, except for those connected to environmental groups who criticize the Nigerian oil industry.

In the popular news media, Africa is basically forgotten, except when there is war, famine, disease, coups, or corruption to report on.

Thus, few peaceful African countries get much coverage. Over the past months, since the country is not at war, not in a famine, not pummeled by disease, has not had a coup, and is now fighting corruption, not much is said about Nigeria. For this lack of attention, in some ways, we can be happy.

There have been news stories about the fight against corruption, which although in the right directions, still characterizes Nigeria as a corrupt place.

Other things that have brought Nigeria into news stories was the United States Congressional hearing into the accusations against an American bank for laundering money for both Mexico's Salinas and Nigeria's Abacha.

Nigeria was an issue in another Congressional hearing as well, in this case hearings regarding Carol Mosely-Brown's nomination for the post of ambassador of New Zealand. Ultra-conservative Republican Senator Jesse Helms, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, attempted to block her nomination for, among other things, her highly criticized trips to Nigeria to wine and dine with Sani Abacha.

In both cases, however, Nigeria is only in the media

because of things relating to the late dictator, and not for anything related to the changes that are now going on.

This is not to say that everything about Nigeria is negative.

Norimitsu Onisli, the New York Times correspondent for *West Africa*, has been doing a remarkable job of getting stories on Nigeria placed in prominent places in that high profile newspaper. Even those news stories that relate stories of violence and division within the country are now accompanied with words of hope and promise for the future of the country.

Anyone who watched CNN's worldwide coverage of the Y2K celebrations would have heard that basic message people around the world are hearing about Nigeria: that things are difficult, but Nigeria is on the right track.

For much of the 1990s, the place most Americans may have come in contact with Nigeria was through the signs in all commercial airports, no matter how small, across the country warning travelers that the American Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) judged Murtala Muhammed International Airport (MMIA) to be unsafe. At 5:35 pm, Eastern Standard Time, on December 30, 1999, I went through the

security check in the airport in Grand Rapids, Michigan. For the first time in years, the warning about MMIA was not staring me in the face, and the only airport the FAA was warning people about was Port-au Prince International Airport, Haiti.

For me, that was a symbolic moment signifying that in official American eyes, Nigeria had turned a corner. No longer would friends and colleagues be able to make jokes about Nigeria based on the FAA warning, and no longer would I necessarily have to pass through Europe to get to Nigeria.

A few days later, when returning to Michigan from North Carolina, I noticed that in the Charlotte airport, the FAA warning about MMIA was taped over rather than being fully removed. This too was symbolic. It showed that in the eyes of the international community, Nigeria is on the threshold of a greater tomorrow, but that there are still questions about whether that progress will be sustained.

Let us pray that nothing happens any time soon to make the airport officials in Charlotte, North Carolina, remove that tape.

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