



Nigeria

Amanda Hale looks back on some poignant moments from her time living in Lagos.

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When I first imagined Africa as a small girl, myriad images would come to my mind: baobab trees outlining the sunset, vast expanses of flat lands with elephant tracks leading to fresh water, drums, grass, bare feet, and voices carrying harmony from one village to the other as families got ready to sleep. Now, as a 22-year-old living in Lagos, of course my view of Africa is much different, much less romanticised, and much more complex, and that is the great advantage of working here. I've come to appreciate Nigeria for all that it is, and I'm constantly amazed at how a place can be so rough and so warm at the same time.

You have the rough dirt streets with open gutters and fallen electric wires, *okadas* and cars always inches away from running over your feet, people shouting and pushing each other over the price of a bus ride, policemen with rifles slung over their shoulders hitting drivers with canes if they don't stop to pay a 'traffic fee', market sellers trying to grab your arm and redirect you to their kiosks to buy jeans or blouses. Then there are people who go out of their way on the street to smile and wish you a good morning, or a conductor who makes the bus come to a complete stop for you and urges you to be careful and to come down gently, or an old woman on your street who calls you 'daughter'.

So many things over the past few months have made me ridiculously grateful for being here. Last month I passed over the Niger River on my way to Anambra state for a wedding, and I remember waking up groggily from a nap on the bus to watch it pass by, and I felt so awed by its enormous width and the feeling of power that it carried. The number of small fishing boats floating on the water alone showed how



Above: Getting around Lagos in style, Below: Oluwakemi and family

so many livelihoods were dependent on its existence... And even as we were crossing the river, I felt as if I should be swimming in it, or walking along its banks to give it the proper respect it deserved for all its strength and quiet beauty. And when I reached the wedding, it was so nice to be included in it all. I'd never even met the bride before, but since I was a friend of the family I was invited into the ceremony with open arms. That is the reality of Nigeria. At my office I was given a Yoruba name to show that I was part of the Nigerian family, that I was a Nigerian at heart – my new name, Oluwakemi, means 'blessed by God', and I've come to respond to it as I would to my English name.

Of course, even with all these ideal moments, it hasn't always been easy living in Lagos. At times it is really hard to feel at home here. As I am clearly not Nigerian, I am always treated as a foreigner by people who don't know me well, and that can be frustrating. So, whenever I do experience moments when I feel like just another local, it makes me smile!

As when, about two months ago, I was riding home in a *keke* (a small 3-wheeled bus that seats five people) from work, like I do every day, and for some reason I was feeling so at home as I watched the familiar shops and kiosks pass by, with their mouth-watering aromas of *suya* and yam and hot flames filling the air, that I leaned forward to the driver as we approached my stop and said, "bros, I wan come down for coconut." In Nigeria 'bros' is another expression for 'brother,' and I used to be too shy to use it. I would use the other familiarities – 'sister', 'ma', 'sir', 'oga' (boss), 'baba' (father) – quite freely, but with bros I always felt that as a foreigner I didn't have the right to say it to another Nigerian – it felt strange somehow. But on this day it tumbled out of my mouth naturally, and the driver simply nodded, pulled to the side of the road, and said 'ose' with a smile when I stepped out onto the busy street. A simple moment, yes, but it made me feel so at home and part of the huge community that is Africa, where everyone is your brother, your sister, aunty, uncle, father, mother... I will miss that closeness and sense of community when I leave for home in just one month. □

