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## The Agony of Lagos

Vance Hawthorne

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20 **By Vance Hawthorne**

Lagos, host city of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, FESTAC, has a personality of its own. As the capital of Africa's most populous nation, Lagos literally swarms with humanity and lives in perpetual motion and activity.

Although FESTAC was the main attraction, many of the agonizing aspects of the Lagos city life somewhat haunted the month-long festival that summoned thousands of participants from all corners of the Black world. FESTAC symbolized a grand homecoming for displaced peoples of African descent. However, the majority of the inhabitants of this sweltering coastal city seemed untouched by the festival proceedings.

Lagos paints the picture of a city that is straddling time spans of the past and the present. It is symbolic of a society in transition that is struggling to reach equilibrium in a technologically advanced world. It is over-populated and lacks the basic conveniences found in most modern cities. The telephone system hardly works, power failures occur frequently, and the traffic bottleneck during daylight hours is without parallel anywhere.

In Victoria Island, Ikoyi, and other sections of the city, several ultra-modern structures can be seen that would rival many a sky-scraper in the Western world. Tafawa Balewa Square, one of the scenes of several FESTAC events, is a spacious concrete open-air facility that can be likened to a modern-day coliseum. Twin towers stretch skyward against a backdrop of some of the city's tallest buildings. A few miles away stands the showpiece of FESTAC, the immaculate National Theatre, which boasts a plush 5,000-seat auditorium.

Lagos, also, is a conglomerate of rural and urban societies. At any time of day, a herd of cattle may amble down some of the city's streets, followed by a congregation of goats, which, needless to say, adds to the traffic tippers. Chickens peck around the dirt roads and the sight of

lizards scaling walls and scurrying about underfoot is not uncommon.

Though the average temperature year-round is 87 degrees, it is highly deceiving because the high humidity (80 to 90 percent normally) is like a parasitic burden on residents as well as visitors. Two distinguishable seasons mark the climate—the dry season which runs from October to April, and the rainy season from May to September. During the latter stretch, torrential downpours transform some of the dirt roads into muddy quagmires, adding to the miseries of motorists as well as pedestrians.

The anguishing aspects of city life in Lagos were best illustrated by the Nigerian editor of a small booklet that was prepared with FESTAC visitors in mind. Here is a quotation:

"Some time ago, somebody wrote tearfully about Lagos: (or was it the country generally he was writing about?) "A city where nothing works"! From this headline point, this saddist went about pouring out his sorry objections of this poor city. I am not writing here with any stress of

bitterness, but to recount some of the problems you may likely be confronted while in it. I think it is right to forewarn you so that you don't start grudging us or to grudge us a little if you must do, because they are our living problems for which solutions are still being eagerly awaited, even from above or any other quarter that may be in sympathy with us, including your good self perhaps—I don't know.

"Well, the first problem that may pose you as you step into this city, may be the go-slow. We have multiple fly-overs (expressways) so recently built and more being constructed, but it appears a wicked force is neutralising all this gigantic efforts of our government. And it is a very sad thing to think about. This one single problem makes every other thing done here, be it the nicest of things, seem like hell on earth. But I pray you don't partake of this our sad experience while you are here since a division of the FESTAC planning committee has been assigned with the uneasy job of easing traffic during this festival period. . . .

"Problem No. 2 is this: Please don't

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brood at all if on the midst of display or watching an absorbing act in one of the FESTAC programmes you suddenly find yourself in the darkness! We have a very sick child here of which sickness is still being seriously diagnosed by the medical experts. This sick child is one big government organisation that goes by the name: NEPA (Nigerian Electric Power Authority). People no more prefer to call it that name, but have fittingly christened it "LEPER" to correspond with its nature of sickness! Of course you know what leper is in sickness, and need no further briefing here. Sadly, ever since this gigantic organisation holding all the powers of the nation had been re-baptised, they had become really leperous to a sense that we are considering seriously withdrawing this nickname and embrace it whole-heartedly, leper or no leper apart! We think that this is the only sensible thing for us to do until sense comes up.

"Or again, you might think of dialling a call to a loved one within some distance to you. Again, don't brood! This is Lagos telephone! You either learn not to rely fully on it, or just take what you get from the passtime exercise! This department —P&T (Posts and Telecommunications) —happens to be the junior brother of LEPER (whoof, NEPA—I am sorry for forgetting!).

"These are the likely dis-attractions you may get. The assertions are not rigid, mark you."

(The "go-slow was somewhat improved by the reorganization of the city's traffic pattern during FESTAC. Also, there were no major power failures at the National Theater or at the other venues where FESTAC events were held.)

Despite many of its drawbacks, Lagos has the charm of an African city on the move. Talking drums reverberate throughout the city as people stroll around sporting garments made from every color of the rainbow. Women and children walk around toting their wares neatly balanced on top of their heads; babies ride strapped to their mothers' backs.

Lagos' open air-markets are an equally fascinating sight. Comprised of a collection of tin-roofed shelters, merchants sell everything from fruit, bread, meat and appliances. Sabo and Oyingbo Markets are the two largest ones in the city. Succulent pineapples, papaya, fresh bananas, plantain, yams, coconuts, oranges and grapefruits are available in abundance each day for relatively reasonable prices. The standard currency is the naira and kobo, the Nigerian counterparts to the U.S. dollar and cent. (100 kobos equal one naira. One U.S. dollar is worth 62 kobos).

Most goods that are sold on the streets involve a price bargaining ritual, where the merchant and the prospective buyer negotiate until they reach an agreement on a price.

Though the people are caught up in the intense competition of coping in this congested coastal city, crime and violence are minimal when compared to Western societies. One reason for this asset is the traditional belief engrained in the people's heritage, plus the fact that armed-robbery is punishable by death (violent robberies and car thefts do occur from time to time).

Though Nigeria is ruled by the military and soldiers with guns are seen everywhere, the government has promised civilian rule and national election by 1979. A national constitution is currently being drafted.

As for Lagos, to understand its paradoxical situation, one must trace and understand the history of Nigerian society. One FESTAC official said it best by attributing the dilemma of Lagos to the "crisis of our existence." This was, perhaps, in reference to the fact that Nigeria is a former British colony still on the road to recovery. Though independent since 1960, the economic strings and other less-overt controls by foreign interests are very much in evidence.

Since its independence, this country of 70 million people has gone through a devastating civil war and a few military

coups. Hence, the slow pace of development.

There was an attempted coup in February, 1976, during which General Murtala Muhammad, the head of state, was assassinated. Even after his untimely death, Muhammad is held in high esteem by his countrymen and by most outside admirers who are familiar with his progressive stance. After his assassination, power was assumed by one of his key aides, General Olusegun Obasanjo, the current head of the Federal Military Government.

In light of these developments, the realization of FESTAC was considered a great achievement by many people.

Nigeria, therefore, is still in the beginning stages of development and nation building.

In this context, perhaps it is understandable why Lagos is the kind of place it is. □

Vance Hawthorne is the feature editor of the Howard University student weekly, The Hilltop.