

July 2008

Hi Friends,

I hope you are well and enjoying a fun and restful summer. I find myself on the coast of South Africa slurping down oysters and calamari, a far cry from where this journey began eating fried yam and pounded manioc in Nigeria. I have been working on youth photography and media projects in both countries. I thought I would share a bit about my adventures over the past five weeks. So here it goes...

I am not a big believer in first impressions but when my plane circled above the sprawling darkness of Lagos, Nigeria, I began to wonder. Usually when you fly into a major urban center you are welcomed by the glow of night life, but all I could see were small rays of white light emitted from the automotive ants below. How was it that Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa and one of the world's largest oil producers in the world (it supplies the US with 10% of its oil), could not power its commercial capital, Lagos. Perhaps it was an unexpected blackout...??? Perhaps there was inadequate infrastructure for a rapidly growing population??

Three weeks is not a long time to confirm a first impression, but I think I can safely say that this black out was no aberration. In fact, the only power I personally experienced in Nigeria was via generators, though I am sure some businesses had access power, in all its forms.

In short, corruption has paralyzed the country. Corruption by political leaders, the military, oil companies, rebel forces, and even village chiefs. As a result the gap between rich and poor widens, though really all suffer as the country's infrastructure lags behind its population growth. Unemployment rates reach 85% in many areas of Nigeria. In Lagos, you can sit in traffic for 3,4, even 5 hours to cover a distance that should take a half hour, making planning and scheduling a nightmare.

Nigerians are an amazingly resilient people, but as the woman who invited me to Nigeria said, "Resignation has come out of resilience." And with resignation, corruption has flourished. This is not to say that there are no highly creative and driven Nigerian minds working to build a healthier future. Which brings me to why I am here. One of those minds, Leslye Obiora, a law professor at the University of Arizona, asked me to start a youth photography program for her NGO, the Institute for Research on Women, Children & Culture (IRAWCC). As the former Minister of Mining for Nigeria, Leslye worked to address the country's challenges and corruption, but that very corruption left her no choice but to leave her position. Due to her high standing in Nigeria, I had the opportunity to meet some real movers and shakers – the wealthiest man in Africa (a concrete magnet), the Ford Foundation, a former governor and presidential hopeful, and many others. It was a bit surreal to see so much wealth in a country with so much poverty, and in many cases, unrealized potential.

So Leslye and I flew to her home town of Oguta in southeastern Nigeria so I could begin the process of creating a youth photography project. I was not sure how many youth would be interested, but the first day nearly 40 girls (12-16 years old) showed up. Needless to say, I was a bit overwhelmed by the turnout. This was amplified by the fact that I only had six digital cameras to share and no teaching assistants. On top of this, the girls had no experience with photography, and the only art class in their high school was relegated to those students failing their science classes. Though they had no art background, there was no lack of enthusiasm, as I nearly got tackled (seriously!) the first time I tried to hand out cameras. I found it a challenge to funnel this energy as their minds and bodies were in constant motion and they regularly talked over each other. I asked other teachers how they “controlled” their squirminess and they used the threat of a cane in the classroom. Hmmm.... Language and cultural challenges added to the chaos, as though all the girls spoke English, their first language was Igbo. Things often got lost in translation, as when I asked the girls (as an icebreaker) what superpower they would want, the majority said God. Needless to say, Oguta and southern Nigeria is intensely Christian (the north is predominantly Muslim). These linguistic challenges continued throughout the workshop, as instead of saying “try to hold the camera steady so the photos are “focused,” I was later told to say “take brighter photos,” as brightness referred to “focus” not the degree of lightness in a photo.

On the first day of teaching I was told I needed to ask permission from one of Oguta’s two kings to undertake the project, particularly due to the “invasive” nature of photography. So I went to King Eze Nnani Nzeribe Eze-Eyiche’s home and stared for an hour at his throne, an entire leopard skin book-ended by two red, fortune cookie-shaped pillows. A bell rang and we rose as the king arrived. The teenage boy, Andy, who had brought me to the King, quickly briefed me about what the King might ask. The King spoke to Andy in Igbo and then addressed me in English. He asked about my “mission” and I rose again, walked in front of his throne, bowed six times, and stated my mission. The silence after my presentation was a knee-knocker, but eventually he eloquently stated his approval on my “worthy” project and offered me a refreshment. In hope of continuing the dialogue, I got up the nerve to ask him, or rather his secretary (since I was not permitted to directly address him), what soccer team the King supported. This seemed to be a standard question in nearly every conversation I had with Nigerians. The secretary transmitted the question, the King chuckled, and said “Arsenal” (a premiere English team). Just before I could ask the secretary if I could photograph the King, the King asked me to photograph him and called his wife on his cell to join him. After photographing, I handed the secretary a gift in the form of a photo I had taken of AZ, as all visitors are expected to offer the King a gift. He peppered me with questions about the photo and I signed the back. Phew, I had passed the test...

