Peculiar People: (2) The Nigerians.

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EVERYONE who goes to a foreign country begins to generalise the instant he sets foot on its soil. After a couple of years the bold outlines of his first scheme are somewhat blurred, and after twenty no doubt one becomes almost inarticulate However, as I am not yet in danger of these years of discretion, I shall launch out into some generalisations—although I could quote exceptions to each of them.

Perhaps one of the chief attractions of West Africa for the English traveller is its promise of danger. It was this that in the past drew people like Mary Kingsley—see, at the beginning of her ***Travels,*** how extraordinarily flimsy are the respectable, scientific reasons she gives for choosing West Africa for her journeyings—and attracts the neurotic with a taste for anthropology today. Nigeria is, of course, becoming more 'comfortable' every year; but it is still true that the margin between life and death is much narrower than in Europe. The dangers of road and riot alone make the Litany's petition against sudden death sound far less melodramatic than in England.

Insecurity

Nevertheless, what strikes the Englishman who has been lured to Nigeria is, today, less its danger than its insecurity. Danger is more exciting and less disconcerting than insecurity; it provides a personal challenge to be overcome instead of a fear to be lived with; it does not usually last long, and, above all, it is fairly rare in average European conditions, whereas insecurity increases as the bombs get bigger. The Englishman, already sensitive to insecurity, recognises it in Nigeria. He is only unaccustomed to the forms it takes.

Most obvious is the dreadful economic insecurity—the open poverty, the way someone begging for money makes the direct physical appeal 'I haven't eaten today', the reaction against remembered poverty displayed in the big cars, big radios, and big houses of those who have achieved material success. Then position in the community, too, is not safe. Public opinion swings dramatically and violently. I was in a Rivers town during the Eastern General Election. A friend of mine was accused of fiddling the votes. The day before, I should have called him a respected citizen of the town. But that evening no one greeted him in the street. The next day he stayed at home, hurt and horrified at the change. However, his house was packed with members of his family to whom he could pour out his woes and who were apparently prepared to spend all day sitting in sympathy to listen or give advice.

The only security, socially, does seem to lie in a man's family, whereas in Europe it depends far more on the support of associates and friends built up outside the family. But a Nigerian can rely on his family's support through thick and thin—so long as the threat is from outside groups. It does not eliminate stresses within the family. My faith, however, in the sufficiency of the Nigerian family was severely shaken when I learnt how witches are detected in a certain clan. A witch cannot be known while alive, but anyone who dies is 'tested' to find if he or she is a witch. If the reply is affirmative, the body must not be buried but thrown away. This seems to me to introduce a lack of security in personal relations for which there is no

European counterpart—that the person nearest you may turn out, at death, to have been an enemy and destroyer.

Now, the Nigerian attitude to his society into which these insecurities and many others enter is, to a foreigner, extremely puzzling. The lack of a spirit of public service and the desire for education in order to secure a profitable job, shock the Englishman deeply. I think this is because of a fundamental difference in outlook. The Englishman works to get what he thinks he deserves; the Nigerian to get what he wants. The Englishman's sense of self-discipline does not exist for its own sake; he feels that he has certain rights from his society provided he fulfils certain obligations to it. If he works hard and disinterestedly, he is entitled to economic security (old-age insurance is a typically British institution), a guaranteed position in his society, and loyalty from those with whom he has personal relations. He is trying, that is, to eliminate risk from his life, professional and personal, by propitiating the gods of chance with sacrifices of hard work. Moreover, he feels it would be presumptuous and dangerous of him to demand more than his deserts; for example, he would not expect to go to a university unless he felt that he was intellectually qualified; whereas in Nigeria I have several times been surprised by the complacency of, for instance, teachers with low qualifications who talk of getting a degree as if the lack of a scholarship were the only thing preventing them. Once a Nigerian has begun rising in the world, he appears to keep on rising until he is forced to stop by outside pressures rather than by the feeling that he has gone far enough to be comfortable.

I think all of this is due to something that is hard to pin down but is perhaps best described as acceptance of risk, or perhaps unconsciousness of it, as opposed to the European's desire to eliminate it. This would explain why the Englishman is appalled by the reckless way heavily-laden lorries rush about the roads and, equally, why the average Nigerian lorry-driver, in spite of spectacular crashes, does little to prevent them. It also explains why an ambitious man here will keep on mounting the ladder—he is more willing to take the risk of failure than the cautious Englishman.

Perhaps this is responsible, too, for the combination of cheerfulness and an astonishing hospitality to strangers with an apparent callousness of attitude. I am thinking, for example, of the way in which an unsophisticated audience will laugh at a folk-tale where someone is hurt or at a description of the public mocking and beating up of a thief in the old days. This can have the most bewildering effect upon a foreigner. The process is very well shown in Elenore Smith Bowen's book *Return to Laughter*, where the narrator, an American anthropologist, becomes deeply involved in the emotions of the people she is studying but has times of complete revulsion—as when she sees children mocking a blind man—in which she feels that she cannot have any sympathy for people capable of such callous behaviour. At the end of the book, when they have experienced a devastating epidemic and she finds them mocking at that too, she realises that their attitude is not indifference to suffering but an acceptance of disaster so that life can go on; their laughter is a weapon, not a forgetting.

This seems to me very true. At least, for me it helped to throw into perspective many pieces of behaviour that struck me when I came to Nigeria. It provided at least a partial understanding of how laughter may not be incompatible with sympathy, of why Nigeria is at one moment a place of laughter and friendly talk, at the next one of sudden tragedy or of fierce quarrelling, and why in spite of its disconcerting unfamiliarity there is a current of life that makes me glad to have come here.