

# Out And About

This article is my impression about Lagos in December 2007 when I flew into Lagos Nigeria, for a wedding, after a long sojourn outside Nigeria. Since then, I have been to Lagos again. My next article will be about what I saw the second time around.

## LAGOS, THE SHRINKING CITY

by Joy Lo-Bamijoko

My plane flew into Lagos at 11:00 p.m. on a Sunday, the day after we left the United States of America. From the air, Lagos looked like any big city in the world. I was there to attend a wedding.

Everything went well until I stepped out of the MuriLata Mohammed airport. At first, I thought I had stepped into a busy market. My niece, Lati, her driver and I wriggled out of the crowd to her Nissan station wagon and sped off. Not too far from the Airport, we hit a road block. Some police men stopped us and peered into our car, saw a military officer sitting at the front seat, and waved us off. I turned to my niece and said,

“Thank God you brought Adam with you. Those police men would have fleeced us.”

The express road, from the airport to the town, was one pot-hole after another, and this slowed down the traffic. The size of the road also slowed down the traffic. This road was called an express way because it used to be the fastest way to and from the airport. The road was now reduced from three lanes to two. As we approached town, the two lanes were further reduced to one lane. Old jalopy cars, some running, emitting thick smoke, polluting the air were everywhere. Some abandoned by the roadsides. *Lagos has indeed become a dumping ground for old cars.*

By the time we reached the Barracks, where I stayed, I joked to my niece that it took me longer going from the airport to the Barracks, than it took me flying from the US to Lagos. That night, there was no light, and it was hot and sticky.

I thought to myself, yes, I am back in Lagos. Power cuts and water shortages were the signature of Lagos, and this time was no exception.

Very early the next day, my niece and I left for town to finish our preparations for the wedding. I dropped her off at the hairdressers, and went with the driver to the tailors. I couldn't recognize where I was,

“Where is this place, Adam?”

“Akoka, madam.”

I should know Akoka very well. I worked in and around the area for many years, and yet I could not recognize the place.

“Everything has changed, what did they do to the place?”

“Ah madam, Lagos don changio, e no bi the same Lagos like the time wey you dey here.”

*I can see that.* There were many one way roads, I believe created to ease the traffic.

There were also, deep and wide gutters for drainage, on either sides of the roads, some of them

uncovered, and there were no side walks. People and cars competed for the roads, and it was chaotic. I thanked God silently for providing me with the use of a car. The first time I tried to cross the street to buy some fruits, I nearly fell into one of those deep gutters.

The traditional wedding was the next day, at the bride's father's house at Alaka Estate. I have always sighted Alaka Estate atop the bridge while going from Surulere to Lagos Island. It is a very exclusive area, but I have never been inside the place. So, for the first time, I was at gated Alaka Estate with her beautiful palaces, and very high walls to hide the houses. This is a common practice in Lagos. People build high walls or iron cages and bars to protect themselves from intruders, especially from armed robbers. The streets were narrow, just one lane, two carriage streets, with high bumps to slow down cars, and there were so many cars. Again, this time, I was thankful that we had a chauffeured car. The driver dropped us off at the house and drove off to look for a place to park.

Like all Nigerian weddings, this one was very colorful. The couple changed their dresses three times, and all three dresses were spectacular. The first was a royal blue lace, the second was hand woven, cream, with royal blue highlights, and the third was hand woven in multi colors, but it favored more the royal blue. Royal blue was their theme. Even the

“Ashoebi” (uniform), worn by the family members were of royal blue George and yellow lace materials.

The couple danced first in their ceremonial dress, the multi colored one. Then they took their seat under a canopy prepared specially for them. Guests went there to greet and give them gifts.

The next Saturday was the church wedding. The church was in Lagos Island on Muritala Mohammed Road, which was once known as the Marina, because it ran parallel to the Atlantic Ocean. This road and the roads around it are the nerve center of Lagos, the commercial heart of Lagos, with shops, banks, hotels, and markets. The Christ Cathedral church was in the middle of this bedlam, not just a busy place, but a mad house. The roads all around Lagos Island seemed to have all shrunk. Lagos, the commercial heartbeat of Nigeria, does not have a public transportation system, so anybody who can afford a car drives in Lagos. That is why there were too many cars, and the streets do not have side walks. There were no parking areas near the church, so cars were parked on the roadsides, reducing the size of the road.

After the church wedding, we all raced to the reception hall, at the Music Association of Nigeria (MUSON) center to secure our seats before the party crashers got the seats. It was another nightmare getting to this place. Cars and people were all over the place struggling for the right of way. There were many one way roads here to ease the traffic, but they created more confusion. People simply did not obey road rules, and with no policemen around, people just ignored road rules.

Finally, we arrived at the reception hall, and took our seat right in front of the stage, a strategic point where we could see all that was happening. The music, the food, and laughter, blocked out momentarily for me the chaos that was outside the hall, and I relaxed and enjoyed the party.

The very next day after the wedding, I was at the airport, and in a hurry, to get a flight back to the United States.

**The After Thought:**

The city of Lagos needs good government, with a leader that will be bold and courageous enough to take the problems of Lagos by the horns, and solve them one after the other. For congestion and narrow roads, pull down houses, especially those built illegally, and pull back houses built beyond their legal boundaries. For transportation, introduce an efficient mass transit system, run by people with good track record in transportation. For electricity, regulate but not control power, and do the same with all the other services. Things can work if the government really wants things to work, and life can become good again.