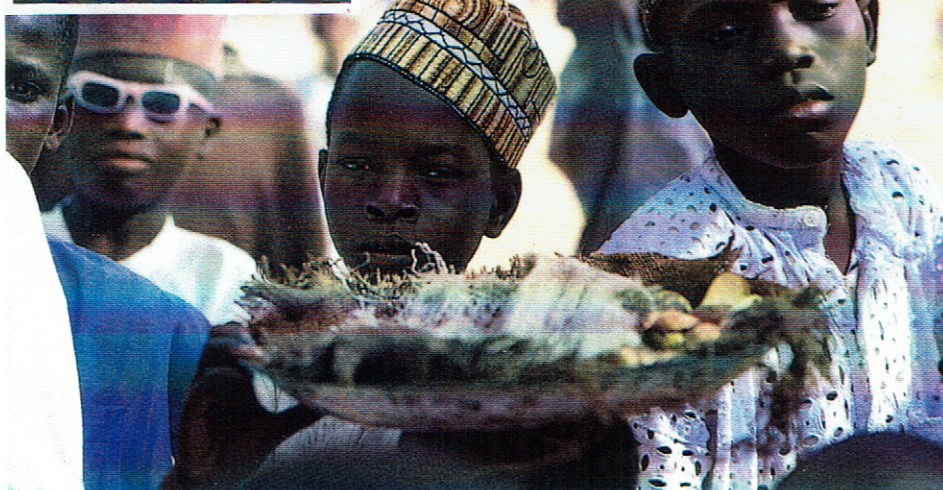
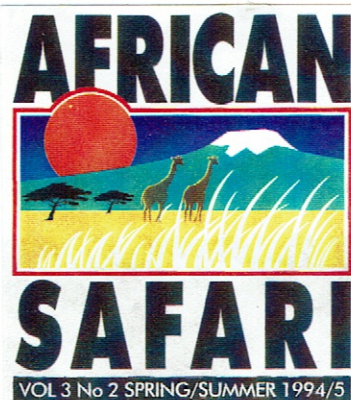




A mad dash

UNLIKE THEIR COLLEAGUES IN THE SOUTH AND EAST, WEST AFRICA'S AIRLINE INDUSTRY HAS YET TO EMBRACE THE CONCEPT OF CUSTOMER SERVICE, REPORTS A WEARY ROBERT IRWIN



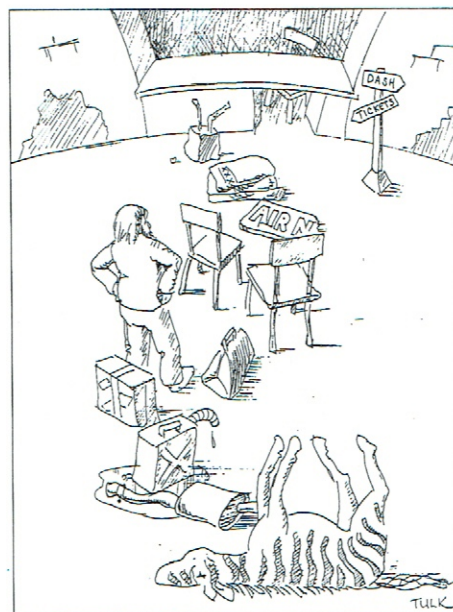
Dawn was just breaking at Kano Airport in the Muslim north of Nigeria when I slid from the tattered passenger saddle of a coughing Vespa scooter. Pocketing his substantial tip, my one-eyed guide bade me farewell with this advice: "Join the queue immediately."

Though Sunday's only flight to Lagos was not for another eight hours, I was prepared to trust his wisdom. He would not have risked running the pre-dawn curfew checkpoints without good reason. What he knew and I did not, I was about to find out.

There were already many people at the airport. Around the crumbling, ill-painted terminal buildings they lay, asleep in the dust. One soldier's face rested on the barrel of his AK-47. I visualised him twitching in his sleep and blowing his head off. Stepping over slumbering vendors, I searched for the queue. But nowhere was there any orderly assemblage of prospective air travellers. Nobody waited for tickets at the wire mesh marked 'Nigerian Airways'. Nobody waited to check in their bags, or for boarding cards, or for anything. Nigerian Airways would not even be open for another hour.

I considered going local - going back to sleep - but dared not risk missing the flight. My business in Lagos was urgent. I had to be at the Cameroon embassy when it opened on Monday morning so I could plead for the visa they had denied me in London. As a Canadian, I should have obtained my visa in Ottawa, despite not having actually been in Canada for more than two years. The confusion inherent in this explanation will make perfect sense to anyone who has experienced African bureaucracy.

