Durbar Time at Kaduna

Adulkadir N. Said

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Like a procession of ancient warriors returning home from a victorious engagement against the enemy, the horsemen and the footmen paraded before modern-day African heads of states in one of the most breathtaking pageantry in contemporary Africa. They were staging a Durbar—an ancient tradition in which the subjects of a kingdom paid homage to their rulers by engaging in a carnival-like procession.

The participants sported colorful Nigerian costumes that ranged from the traditionally-bright robes to tightly-fitting uniforms of armies that once protected the life and property of feudal rulers of another era. They brandished shiny sabers, daggers and an assortment of armaments of war from ancient times. The sound of trumpets and drums filled the atmosphere. Indeed, it was a magnificent re-enactment of the diverse but rich cultural heritage of Africa. For those participants of FESTAC who travelled from Lagos to the northern city of Kaduna—a distance of approximately 600 miles—it was an experience of a lifetime. It provided a rare glimpse of a tradition that most people read about only in history books—perhaps view it in superficial imitations by Western moviemakers.

The Grand Durbar at Kaduna was a significant part of an era when African societies paid homage to Kings, Emirs, Princes and an assortment of feudal rulers.

For five continuous hours, as the African harmattan wind blew a cool but dusty breeze toward the spectators, leaders of traditional northern Nigerian societies from nine states led their contingents past the grand stand—riding graceful Arabian stallions and displaying royal exuberance. At times, it was difficult to distinguish who was paying homage to whom—particularly when those same descendants of royals who led each state’s contingent are
known to be as politically powerful and
economically comfortable as some of
the assembled heads of states.

The contrast between the old world of
color and splendor (serfdom too) and
the modern world of motorized frenzy
was evident at one end of the grand
stand, where large numbers of custom-
ized Rolls-Royce and Mercedes-Benz
were seen vying for positions—
apparently to whisk off the very men
and some women) who were leading
the contingent on horseback. Of
necessity, the rest of their followers
continued on to demonstrate more
martial prowess to the spectators who
were awestricken by the re-enact-
ment of a tradition of historical
significance.

In all, 3,000 horses and 10,000 indi-
viduals took part in the exciting
pageantry. There were camels, too,
carrying war drums and riders who
chanted verses from the Moslem holy
book, the Koran. And the horsemen
from each of the nine states distin-
guished their agility by displaying
perfect horsemanship. Yes, there were
dancers, singers, and acrobatic
presentations with each contingent—
each making a successful attempt to
mesmerize the thousands of spectators
and the distinguished guests.

The Durbar, indeed, was an outstanding
presentation of the month-long festival
of arts and culture for which Lagos was
the main venue.

Appropriately, the Grand Durbar was
the host country’s way of sharing the
rich culture of the people of Nigeria
with the rest of the Black world. It was
a fitting tribute, a mind-boggling
experience that, for sure, left a lasting
impression on those who were able to
view and appreciate the spectacle.

Yes, it was out of sight!
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