

CHAPTER 8

Dateline Lagos

Reporting on Nigeria to the World



In 1976, John Darnton came to Lagos as a correspondent for the *New York Times*.¹ This was his first foreign posting. Starry-eyed, the young journalist would do feature stories on everyday life and urban growth pains: street traffic, the end of the windy harmattan season, the problems of getting a telephone repaired, the influx of expatriates, new buildings coming up, the old canal between Lagos Island and Ikoyi being filled in. Then, about a year later, he was arrested, and a little later expelled with his family. He continued writing from elsewhere in Africa, and later earned a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting from early 1980s Poland. At the time of his expulsion, the Nigerian military government was evidently disturbed by the intended but failed counter coup that resulted in the killing of General Murtala Muhammed, the energetic head of state. So it seemed inconvenient to have foreign newsmen like Darnton around. The immediate cause of government action may have been his interest in the infamous military attack on Fela Kuti's nightlife temple, the Kalakuta Republic.

The coverage of Nigeria by international news media in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has been, let us say, a mixed success.²

There have been other star journalists reporting out of Lagos. Ryszard Kapuscinski, apparently the only foreign correspondent working for the national news agency of Communist Poland for a long period beginning in the 1960s, acquired world fame for his books on the courts of the emperor of Ethiopia and the shah of Iran, and for *The Soccer War* (1990), a wide-ranging book of essays drawing its title from the strange armed conflict between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969. He claimed to have witnessed twenty-seven revolutions and coups.

As far as Nigeria is concerned, there is a chapter in *The Soccer War* on an early 1960s election campaign of UPGA, the United Progressive

Grand Alliance, a Yoruba-based opposition party. In another book of essays, there is Kapuscinski's (2001: 108–117) account of finding housing in central Lagos, in an alleyway where his neighbors are surprised to find a white gentleman standing in line with their children to get to the water pump. A Polish correspondent had much less funding for travel, accommodation, and other expenses than Western European or American correspondents, so he had to seek carefully for a place where he could stay.

Even as it may just about always have been a pleasure to read Kapuscinski, his reporting may have tended to be more poetic than precise. It is also true that he remained overtly loyal to the party at home, while privately less so—as long as the regime lasted, anyway. That meant that, after 1989, he had a past to deal with, and, in the intellectual and political upheavals of post-Communist Poland, commentary on Kapuscinski continued after his death in 2007.³

Much of the time, however, international news reporting on Nigeria has been based elsewhere, done from a distance or by way of brief visits. I learned some more about this in the late 1990s and early 2000s as I engaged in a study of the work and life of foreign correspondents, and had Africa reporting as one of my central interests. The main site for this part of my study was in Johannesburg, South Africa. In Richmond, a small suburban enclave a little to the west of central Johannesburg, there were two buildings a couple of minutes apart from one another, where a great many of the foreign news media organizations in Johannesburg had their offices. In one of them I found the Associated Press, CNN, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek* and some others; in the other, rather larger building, there were around twenty-five to thirty media or media-related offices. From those two buildings in Richmond, a very considerable proportion of news out of Africa spread over the world. Many of the news organizations had one “Africa correspondent,” in principle responsible for covering some forty-five countries south of the Sahara. Johannesburg was a logical location for the purpose. It was the main city of what for economic and other reasons seemed to be the most important country of the continent. Even if it was far to the south, it had reasonably good air connections, while regular traffic between African countries was otherwise deficient. Johannesburg could also offer comfortable living conditions, not least for those correspondents who had brought their families.

The journalists—whether print, radio, or television people—would certainly travel out of there to other parts of Africa on reporting business. But, as such trips were likely to be expensive, their head offices, wherever they were in the world (mostly Europe and North America), would tend to limit them. The editors and management

might see the coverage of “hard news” as inevitable, but tended to be unenthusiastic about softer feature stories of various kinds. “Hard news,” however, tended to be bad news: about coups, civil wars, epidemics, natural disasters. And so the outside world was offered a somber view of what happened on the continent. “Afro-Pessimism” became a 1990s word. Not that the continent was without problems, but one might ask if the economics of the international news business did not contribute to generating such outside understandings.⁴

Hard, bad news, of course, would tend to be complemented by stories about wildlife. Distant audiences seemed forever interested in elephants and chimpanzees, and giraffes look good in pictures. But this would favor the east and south of the continent, rather than the west.

There is a parody of quick news media travel in Chibundu Onuzo’s *Welcome to Lagos* (2017), describing a British talk show star’s journey to Lagos, flying first class alone, with his technicians and makeup artist further back in the plane. He was to interview a Nigerian ex-minister about a corruption scandal transforming into something like a Robin Hood tale (see chapter 5); knowing very little about Nigeria, he nevertheless had expertise in talking to people.