The cleaning staff arrived. She was old and tired and, like all African cleaners, hunched over. With her whisk of dry straw she pushed the previous day's litter of beer caps around the departure area. She was helpful in other ways as well. She pointed me to the queue.



I joined it at number five, directly behind a pair of broken, but still functional wooden chairs. Ahead were a pile of burlap bags and part of an airline sign. At the very front was a chunk of cement the size of a television. Just visible through the dusty glass, a Nigerian Airways jet was parked on the tarmac. Smiling, the old cleaner shuffled off, pushing her beer caps before her. I supposed it was somebody else's job to clean the windows.

It didn't take much in the way of reflection to see the silliness of my situation. Apart from being the only one awake in this queue, I was the only one actually **alive**. I was the sole breathing human in a line-up of inanimate objects. Furthermore, I hadn't a clue what this line was for. I suspected it had some vague connection with the plane outside, but even that seemed uncertain. Why should I already be waiting to get on the plane? I hadn't even bought a ticket yet.

While I pondered that one for a while, a sleepy Nigerian stepped up behind me. He wore a threadbare but spotless suit with four-inch lapels. I marvelled at his shoes. They were cleaner than my toothbrush. When he put down his suitcase and turned to go, I grabbed him back. As you might well imagine, I asked him about that crazy queue I was in.

"This is for boarding cards only," he said. When I told him that I had not yet bought a ticket, he shook his head sadly. He pointed to the airline office still padlocked behind the wire mesh.

"Sometimes they open at 7 o'clock," he said. "Also, sometimes they sell tickets." As he walked away from me I noticed that he was still shaking his head from side to side. I sat down in my place. The cold cement floor and my growing panic kept me awake.

Time passed. Other passengers lined up with me. Or rather, pieces of their luggage and other inanimate objects did, while they wandered off elsewhere. It was a nifty system, all right.

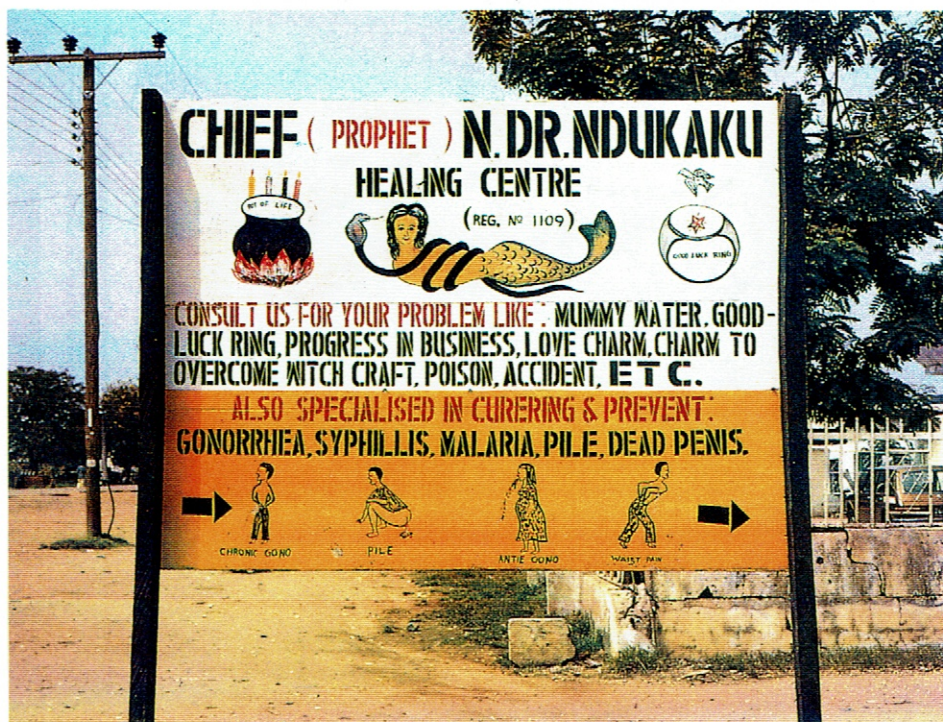
I appeared to be the only one not using it when the 7 o'clock miracle happened: Nigerian Airways opened for business. Did I dare leave my place to run over for a ticket? If I left my only bag for a marker, would it be stolen? Clutching it, I raced to the window.

The lady inside - her hair coiffed and nails perfect - ignored my road-weary presence completely. No physical gesture or verbal harangue I could invent would attract her attention. Finally, content that she had no work to do, she locked the office and disappeared. Angry and worried, I returned to the queue. It may have been my Africanised imagination acting up, but I swear that in my brief absence it had compressed. Back in between the chairs and suitcases I squeezed. Behind me, the queue grew. It became an organised, eccentric, almost organic collection of everything you might find in the markets and gutters of West Africa. It was impossible to determine how many people it represented. Some two hours later the ticket lady returned. I ran to her immediately. I pleaded for her mercy. Condescending, she accepted my 210 Nigerian naira. She spoke but one disdainful word to me: "Dash." So I did - straight back to my queue and the lifeless camaraderie of my companions.

