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I **T** was beginning to dawn outside. But only outside and not for the mass of humanity, sprawled all over - on tables and desks, over benches and mats and just about everywhere - in assortments of positions. A marvel to those not accustomed to this way that the long hours of night could be passed in, for some, virtual stooping postures.

Then echoes of the dawn gradually percolated into the vast tout's 'office'. A tout stirs awake, and this great Lagos suburb rumbled, whispered through broken louvres and air sleeves that its brief midnightly slumber was over.

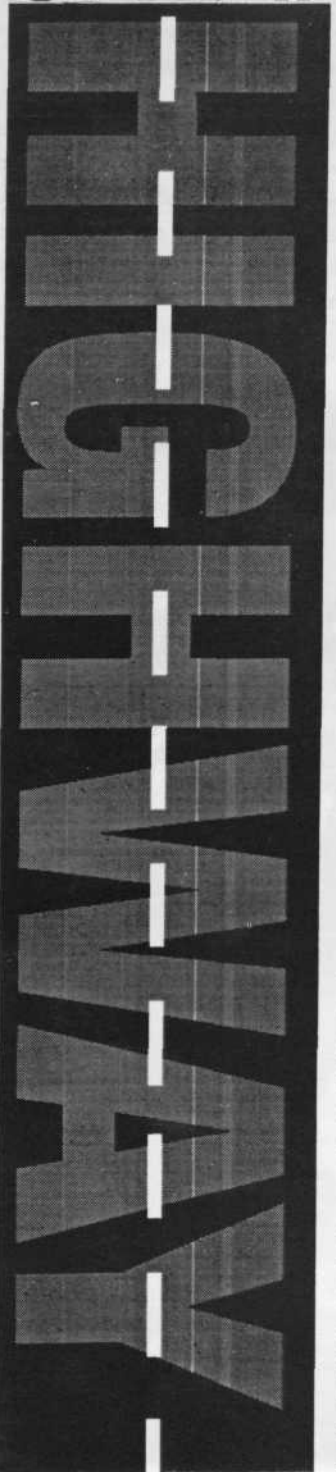
More souls awoke out of sleep but a few persisted. A soul in particular with back pressed to the wall whose heavy snores served to contest the evidence of all the gathering light that the night now was indeed far spent.

Underneath the vast office table emerged the registrar himself who briefly exercised, rinsed his face outside and took his position voluptuously behind the table and now busied himself writing up receipts and filling in empty columns in his huge books. He looked up from his enormous task with great pain as each intending traveller on the Great Highway was ushered into his presence, gave the fare which he counted with practised ease.

The office insisted on all the dignities of an international travel centre in spite of its atmosphere - low, even strikingly diminutive travellers' seats, stained oil-painted walls and air scented by heavy acrid smells. Receipts detailing destinations and perhaps main mid-way stopovers and outsized registers all seemed to me a part of the general psyching-up process.

I found Mokaila outside, by the motor-road wiping the dew off the long stationwagon car that I soon discovered was to be our vehicle. Mokaila, the driver's assistant betrayed a slight Ghanaian accent which was reassuring since, after all, the sign placed on

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the roof of the Peugeot was explicit, 'Lagos to Accra'. There was, I thought also, Accra inscribed in his facial features, an amazing resemblance of the youth illustrated in pen and ink on the cover of Peter Abraham's book, *Tell Freedom*.

I lamented to Mokaila about the jagged, nearly wrecked body of the car but he chuckled, promised to show me worse car body works which invariably all braved the distance. Fellow wayfarers whose luggages had found accommodation in the heaps and heaps now filling the vehicle to bursting waited patiently under a canopy on the other side of the road, its legitimate owner only managing to run her business on one edge dishing out bowls of rice and stew to school pupils and touts and assistant touts and all who cared for an early morning snack. Voyagers included traders who reserved carrier-bags, veritable 'hand-luggages' to be sure, which held spill-overs of assorted articles of trade - venus body lotion, air-tight snuff, toiletries - whose larger bulks were fed into the car, in some cases, the day before.

