

WEST AFRICA



Celebrating the return of a direct flight between New York and Lagos in New York, December 2009. Above left, Arik Air Managing Director, Nigerian Dr Michael Arumemi-Ikhide is wearing a blue tie, seen talking with his wife Susan, who is a public relations professional, in red skirt. Above right, Chief Lookman.

Travelling to and through West Africa

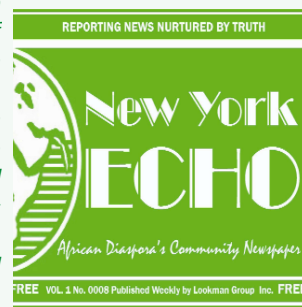
The press release, following paragraph, from North American Airlines in February 2008 was bad news for me as an intended frequent traveller to Africa. At that time I had already flown to Nigeria twice: once from Philadelphia tortuously via France, once from New York directly to Lagos.

JAMAICA, NY. (Feb 19, 2008) – North American Airlines today announced that it will discontinue scheduled service between the United States and the cities of Lagos, Nigeria; Accra, Ghana; and Georgetown, Guyana. All flights in these markets will be completed by May 20, 2008. North American ... [was] the first US airline in decades to fly non-stop service from the United States to sub-Saharan Africa," said Rob Binns, Chief Commercial and Planning Officer. "We have been pleased that all of these markets have performed on a revenue basis as we anticipated. What now makes these markets untenable is the rising cost of fuel. We have seen our jet fuel costs increase 60% since we entered the Africa markets in 2005."

The flight via France included collecting deported Nigerians, and a passenger strike because we were upset at how it was handled by the French gendarmes. More than 24 hours after leaving Philadelphia I was met by my hosts who had been waiting 6 hours for me without any idea of why we were delayed. The direct flight 6 months later included Nigerian food, Nigerian music, and enough sleep, and took less than 11 hours.

By July 2010, I had travelled 3 times to Nigeria, and

*New York Echo
Publisher Chief
Lookman Sulaimon
Arounfale MJ travelled to Nigeria on Arik Airlines with MJoTA Publisher and took all the article's pictures in New York, Sierra Leone and Nigeria and on board.*



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once to Kenya via London. I held off returning to Nigeria because no reason to go was worth the trouble and cost of getting a visa and taking 24 hours to get there. The only direct flights from the United States to Nigeria were through Atlanta, which means that instead of hanging about in a European airport, I would be hanging about in a United States airport.

In November 2009, right after *New York Echo* Publisher and I went to a press preview of the Broadway musical based on the life of Nigerian superstar musician and political activist, *Fela*, I heard about a direct flight starting between New York and Lagos. I was so excited I drove from my home outside Philadelphia through heavy post-

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SIERRA LEONE



Mrs Wai-Lansana and her uncle, Mr Sidique Wai

Thanksgiving traffic to JFK airport, to record anything I could find about the Arik Air flight. My information was faulty: the first flight left Lagos that night for New York, not the other way around. However, I ran around New York's JFK airport photographing a Nigerian journalist-turned-pastor whom I collected in the Bronx on the way, who had agreed to come with me after innocently instant messaging me on *Facebook*. Blessings on the Reverend Jerry, and on Arik Air's direct flight!

Three days later Arik Air threw an inauguration party in a hotel next to Central Park in New York, flew in its CEO Dr Michael Arumemi-Ikhide, his wife, senior managers, and their London-based public relations consultants, and invited Black media publishers and travel agents. And I came early.

This party marked a change in how New Yorkers travel to Nigeria, and a change in the Black newspaper with which I am affiliated. I was Managing Editor of *New York Echo* in Spring 2009, and left as a result of 2 media professionals divided by a common language and a malicious lawyer. After 5 months, during which time I volunteered with *Africa Reporters* newspaper as graphic designer, photographer, contributing editor, and newspaper distributor, I returned to a partnership with Chief Lookman's *New York Echo* newspaper and the Lookman Group Public Relations Company.

In July 2010 my year-long plans to visit Sierra Leone with Mrs Zainab Wai-Lansana solidified with a date that I needed to meet her in Freetown. I had met Miss Zain in Harlem in March 2009 when *New York*



Above, Delta airplane in flight over Brooklyn. Delta flies direct to Nigeria from the United States from Atlanta, which is approximately 900 miles south of New York.

Left, from first page of MJoTA 2009 vol 3, no 6 pp140-1, in which Mrs Zainab Wai-Lansana (Miss Zain) describes the deaths of both of her grandmothers in childbirth in the 1940s, and the hazards of childbirth in Sierra Leone today.

