

# Inland, Upriver with the Empire

## *Borriboola-Gha*



In the reputed phrasing of the real estate agent, what matters is “location, location, location.” In the nineteenth century, when British colonialism began moving inland from the South Atlantic coast, Lokoja would seem to be all about location: a rather modest settlement, but strategically situated where the Niger and Benue rivers met. Howard J. Pedraza’s small book *Borriboola-Gha* (1961) is a chronicle of some of the early British involvement with what would become Nigeria, with Lokoja gradually emerging as a focus. Pedraza was British, and had been in the colonial service in Nigeria. The book does not explicitly say so, but a review of it in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (London) informs us that Pedraza had been a district officer at Lokoja for some years. Yet his book is largely based on historical sources and archival work.

The Niger-Benue confluence had been “discovered” (as one might Eurocentrically put it) by the explorer Richard Lander and his brother John, coming from upriver on the Niger, in 1830. The Landers had apparently come ashore at Badagry, another old Atlantic slave port just west of Lagos, and made their way overland to Bussa on the Niger—Bussa was where the earlier explorer Mungo Park had drowned in 1806. From there they did not have very far to travel on the Niger before they could see the other great river flowing into it. Here the Niger turned south. They continued down to the delta, reaching the sea.

Soon enough a Liverpool merchant launched a more sizeable expedition. This was McGregor Laird, son of a well-known ship-building family, who would have a major role in Niger River enterprises for several decades. That first expedition, in 1832, consisted of three ships; before making their way into the delta, they halted at Cape Coast, in

what is now Ghana, and Fernando Poo—then a notable Spanish island base, by now part of Equatorial Guinea. (We saw in chapter 2 that Sebastian, Mariana’s husband, also went there.) On the other hand, it did not go into Lagos—a major port for the slave trade, but not yet under British control. The journey upstream was hazardous, with a number of key crew members lost to malaria. Yet eventually, they could again see Benue and Niger meeting, the former clear and dark blue, the latter whitish and muddy.

Trading was slow. Cowrie shells were the only currency (as Amos Tutuola’s palm-wine drinkard would also find in the Land of the Dead a hundred years later), and there was a dearth of those. Following various intermezzos, what remained of the first expedition returned to Liverpool.

It took Laird almost a decade to get a second expedition going, but now he had more official support. It was a complicated organizational construct, and some linguistic, cultural, and geographic confusion seems to have gone into both planning and execution. This time it was not all business, but a civilizing mission as well, carrying Bibles and other religious literature for distribution. There were also letters of recommendation from rabbis in London, just in case one would run into any Jews inland. One of the rabbis encouraged inquiries into the customs of the natives along the River Tigris; he must have gotten his great rivers mixed up. A German chaplain, the Reverend Schön, reputedly had some expertise in Hausa, the *lingua franca* further north, but on board, his sermons were “rendered unintelligible to many by his foreign accent.”

More importantly, the crew included a young man named Samuel Ajayi Crowther, originally a Yoruba, who had first become a commodity for Portuguese slave traders. Freed by the British and landed in Freetown, Sierra Leone, to become a Creole, Crowther was placed in a missionary school and was found promising. After he was sent to Britain for even further training, he returned to West Africa, where he was recruited to accompany the Reverend Schön on the Niger expedition. After that, Crowther came back to England to be trained as a minister, eventually becoming the first African bishop of the Anglican church. But that is another story.<sup>1</sup> (His grandson Herbert Macaulay became an early Nigerian nationalist.)

This expedition reached out for a treaty with “the king of the Ibo” (we may surmise that this was at Onitsha) to establish trading agreements and to abolish slave trade and human sacrifice. The king received a range of gifts supposedly from the Queen of England, and

came aboard the main ship, where things seem to have turned a bit chaotic:

At the conclusion of the treaty, King Obie willingly accepted an invitation to join in prayers in the Captain's cabin, even to the point of kneeling in Christian fashion. Half way through, unfortunately, he became violently perturbed for the safety of his soul and at the end of the service, uttering a sudden fearful exclamation, he called loudly for his fetish to be brought so that he could pour a libation on the spot to his own gods. Perspiration streamed down his face and neck, and it was some time before he could be quietened with the assurance that the prayers were bilateral; when satisfied on this point, instead of pouring the libation he drank it himself and washed it down with some Spanish wine that was offered. (Pedraza 1961: 26–27)