A woman who grew increasingly talkative amongst other chattering friends reordered her pack surveying a toilet soap destined for export to Accra and complained about the recent slow-drag of business. Sale in Ghana drops, she says, because of the reputation of Nigerian manufactures as fake.

'They are all feek', she concluded.

Tongues varied and fluid switching of tongues very usual. Multilingualism had become the ubiquitous trait of all who frequent the great highway. French to English, Yoruba to Hausa, Twi and Ewe. Twi, I found, was in employment during banter within the towns of Benin and Togo.

And then there was the enigmatic Alhaji, a famous denizen of major world highways who though had no real grasp of languages beyond his mother-tongue, Yoruba, and English, had perfected the art of survival and immovability in linguistic jungles. He sat patiently under the rice seller's stall glaring into the day's newspapers. Gray-headed, hair shaven nearly to the scalp and thickset neck,

his solid forehead thrust into the open pages presented an almost comical demeanour, which attracted me to him. Alhaji revealed that he had plied the road regularly since 1990, has travelled widely in Europe and the Far East. His passport, defaced with stamps said it all. Throughout all the misfortunes of this particular trip he kept assuring me that the highway was preferable to air-flight or the waterways. Alhaji at some point wagged his finger at me and said, he once ventured beyond the farthest ends of the great highway and reached up to Spain.

'You boys! You've read in books but have not seen with your eyes. No experience! Beyond Mali, Sudan, when you reach Libya, you are ready to stretch your hand across the channel to your friend in Italy for a handshake.'

After I confided to him that I was a journalist, he lifted his eyes and spied me all over, and said, 'if I were to write on this highway, oh! How I would write and write.'

Now Mokaila turned up on the heels of his master, the driver. The driver's voice had preceded him, and his orders. Mokaila swivelled in response to each, the last of which was 'get the car on the road!' And then the man whose straight-backed gait and overall demeanour was about to fetch him the name, General, in my estimation, turned on us and barked, 'get into the car!' It was difficult to resist his tone and the finality with which he gave the commands; like it or not, we too responded and began to trudge down the road, an unreasonably lengthy distance, beyond the filling station, where I felt he asked his boy to take the car to merely to prove who was firmly in charge. I had wondered when shown our 'international carrier' why only one place remained and yet none of those who turned up earlier bothered to secure the usual choice positions for themselves. Another lesson of this great highway - no position was particularly convenient.

The car which ought to have held a maximum of seven, the driver included, took ten under the General's command, a horde of whimpering kids sandwiched between the women and myself in the middle seat. And when one of the babies would not be pacified, even with mouthfuls of drinks and tears-soaked bread pieces, it was in my very direction that he turned and sprayed. Yet the General emerged with an extra baggage and insisted on tucking it underneath, exactly where my feet managed to find accommodation. Naturally, my protestations fell on deaf ears and so, I exploded, dismounted and asked him to refund my fare, knowing I had him against the

barrel. The same long, tortuous journeys going through registers and cancelling receipts would be followed before any refund would come through. But the General would rather not be stripped of authority; he kept his distance but refused to budge all the same. Bent on puncturing his inflated airs I flared, declared that I was through with the journey and insisted on the refund. It took the pleas of Alhaji and the other passengers to prevent further delays, Alhaji offering to switch positions with me. His space at the front seat however turns out much worse than where I rejected but peace was made in order that the voyage might commence.





It was an 'obstacle race' once we turned towards Seme, Nigeria's borderpost into Benin Republic, west of Badagry town. There was a checkpoint within every kilometre mounted variously by the Nigerian army, police, drug-law enforcement agency and immigration. What passed for 'checking' was in reality illegal toll-collection which was rendered mandatory. It seemed all you needed was a uniform and or rifle, and then you mounted your own collection point. And the greatest undoing of any vehicle was to be clearly marked as envisaging a multiple international border thrust, particularly if it was also visibly stacked to the roof as ours was. Great was my wonder to see the General dissolve at the very first of such encounters completely losing his grit, becomes supplicatory before the customs men and soldiers, turned aghast at yet another, full of complaint:

'why you ask us to pay so much? A thousand. Five hundred! We no carry weapon, no fayawo!'