That night I reviewed the girls’ photos and nearly all of them were distant and posed. I asked another local photographer, Efulense (who thankfully helped translate and teach at times), about this and he said that photographs in Oguta were generally only taken for events (weddings, etc.), so the girls’ only experiences were with posed photographs. I did not want to alter their perspective too much, but I did encourage them to also consider taking more “natural” documentary photos, but it was quite difficult for them to

photograph people naturally. Nearly everyone was concerned that we were going to give their image to a witch doctor or to the police/military (since a good deal of the commercial activity on the streets of Nigerian is black market).

Each night for two weeks I would quickly download and organize their photos before my 2-3 hr window of power (via generator) shut. Though Oguta and southeastern Nigeria is one of the most oil-rich regions in the world, Oguta has essentially no power, yet residents are still expected to pay their power bills. Ironically every night I could see crimson clouds glowing like fire embers as natural gas was burned at the oil fields across Oguta Lake. Instead of processing the natural gas, they burn it off, illuminating the sky but leaving the residents in toxic darkness. I won't go into the complexity of the oil situation, but in a nutshell rebel forces have been blowing up oil facilities and kidnapping anglos in southeastern Nigeria in hope of securing ransom and revenues from the oil companies. Amidst all this, oil companies pay off rebels, chiefs, military forces, etc. From what I heard, many of these companies are now trying to end these corruptive practices, but...

After a week of teaching, I was totally drained. There were just too many girls and I could not give them the attention they deserved. I decided to reduce the number of girls to 12, the size I had originally planned to work with. The girls were pretty devastated and the three most outspoken girls literally begged me to allow all 35 girls to participate. I sadly explained my predicament and they seemed to understand. I was not happy with my decision but I was spinning my wheels and the girls were not progressing. This turned out well in the long run as week two of the workshop was much more fruitful. Toward the end of the workshop I asked the girls to photograph what they would change about Oguta. They produced some compelling images calling for better urinals and classrooms in their school, improved roads, the elimination of child labor, and solutions to the severe litter and trash problem. At the end of the workshop, they selected two of their photos to write about and produced short biographies. Leslye and I had met with the editor of The Guardian, one of Nigerian's leading national newspapers, and he agreed to publish some of their photos and writing. The Guardian also sent a reporter from Lagos to Oguta to write a story about our project, so they seemed pretty serious about covering our efforts and making sure the girls' voices were heard.

Before leaving Oguta, I spent a few hours each day training two local photographers to take over the photo project. I had brought nearly 70lbs of equipment – a laptop, digital cameras, power inverter/converter/adaptor/regulator, a printer, 500 sheets of photo paper – that I was leaving in Oguta and wanted to make sure they felt comfortable using the equipment.

Leaving Oguta was bittersweet, as I was ready to move on (especially my stomach), but sad to leave the girls, particularly Vivian and Adaobi, who day after day showed great promise and interest in photography and writing. On the way to the airport, as usual we passed numerous military checkpoints – mounds of tires and found materials lined with armed men wielding multicolored, semi-automatic weapons. The bright colors and nonchalant manner in which the guns hung like necklaces made the guns look like toys.

Normally at these checkpoints we would be waived through, but not this time. The military officer and my friend driving me talked outside the car. The officer leaned into the open window on the driver's side and asked me for a bottle of water. I paused, said no, and then he pushed for money for water. I said I had none, which might not have been the smartest thing since he was armed and clearly wanted a bribe. He awkwardly chuckled, blurted "white man" in Igbo, and let us through. According to my friend, the officer has pulled us over because he thought I might be a hostage since white foreigners were being kidnapped by rebel forces in the region. Not more than 20 minutes later we were stopped for the same reason. Just 2km before the airport we got pulled over a third time but this time for car registration papers. In the past we bribed the officer with 200 Naira, a little less than \$2, but we got through bribe-free when my friend mentioned I was the guest of the former Minister of Mining. Thankfully for me, prestige and power speak loudly in Nigeria. Sadly, this fuels the endless appetite of corruption.

Well, I think that is more than enough about my experiences in Nigeria. I apologize for the length of these meanderings, but hopefully something in here strikes a cord.

To wrap up, I have been traveling for two weeks in South Africa and am about to start teaching a 10-day digital storytelling workshop near Cape Town. But I will save those stories for a rainy day. Plus, the penguins and whales are calling me. As is this slice of apple-raisin tart (aka pie) that I have been photographing for the past 15 minutes. The waitress just approached me and hesitantly asked, "Are you alright.....Why are you photographing that tart?" As if photographing pie was some sort of illness. Ok, I really better sign off.

Cheers,  
Josh