If this expedition, too, had its problems, it received much favorable publicity in Britain. There were grandiose visions for future commercial development and continued philanthropic endeavors in the African hinterland. These in turn apparently inspired Charles Dickens's ironic fiction of a "Borrioboola-Gha" in the novel *Bleak House*: living in London, the small, plump, pretty Mrs. Jellyby is entirely consumed by the project of resettling impoverished Englishmen among Africans in the new settlement, where they would all grow coffee together. In support of this vision, both she and her daughter spend all their time sending out propaganda and answering queries about Borrioboola-Gha, while their family life deteriorates, and the ignored Mr. Jellyby gets close to suicide. Unfortunately, in Dickens's version, the entire project fails, as the local African king sells the volunteer migrants into slavery so he can buy rum. And the Jellyby daughter, tired and exasperated, bursts out: "I wish Africa was dead! . . . I hate it and detest it."

This was the entry of Nigeria, or what would become Nigeria, into British fiction.

Yet more upriver traffic followed. By the 1850s and 1860s, the colonizing process seemed to stabilize somewhat. The prophylactic use of quinine against malaria had been discovered, so West Africa was no longer quite so surely "the White man's grave." But there were also more African hired hands, often liberated in the struggle against the slave trade, and familiar with the foreigners' ways of doing things.

Now, in 1860 it seems, Lokoja came into being as a commercial settlement at the Niger-Benue confluence, under the relatively long-term supervision of another colonial visionary: William Balfour Baikie, naturalist, philologist, and medical doctor. The community attracted

people from surrounding areas, many of them apparently refugees from slavery, and its market place drew much trade. While running Lokoja with a firm hand, Baikie also found time and energy to translate Christian texts into Hausa and Nupe. However, his health suffered, and the time came to leave. Pedraza (1961: 64) concludes that “his long years of autocratic independence had made him irritable and cantankerous, and it is quite possible, though not a pleasant reflection, that he had become unbalanced.” His replacement in Lokoja arrived. On his way back to Britain, Baikie made it only to Freetown, where he died.

By then McGregor Laird was also dead since a few years back, and British policy toward West Africa turned rather Dickensian and distracted. There was, for a period, no enthusiasm in London for pushing inland in this part of the dark continent. Such development as there may have been at Lokoja was at quarter-speed, depending more on local dynamics than on official long-distance support. Baikie’s successors had the title of consuls, but one skeptical visiting trader referred to their residences as “Her Majesty’s Mud-Huts.”

Later yet in the century, however, there was George Taubman Goldie, forcefully running the Royal Niger Company with a close connection to the Crown, and so Lokoja came alive again. There were new facilities for trade, and after Goldie arrived in person for a visit to the region to wage a battle against the forces of the emir of the Nupe, it was clear that British power in the area would be durable. This was further manifested when Frederick Lugard, as new representative of the British Empire, took over something now described as the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, on the Lokoja parade ground on 1 January 1900.

In the twentieth century, finally, Lokoja took on the form of colonial logic. The European population, which reached its record size of eighty-nine in 1907, lived in its segregated residential area of what was referred to as “Lugardesque” bungalow architecture, while the old neighborhood from Baikie’s time became the native township. The young men working for what had been the Royal Niger Company, and was now the United Africa Company, were under the discipline of their manager, who kept their whisky bottles in his cupboard and allowed them “one tot per evening.”

Pedraza’s account ends rather ironically. “Location” turned out not to be everything; at least not Lokoja’s. The site was not very healthy, compared, for example, to Kaduna, Lugard’s new urban center. Soon enough, moreover, transport would be on new railways and roads, rather than by river. By the time Pedraza published his book, at the time of Nigerian independence, a hundred years after the town came into existence and sixty years after Lugard’s appearance on its parade

ground, Lokoja was once more a backwater. Yet moving forward again, to the twenty-first century, it does not seem to do so badly. Nothing, it seems, can stop a Nigerian urban center from growing. The river confluence may not matter so much, but with a population approaching a hundred thousand, the city is now a state capital and has a new university.

But back to Howard Pedraza: the review in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* concludes that his book “will be useful to African schoolboys and undergraduates” (Jones 1961: 180). Again, it is not really an account of his own Lokoja experience, but rather the work of a district-officer-turned-historian.