Even so the private cars are gener-

ally waved on at the sudden roadside checks and even the borderposts reserved some measure of courtesy for them also. We had to disembark a quarter of a kilometre before the very bordergates and make the rest of the way by foot. The idea was to let each traveller sort herself/himself out with the multitude of viscious and rampaging officers manning the gates, as though into eternity. The more experienced knew where to offer the handouts, how much and where to bluff. Presenting valid travel documents saved you from only one of five desks, each with the powers to detain or prevent further progress.

The gravest danger of all was to fall into the hands of touts who offer to serve as guides and advocates. In soliciting, they build fear into the potential customer, offer to take over the hand baggage and if there were hard currencies, demand to have them transferred under their safe keeping. It was the sensible thing to do before presenting yourself to the border officers. But once checking had all been surmounted, argu-

ments would quite naturally erupt about the precise amount of hard-currencies taken in custody and or vital contents of the hand-luggage has miraculously disappeared.

The treatment meted out at the Benin Republic edge of the same gate was more severe or less, depending on the degree of the voyager's acquaintance with the way and ability to speak French. Unlike the Nigerians, the French-Africans wore no uniforms, gave sharp commands, from several ends at once, and were

prompt with whistles. The more fortunate would be saved by the timely intervention of some compassionate officer who would help to fix a precise moderate sum, issue orders for your safety or provide an escort through, right into the centre of the stalls and motorpark where the basis of solicitation from touts altered to offers of taxi and snacks service.

The passengers emerged one after another and collected under the stalls but there was no news of the General and Mokaila as yet, not until five hours afterwards. The food and snacks vendors with whom we found accommodation were Beninnoise Yoruba girls, school girls in fact, who served Guinness beer and Malta, poured into mugs. There I was joined by three young men, two Beninnoise and one Nigerian-born British citizen who conversed in English. The Nigerian-Briton narrated the tale of his adversities with the Nigerian immigration at the Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos. They refused him passage into Nigeria despite his being in possession of all the valid papers. His

Beninnoise friend replied amidst his draughts of beer that it was much worse at the Seme Bordergate.

'You cannot be right here. Not with the Narcotics agents in particular. They would make you eat bread and ask you to wait till you are ready to excrete, just to punish you and delay you.'

The man from England, more angered than frightened returned,

'They can't do that to me. They'd lose their jobs.' But the border tout inclined his head and downed the remainder of his beer:

'They will tell you it is not their fault, it is order from abey.'

General appeared at dusk, with Mokaila but he was never angrier. And it took a while for me to recognise that I was the cause of his tragedy. It was explained to me later that the Benin customs had frisked him and extorted from him far exceedingly upon sighting the glazing copies of *Glendora Review* in my baggage, charging him for importing 'graphic'. Whereupon I wore the piteous, sympathetic look which hardly appeased him, rather he demanded for additional payments that came up to about half of the entire fare I had paid in Lagos. So that my sympathies metamorphosed into playing it deaf!

The roadchecks re-emerged even in the francophone African territories. Through the cities of Benin and the Republic of Togo, terminating at the Ghanaian edge of the Aflao entryport. It seemed that the spirit of extraction built its throne in the Atlantic ocean, along whose coastline the Great Highway paved right from Badagry to Aflao. We peeped on the sea often, losing its track only momentarily and regaining it in a short distance. The rush of sea-storms and recumbent coconut palms however remained with us even at those moments when we failed to snatch a glance of the surface of the ocean.

The roadside Gendarmes in Benin and Togo were encountered rolicking leisurely in chairs, under tarpaulin or palm-frond canopies. Decked for the most in full military gear and appropriately armed, they were in actual fact fussless, especially as the driver knew what was expected of him: a rolled leaf of 500 CFA disappeared between warm handshakes. When their patience was tried they resorted to the whistle which could be very threatening.