While in Johannesburg, I was curious about what those roving correspondents could tell me about their experiences in reporting on Nigeria. In fact there was not so much of it. Under the dictatorship of General Abacha, the tendency was to think that the fewer foreign journalists were around, the better—thus, not to let so many of them into the country. Some made their entry on tourist visas, but many would hold this unprofessional, as well as dangerous. The Africa correspondent for the *Guardian* at the time, Chris McGreal, described how he had flown into the country shortly after the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, writer/environmentalist/politician, an event which did call for international attention (see chapter 18). Somehow nobody had checked whether he was really accredited, so he even made his way into an official dinner where Abacha was making a speech, and went on to Ogoniland, Saro-Wiwa’s homeland in the southeast. And there the state governor had wondered why so few foreign journalists came to see him—apparently unaware that mostly they were not allowed into the country. To McGreal, this was all an intriguing mixture of despotism and inefficiency.

A little later, on the other hand, international news media people clearly flocked to Nigeria, and this could have unexpected consequences. It was toward the end of the 1990s, as I was engaged in my study of the foreign correspondents, but at home in Stockholm, and watching

the evening news on CNN International. Then suddenly something unexpected came up. Catherine Bond, an Africa correspondent usually stationed in Nairobi, was on the screen reporting from Kafanchan! Then in a day or two, the *New York Times* also reported from my Nigerian town.

The emir of Jemaa, Hausa traditional ruler of the area where Kafanchan is located, had died, aged 95—I suspect that his age was really somewhat uncertain and approximate. In fact, his rule had been shaky. His dynasty had arrived in the early nineteenth century as an outlier of the Fulani-Hausa Muslim jihad led by Usman dan Fodio. It exacted tribute from the local farming populations and took some of their members as slaves. The system of indirect rule introduced by Lord Lugard actually strengthened the power of the Jemaa emirate, as it now also had British support. But then these local ethnic groups in large part adopted Christianity as both an ideology and an organizational resource in resisting Muslim domination, and, by the 1990s, they were certainly expecting that when the old emir died, that would be the end of the emirate. Yet now, suddenly, it was announced that his son would succeed him in the office. Locals rose in violent protest. The emir's palace had been set afire, and the new emir had fled. The uprising had caused a number of deaths.

This could indeed seem like something worth reporting on, but I suspected that the international news attention to Kafanchan was a case of serendipity. After the long period of dictatorship under General Abacha (who had recently died under mysterious circumstances), Nigeria was returning to civilian rule. And the newly elected president was just taking up office, so members of the world news media gathered for the event in Abuja. Then, as one of its last actions, the departing military junta had decided to let the Jemaa emirate continue in power. At least some of the media people heard of the resulting unrest, a few hours' drive away, and hurried over there. I doubt that either CNN or the *New York Times* have reported from Kafanchan since then.

Then for some time there was Boko Haram (trans. "Ban Western education"), and especially its kidnapping of a few hundred teenage girls from a boarding school in Chibok—"the Chibok girls," drawing the attention of the world to Nigeria. The Bring Back Our Girls campaign had the support of First Lady Michelle Obama, as well as Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai.

But again, some of the reporting was by Africa correspondents in Johannesburg. Other newscasts were from Lagos, in the southwest corner of Nigeria, about what was happening in the northeast (particularly in the state of Borno). It irritated me repeatedly that on radio

and television, there were all those references to Maiduguri—not Maiduguri. One might think that was a minor nuisance, the reaction only pedantry on my part, but it suggested that the reporters had not *spoken* to anybody with local knowledge. They relied entirely, it seems, on written sources on the web, which taught them nothing about pronunciation.

After some years, finally, came the small book *The Chibok Girls* by Helon Habila (2017). Habila's probably best-known, acclaimed novel, *Oil on Water* (2011), is a tale of the troubled Niger Delta, with the oil industry and government troops on one side and local armed rebels on the other.⁵ It is the lively story of the presumed kidnapping of the wife of a British oilman, as seen through the eyes of a young Nigerian reporter trying to cover that story. So this was journalism in fiction, dateline Port Harcourt, on violence in the southeast of the country. *The Chibok Girls* was nonfiction journalism in the violent northeast, dateline Maiduguri.

Habila's reporting on Boko Haram could draw on the fact that he knew the area. He was a member of the small Tangale ethnic group, the son of a Christian preacher, and had his childhood in the city of Gombe, not very far from Chibok. Gombe was the capital of a Muslim emirate, so Habila grew up surrounded by Muslims. But it was also in the border area of what has been known, in politico-cultural terms, as the Middle Belt of Nigeria, in large part Christian and opposed to the Muslim domination of that North, of which it was somehow also a part. (In fact, Kafanchan and its surroundings, a considerable distance away, shared much of the same nineteenth- and twentieth-century history.) So Helon Habila understood Chibok, which was another Christian enclave in the North, and could portray both it and Maiduguri insightfully, as well as colorfully. In Maiduguri, he could talk in Hausa to his taxi chauffeur, member of a trade that is often a first source of information to fly-in foreign correspondents; but he could even detect the Kanuri accent. The Kanuri are the largest ethnic group in Borno State. Habila discovered, too, that the view of the problems of modernity held by this driver were not so different from that of Boko Haram.⁶

He could also talk to some of those Chibok girls who had escaped, in Chibok. They remembered that their Boko Haram captors had called them infidels and prostitutes. Now they wanted to go to the university and become doctors.