In a history of writings about Nigeria, or what would become Nigeria, Chinua Achebe (and some other authors, such as Dilim Okafor-Omali) can offer the perspective of the colonized. Someone like Pedraza gives us the colonizer’s view—from sometime between the mid-nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century. Pedraza gathers materials from early colonization, while other writers provide autobiography, or glimpses of autoethnography, or even fiction. With the coming of Nigerian independence, the Afropolitan horizons of the colonialist veterans become views in the rear-view mirror. As a whole, this chapter is about such expatriate colonialist commentary—leading finally into a bit of oral history.

Pedraza goes back to earlier history. It so happens, however, that in a book describing some twenty years of service to the British Empire, one of his predecessors in Lokoja devotes a few pages to his own brief stationing there, in 1938–39. John Morley (1992: 80–85), coming in from previous postings further north, found that “the town councillors were a cantankerous lot, by and large, and did not respond to the mild joke or witticism which so often saved the situation when one was dealing with Hausas.”

His main project in Lokoja was building the town’s first public latrine. Where? To keep the foul smell at a distance, he had decided to place it away from other buildings, close to the river shore. That was fine, except for the two or three weeks of the year when the river flood peaked, and the latrine was out there in the water. Unfortunately, that was when Morley’s superior officer came on tour.

But Morley soon moved on, for service elsewhere in Northern Nigeria, Eritrea, Malaya, Singapore, and finally in the Gold Coast, just before it became Ghana. Another paragraph of his West African reminiscences might be worth citing: the Elder Dempster Line mail boats, between Liverpool and main West African ports before World War II, “were an extension of the West African scene . . . the passenger

list was predominantly male, and the seasoned coasters were, even before the ship had cast off from its down-river berth, settled in front of gins and bitters in the smoking-room chairs they would hardly vacate for the rest of the voyage.”

In fiction, from around this time, there is Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* (1939), finding a wider audience rather slowly—but also one of those books the young Chinua Achebe read, and disliked (together with Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*, another colonial-era novel, not uncritical of colonialism, and yet not free from prejudice). The imagined young Nigerian Mr. Johnson, working in the colonial service in an area that is not his own, finds himself in an uncomfortable in-between position, and faces the different personalities and styles of his British superiors. Of Irish-British family background, Cary had had his own mixed experience of serving in the colonial administration for some years around 1920.

On the whole, local-level colonial administrators have not contributed a great deal to published writing about Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> Achebe’s fictitious Captain Winterbottom in *Arrow of God* showed no sign of such plans. One notable exception is Stanhope White, with his book *Dan Bana* (1966). White joined the colonial service in 1936, but declined an appointment in Kenya, as he foresaw that the relationship between the Kikuyu people and the European settlers would only get worse—indeed, the result would be the Mau Mau rebellion. Instead he came to Northern Nigeria. His book offers snippets of Nigerian history, and much description of local life from his various postings over an eighteen-year period—from Maiduguri via various Hausa emirates to Tivland on the Benue. But not least revealing are his forthright revelations of the tensions between higher-level bureaucrats and the “Bush DOs” (district officers) like himself, where he could even be seen as a whistleblower. He comments ironically about one governor’s circular announcing that “promotion to the higher posts lay only through the Secretariats; the ability to deal with paper was apparently of much greater importance than the ability to deal with men.” His oppositional stance took him to what he recognized as a punishment posting: Birnin Kebbi, capital of the Gwandu Division, was in most ways not a bad place, but it was hardly unknown to the central administration that it was intensively plagued by mosquitoes. Stanhope White and his wife, who had come to join him, had to spend much of their time fighting them.

White—his Hausa nickname “Dan Bana,” he notes proudly, means “he who is up to date”—did not remain in Nigeria until the coming of independence, but returned to Britain for a business career. When

over a decade later he got around to finishing his manuscript, it was the beginning of 1966. The first military coup had just occurred, and he saw dark times ahead for Nigeria.

Those who wrote their memoirs, or had their biographies written by others, were otherwise mostly high-level people, of gubernatorial rank or so. One example would be Sir Rex Niven's *Nigerian Kaleidoscope* (1982). Niven ended his career when colonialism came to an end. In the final years, he had been close to the new Northern regional government under Ahmadu Bello, the Sarkin Sokoto. He got along well with the aristocratic Sarkin, although on the whole one gets a sense, in an account with a flavor of imperial nostalgia, of members of a colonialist establishment engaged in their own encapsulated lives. The high point of Sir Rex's career was the visit of the young Queen Elizabeth.

