

Conversations With Cabbies



by Theodore Dalrymple

Many a foreign correspondent, sent to an obscure country of which he knows nothing but which has suddenly drawn the world's attention to itself by a terrible but soon-to-be-forgotten crisis, has based his report from the country on what the taxi driver told him on the way from the airport to the country's one five-star hotel, at whose bar he will soon be sitting.

This is lazy, but not necessarily stupid, for taxi drivers are often well-informed, having overheard a great deal; and they are besides blessed with that knowledge of human nature that derives from experience rather than from reading or theorizing. They are often derided as being prejudiced, but there is no one more prejudiced than he who has a theory to preserve against all evidence.

I have had many delightful and illuminating discussions with taxi drivers. In Paris, an African driver told me that he was

returning to Senegal in order to be freer than he was in France. I knew what he meant: In many respects, life is freer in Africa than it is in Europe, provided only (and it is an important proviso) that you have a little money. Regulation in Africa is much less oppressive and restrictive than in Europe, and such regulations as there are can easily be got round by a little bribery. Bribery is much more efficient than bureaucracy, especially when the latter is large and honest (there is nothing like size and honesty to render a bureaucracy stupid).

Recently, I recognized a taxi driver in London as having come originally from Nigeria. He was delighted to have a conversation with me about his homeland, which I had visited about six times. You can't talk about Nigeria for very long without laughing, though there is always a serious, indeed tragic, undertow to the laughter.

My first experience of arriving in Nigeria was in the north, overland from Cameroon. I reached the city of Maiduguri, which to my surprise was empty of people. I found a hotel and asked the receptionist why there was nobody about.

"They're all away at the public executions," he said. Three men were being executed by firing squad for armed robbery.

This was 36 years ago. I said to the taxi driver in London that I had been told that the police rented out their weapons to armed robbers overnight, though I didn't know whether this was true.

"It is true!" he exclaimed. "It is still true. And the army does it as well."

We talked about the elections.

"The president, he bribes everyone: the judges, the army, the police, the lawyers, the voters—everyone. He says, 'What money can't buy, more money can buy.'"

A splendid bon mot, almost as good as Mobutu's to the effect that it takes two to be corrupt.

I told the driver that I had been quite friendly with Ken Saro-Wiwa, the writer, who went into politics and was hanged for his pains. I had tried to dissuade Saro-Wiwa from entering politics because, I told him, Nigeria needed a writer of his caliber more than it needed another politician. He said he knew that they—the political class, whom he called “the rascals”—would kill him, but that the situation in his homeland, Ogoniland in the Niger Delta, had become so terrible, thanks to the pollution caused by the oil companies, that he felt obliged to try to do something to redeem it. I said to him that I didn't think that he would be killed. Though Nigeria was under military rule at the time, I thought he might be imprisoned for a time but not hanged. I was wrong. A new and far worse military dictator came to power by coup and trumped up charges against Saro-Wiwa as a pretext to kill him.

Never shall I forget his deep-throated laughter as he told me that “the rascals” would kill him.

I said to the taxi driver that I thought that the discovery of oil—supposedly a source of wealth—had been a terrible disaster for Nigeria. No doubt it was no paradise before the discovery, for nowhere is a paradise except in rose-tinted retrospect or prospect, but the discovery of oil had turned the struggle to control the unearned loot into the sole serious business of government. Oil wealth had destroyed prosperity.

The driver agreed, though whether from professional courtesy or genuine conviction I cannot be certain. Naturally, I prefer the latter explanation to the former: a meeting of minds rather than an expression of subordination. But when I repeated the apothegms that I had seen painted on the sides of minibuses and other vehicles—*No condition is permanent* and *Let them say*—his pleasure was unmistakably genuine and his

laughter was exactly that of Ken Saro-Wiwa. It was a kind of laughter that is very rare in or absent from our climes, as if the whole of human existence, even the universe itself, were a vast joke. It is a laughter that seems to well up from the deepest level of a person's being and shakes him through and through.

We talked of Northern Nigeria, through which I had traveled many years before. I had never dreamed that a vicious movement like Boko Haram (the Islamic terrorist group) could arise there. I sensed no tension, though occasionally there would be minor disturbances in cities like Sokoto over the taverns outside the city limits where southern Nigerians gathered to drink beer; and certainly, there was no hostility—rather the reverse—toward me. Perhaps I was merely callow and insensitive, but I do not remember anyone else, either, having predicted the rise of a movement like Boko Haram.

The journey I made without a second thought for my own safety would now be not merely inadvisable but impossible. Perhaps the fact that the population has increased by 250 percent without a concomitant increase in economic activity or possibilities is part of the explanation. Malthus has been refuted a hundred times, but his theory is hydra-headed and refuses simply to lie down and die.

“It was much better in British days,” said the driver. “A million, a billion times better.”

Of course, he was not born then, so he had obviously heard rose-tinted rumors from his elders.

“That's no way to get invited to speak at Oxford or Yale,” I said.

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