Cotonou rose in full splendour from its very outskirts, dominated mainly by huge industrial complexes, its networks of motor-roads accompanied on the edges by rail tracks. The brilliant blaze of electric lamps distinguished this city even when small homesteads were glimpsed through the luxuriant foliage of fruit trees. Coastal windstorms sailed through the whole cityscape to an extent that, when occasion demanded that the car stop for a man to defecate in the bushes, before we rode midtown, buttocks bared to the wind, the turbulent storms nearly snatched my unbuttoned trousers! All the city sidewalks might have been swept glazing. The night markets complemented the beauty of the whole visage, patronised by non-sophisticated but cultured folks. Rail-lines clambered up bridges and crossed pedestrian and motor ways without frictions. The masses of people went as swoops of fireflies on motorcycles in the night, women also, in wrappers, riding leisurely and fusslessly, since, much unlike in Lagos, traffic-lights were heeded here and rights of passage acknowledged among road-users where due.

Alhaji was however the least impressed. Asked why during one of our brief stops where the General went to present his police offerings, he explained that there was such remarkable neatness in Cotonou and Lome because the people had battered their brains to France in exchange for a similitude of development. He took one final disparaging

glance at the enormous parliamentary buildings of Benin, awash with glows from archlamps, and hissed:

'You see, the French did all their thinking for them!'

We grew friendlier, as we walked the passage through the borderposts between Benin and Togo at Hillacondji. The fuss was generally less when moving between two French-speaking territories and Hillacondji was quiet, even solemn both night and day. Here Alhaji declined to present his passport for stamping, I figured as yet another expression of his condescension for the francophone Africans. Besides, his regrets for not having a chance to pour his anti-French expletives directly into my reportorial notebooks came to the surface again: promptly shifted into the role he had clearly rehearsed and envisioned himself in for sometime; he grabbed my hand before the Togolese immigration and proudly introduced himself as my boss, you know, coming along with his boy all the way from the *Daily Times* in Lagos!

The accuracy of his gauges, of Togo's size, as with all else, was legendary. He had campaigned vigorously, even before we set our eyes on Cotonou that we pass the night at Hillacondji which caught his fancy for no obvious reason, assuring me that the distance between Hillacondji and Lome-Aflao was a mere thirty minutes. I believed him but the General paid no heed. It turned out that more than three hours separated between Hillacondji and Lome, and a further two hours and half between Lome and Tema-Accra.

No one pierced the borders at Lome after dusk, just as in Seme and our arrival in the midnight meant that we were able to present ourselves at the immigration building first thing in the morning. But we were not alone. Sharp on the dot of 6am. (7am. Nigerian time), a huge crowd, mainly of pedestrians and

traders which had accumulated before the gates, made their rapid dash for the borders. The few Togolese officers who tried to hold them back with batons and whips almost fell over backwards in the face of the surge. But the Ghanaians waiting at the Aflao edge seemed better prepared, maintaining order with their own small-sized whips and upheld belts. The way paved into two, one for those with valid travel papers and the other for those prepared to earn their passage with unofficial (but well acknowledged) sums of money. Those who could hardly afford the prescribed fee made up with pairs of second-hand children's shoes or clothes, extracted from amongst their articles of trade. Even so, valid papers at

the other side needed augmentation with the one thousand cedi note.

The General's luck has since improved, after his initial encounters at the Nigeria-Benin border; in less than two hours afterwards our car was heading fast for Accra. We all now were in the cheerful mood, the General inclusive; the women behind burst into songs, inspired apparently by our progress towards Accra. The Alhaji could think of no other way to express his pleasure than to make one more descent on the French. This was at the moment when, thirty minutes after departing from Aflao we happened upon the Volta river. The Volta bridge was the traditional border between the old Gold Coast and Togo, he revealed.

That was before the Republic of Ghana pushed the borderline backwards to Aflao. Muttering more to himself now, he wondered why Ghana had not yet thought it fit to over-run the entire of Togo and annex it! Togo more than deserved this, he reasoned, because of its small size.

The way left and right of our advance was far from densely forested; the endless stretch of sparse vegetation nearest to the savannah without the grass but rather isolated squat trees. Thereon our visage was interrupted only by tiny, tiny human settlements, up until we emerged in Tema, the harbour town outstrip of the capital, by midday, twenty-six hours after our departure from Lagos. **GR**

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