More at a grassroots level again, but by a nonofficial, is Raymond Gore Clough's *Oil Rivers Trader* (1972). Clough came into his business when "oil" in the Niger Delta was still palm oil, not petroleum, and when the European traders were moving from rather anarchic conditions into somewhat more orderly colonialism. For one thing, there is an eyewitness account of the Igbo women's uprising in Aba in 1929, and the violent British response—one of the sordid moments of colonial Nigerian history.

As the 1960s and 1970s discourse shifted to "developing countries" and "international aid," there was evidently some disappointment among repatriated excolonial officers that their acquired local knowledge did not seem to count. They had become had-beens, reverse been-tos of a kind. But whatever the old local administrators felt about this back home in Britain, much of their reporting, handwritten or typed, was by then in the far-away archives—where I found it.

As I was doing my field research in Kafanchan, I made occasional side trips to Kaduna to look at historical documentation available in the branch of the National Archives located there. The colonial period only a couple of decades away, and Kafanchan being a quite young town, I could connect the reporting in the archives to the memories I was getting from old-timer townspeople. While in the archives, too, I listed the names of the district officers who had written the reports. Fairly soon after, when I was spending a term as a visiting scholar at a British university, I got in touch with a couple of them, by way of the government agency responsible for paying the pensions of the former colonial personnel. And I arranged to meet with each of them.

They had both spent a few years each in Kafanchan in the 1950s. This had hardly been a prestige placing, so my two informants had been rather young when they got there. One of them had remained long

enough in Nigeria to spend a period higher up in the administrative hierarchy, in Kaduna—and he had also married the daughter of the next-to-last British governor there. (Of the other officers on my list, one who had been in Kafanchan before them had had a better chance for an extended career in the empire, ending it as governor of the Seychelles and becoming a peer.<sup>3</sup>)

The old DOs excused themselves at first, saying I could really not expect them to remember much. Since I had been recently in Kafanchan and knew their reporting, however, I could refresh their memories, and they were soon reminiscing about the people they had written about—some of whom were among my own acquaintances.

The office/residence of the district officer had been set a little apart from the African town. It was approximately midway between the Catholic mission and the railway housing. As the few white people in Kafanchan at the time would belong in one or the other of these, said one of my informants with a smile, this led to a certain balance in interactions. Clearly the railway people were considerably more profane. In a village further away, there was the station of that North American, evangelical Protestant mission that was most successful in the area. The headstrong veteran head of that mission, much longer in the area than any district officer, was clearly often a bit of a nuisance. So was the aging Hausa emir of Jemaa, head of the “native authority,” preferring to stay out of the way of the white men, but rather unpredictable and inconsistent in whatever decisions he was supposed to make.

But both the old DOs really became most enthusiastic when they had a chance to reminisce about their own pet projects in and around Kafanchan. One had started a football cup—the railway workers had a team, the teachers another, and so forth. The other had made villagers make clearings for improved roads, and then made funds available for local contractors to build small, simple bridges where needed. (Preferably at right angles to the road, so one could not cross them at too high a speed.)

What, then, did these two men now do, back in the mother country? One of them worked in local government. The other I met in his tiny office in Bush House, the old broadcast building in central London, where he was in charge of BBC Hausa news; the empire might be a thing of the past, but the public service company was still in touch with distant listeners. Before he found this job opening, he had briefly taught school.

In different ways, perhaps both could use some of their Nigerian experience. But they hardly had the opportunities for their own initia-

tives and priorities they had had as district officers in charge of an area with tens of thousands of inhabitants, alone and far from their superiors. It was obvious that they now saw their stay in Kafanchan as a rich period in their lives.

It was another aspect of those lives, too, that they did their part as local ritual engineers. One of them reported to Kaduna about how Kafanchan celebrated the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. And then there were the annual festivities of Empire Day. In these small ways, perhaps, they had been contributors to that border-crossing Afropolitan imagination.

### Notes

1. For a brief account of Crowther's life and work, see Apter 1992: 193–204.
2. An anthropologist, Helen Callaway (1987), has drawn on varied materials, including interviews, in assembling a view of expatriate women in colonial Nigeria, providing a sense of ambiguities, ambivalences, and recurrent absurdities in their lives, in large part as spouses of colonial officers.
3. This was Sir Bruce Greatbatch, who became controversial in his period on the Seychelles when he arranged the deportation of Indian Ocean island inhabitants from what would become the American naval base of Diego Garcia.

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