The next four hours saw the cool of morning crushed beneath the oppressive heat of the sub-Saharan afternoon. Men sweating inside suits from of every decade but the present arrived to replace their markers. The chunk of cement became a fat Hausa businessman. Two colourfully swathed Ibo women occupied the pair of chairs. My mate with the shiny shoes returned to sit on his suitcase. Vendors flogged sodas, socks and cigarettes. Touts dressed in street rags tried to crash the queue for cash. Flying fists followed vehement insults. Hundreds of desperate ticket-holders clawed toward the barrier. It was the end of order and the rise of pandemonium. Somehow, the uniformed airline staff managed to ignore it all. Those of us who had waited patiently in our queue remained confident that our dignified behaviour would be rewarded with boarding cards. Still we had to struggle to hold our ground against the forward press of sweating, shouting chaos. "We must be civilised," implored my shiny-shoed friend. His appeal went unheard.

Then, streams of stately men in flowing, elaborately embroidered bou-bous skirted the turmoil. With their Gucci briefcases and elegant, carefree women, they ducked under the barrier. The protests of those left behind were lost in the roar of their jet departing for Lagos. For eight hours I had waited three metres from the departure gate and gone nowhere. I began to wonder if the meek would inherit anything.

My friend looked down at his shoes, now badly



Opposite top left: Scooter taxi, Kano. Above: Typical Healing Centre sign, Bui, northern Nigeria.

scuffed by the ruckus. His heart-felt observation was both a statement of fact and a sad lament for his country. "They have all paid the dash," he said. "In Nigeria, it is the only way."

His meaning was as clear as the gulf between Nigeria's golden elite and its dusty, frustrated millions: bribery. You can say what you like about principles, but I had to get to Lagos. I found the duty officer. For 40 naira, about A\$8, I was added to the long list of the next day's paid-up preferred passengers.

What I found in the morning, after another pre-dawn scooter jaunt, was that I was not preferred enough to be guaranteed a seat on the plane. All I got for my dash was a place in the queue with a couple of hundred other veterans of the previous day's ordeal. Besides us, lined up at the same departure gate, were the new day's fresh hopefuls. It was a few hours before the next melee, which I now viewed as little more than a pitched battle between the forces of good - me - and the rest of the world. When I finally did get my boarding card, it took some serious aggression and a couple of well-aimed elbows to get through the crowd that jammed the gate.

Out on the blistering tarmac, I finally relaxed. My friend, his shoes once again freshly shined, had made it as well. For two more hours we stood in the blazing sun in - you guessed it - another queue. Before us a pair of jets - one from Nigeria Airways, the other from Kano Air - were being serviced.

"I got this far last year," recalled my friend. "Just when I thought I would have a place, a motorcade of VIP's arrived. They commandeered the plane to Lagos. It was two days until another. And even if you do get a seat, you are not truly safe until the door is locked and the plane is off the ground."

No sooner had I been frightened by what was surely an exaggeration than the wail of sirens approached. A long line of black Mercedes flanked by a squad of military motorcycles sped towards us. It glided to a halt between the waiting jets. My friend, as though his recollection were to blame, appeared visibly shaken. Bad omens mean a great deal to Africans, and witchcraft is still very much alive in Nigeria. I felt it also - that very real feeling of nausea that often portends disaster. Or it could have been the intense heat, the blinding sunlight and the blistering tarmac beneath my feet. Whichever, it lasted only a moment. The happy contingent of VIP's, in their Saville Row suits and Rolex watches, boarded the Kano jet. As soon as they'd taxied away we were boarded as well, and on their tail to Lagos.

This was not as wonderful as it might sound, for once I'd negotiated the 24-hour labyrinth of bureaucracy and obtained my Cameroon visa, I would have to get back to Kano. It didn't bolster my spirits much when my friend recounted an airline nightmare from that city. A few years ago a Nigerian Airways 747 had been triple booked in Lagos. A riot ensued. The army colonel called in to settle the matter had a brainwave solution. He organised a foot race. The first 400 people to sprint three laps of the jumbo jet and fight their way up the stairs, got seats.

By the sound of things, if I wanted to fly back to Kano I'd do just as well to get some wax and ostrich feathers and make my own wings.

Robert Irwin is a London-based writer. He was formerly product manager for the Africa Travel Centre and a Guerba Expeditions tour leader.