Helon Habila, of course, was not quite a "foreign correspondent." The Gombe childhood clearly helped his entry into the Boko Haram

world and its local counterworld. However, when he published his report, he was an associate professor of creative writing at George Mason University in suburban Virginia, outside Washington, DC.

Notes

1. I draw for this paragraph on the *Wikipedia* article on John Darnton, and on two of his *New York Times* articles (Darnton 1976, 1977). In chapter 9 we turn to a novel by his wife, Nina Darnton, drawing on her Lagos experience. The prominent (and anthropologically inspired) historian Robert Darnton, specialist on French cultural history, is John Darnton's brother. Later on, it seems to have been another *New York Times* correspondent, Norimitsu Onishi (2002), who coined the term "Nollywood" for what was to become one of the world's largest movie industries. It was also Onishi (1999) who reported from Kafanchan, in an article referred to later in this chapter.
2. One of the most successful reports on Nigeria, a long step away from day-to-day coverage, is Karl Maier's *This House Has Fallen* (2000)—the title is a quote from Chinua Achebe—appearing after the end of the difficult 1990s and the Sani Abacha regime. Maier was Africa correspondent of the *Independent*, the London newspaper. Kafanchan and its surroundings are briefly portrayed in the book as well.
3. A review of Kapuscinski's life and work by his friend Artur Domoslawski (2012) itself became a bestseller, and earned an English Pen award.
4. Some twenty years later, international reporting would seem not so entirely Afro-Pessimist. Dayo Olopade, Nigerian-American journalist with three degrees from Yale University and a record of reporting to a variety of American newspapers and journals, has a hopeful book describing her beat (including Nigeria): *The Bright Continent* (2015).
5. In a later novel, *Travellers* (2019), Habila takes his readers to Europe and tells of encounters among refugees, exiles, students, artists, and others of varying African backgrounds, in Berlin, Basel, London, etc. Nigeria and Nigerian identities appear marginally here, although at the end a refugee with a particularly dismal path through life reminisces in a written note about his experience of a terrorist movement, which is obviously Boko Haram.
6. On Boko Haram and the Chibok girls, there is also a book by Isha Sesay (2019), sometime CNN reporter of Sierra Leonean background. And there is Edna O'Brien's novel *Girl* (2019), the first-person narrative of a young female, captured and prematurely forced into motherhood and adulthood, then escaping and finding a new life with her baby daughter; a book remarkably based on field studies in Nigeria by the author, then in her late eighties. While she may not have been in the Boko Haram heartlands, the acknowledgments at the end of the book show that she has been to Abuja and to Jos, and to Fulani camps in Kaduna State. She had found informants as well in the Nigerian Houses of Praise scattered

through London. In fact, the term “Boko Haram” appears nowhere in the text, where the movement is referred to only as “the jihadis.” But in the acknowledgments and on the front cover flap, the Boko Haram reference is explicit.

References

- Darnton, John. 1976. “Winds Gone, Rains Due, an Unsettled Mood Hangs over Lagos.” *New York Times*, 17 April.
- . 1977. “Nigeria Arrests, Then Expels the Times’s West Africa Correspondent.” *New York Times*, 14 March.
- Domoslawski, Artur. 2012. *Ryszard Kapuscinski: A Life*. London: Verso.
- Habila, Helon. 2011. *Oil on Water*. London: Penguin.
- . 2017. *The Chibok Girls*. London: Penguin.
- . 2019. *Travellers*. New York: Norton.
- Hannerz, Ulf. 2004. *Foreign News*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kapuscinski, Ryszard. 1987. *Another Day of Life*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- . 1990. *The Soccer War*. London: Granta.
- . 2001. *The Shadow of the Sun*. New York: Knopf.
- Maier, Karl. 2000. *This House Has Fallen*. New York: Public Affairs Press.
- O’Brien, Edna. 2019. *Girl*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Olopade, Dayo. 2015. *The Bright Continent*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Onishi, Norimitsu. 1999. “New Leaders Face a Violent and Splintered Nigeria.” *New York Times*, 10 June.
- . 2002. “Step Aside, L.A. and Bombay, for Nollywood.” *New York Times*, 16 September.
- Onuzo, Chibundu. 2017. *Welcome to Lagos*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Sesay, Isha. 2019. *Beneath the Tamarind Tree*. New York: HarperCollins.