Echo showed up at Harlem's Apollo Theater to witness her uncle Mr Sidique Wai being honored for his work in community liaison with the New York City Police Department. In the 18 months following, I followed Miss Zain's efforts on behalf of Sierra Leonean women with interest, and published an article she wrote on Sierra Leone's terrible burden of maternal mortality (MJoTA vol3no6pp140-1).

During 2010 Ms Zain collected 99 boxes and 5 barrels of donations of medical supplies, clothes, library books and non-perishable food, with the goal of setting up a library in her village of Pendembu in Western Sierra Leone. When Miss Zain was ready to go, I went with her to document for *MJoTA* and *New York Echo* her efforts in aiming to reduce the rate of maternal mortality on behalf of the Foundation she and her kinsman Alfred Jamiru run, Amuloma Development Foundation Inc.

Getting to Sierra Leone is gruelling. Miss Zain landed in Brussels and in Dakar before arriving in Freetown, herself and her young son Cecil Lansana intact, but minus a suitcase.

I decided to go first to Lagos, and then buy an additional Arik Air ticket to get to Sierra Leone's capital city, Freetown. The cost of my Arik Air ticket between Lagos and Freetown was USD750 roundtrip. Because the cost of the New York to Lagos flight was reduced 35% by Arik Air management as a courtesy to *New York Echo*, the cost of flying from New York to Freetown was approximately the same for Miss Zain as for MJoTA Publisher. For the general traveller, the cost of flying to Freetown

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Top, economy passengers settling in for the 10 to 11 hour Arik Air flight from New York to Lagos. Above left, Chief Lookman chatting with other passengers at the economy section bar. Above right, stewards.

from New York is more than USD500 more expensive by Arik Air via Lagos, and the passenger will additionally have to buy a Nigerian visa (USD112 for single entry).

The flight to Africa for us started in New York at JFK Airport when Chief Lookman Sulaimon and I arrived at the check-in counter in Terminal 4. The plane was scheduled to leave at 10pm, and it did, exactly on time. After traffic jams, buying bottles of perfume and baby clothes for Chief Lookman's newborn nephew, we had arrived late, just before 9pm, with 4 large bags, all overweight. The Arik Air crew were polite and sympathetic and Chief Lookman jettisoned excess weight which friends carried home, and we shrink-wrapped the 4 bags we took with us. We were the last passengers on the plane before the cabin crew closed the doors for flight.

The flight itself was pleasant and uneventful. We settled into vacant bulkhead seats, economy was 60% filled, and for some hours Chief Lookman chatted with fellow passengers in the midplane economy service area, which includes a bar table. The flight crew were friendly and permitted us to photograph them.

Arriving Lagos on time, moving through immigration, baggage collection and customs was smooth. We were collected by our hosts and settled back for several days of travelling around Lagos collecting stories, visiting the Faculty of Pharmacy, the University of Lagos, meeting with friends, relatives, prospective clients, and organizing return trips. We

travelled across Lagos, past Victoria Island, to celebrate the coronation of a king. Chief Lookman had introduced me to him in Atlanta, Georgia, during the celebrations of the wedding of a princess (Africa in America. Atlanta Nigerian Muslim Wedding. MJoTA 2009:3(5):126-7). We were shown around a Lagos catfish farm, which is a small hatchery for a 3-acre farm in the country.

Four days later I went back to Murtala International Airport to buy a ticket on Arik Air for Sierra Leone.

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Above, Chief Lookman visits a Nigerian-American professional who walked down the hospital corridor after 6 weeks therapy in New York. He retired to Nigeria, and his life was saved because of the Arik Air direct flight. A series of medical mishaps had him fighting for his life in Lagos; and was told he would not survive a day longer without a therapy unavailable in Lagos. That night, unable to walk and with difficulty breathing, he was put on the direct flight to New York accompanied by a trained nurse and a son. An ambulance met him at the airport and took him to Brooklyn's King's County Hospital.

Below, Chief Lookman inspects a hatchery in a Lagos fish farm, owned by the Nigerian-American shown above with his wife.



Top, Chief Lookman greets Mr Pedro Lawal SAN, Solicitor-General of Lagos, during the celebrations of the coronation of His Royal Majesty Zaid Elegushi as King of Ikateland. The King and Queen are shown with their faces towards the camera in. Above, Chief Lookman and Dr Dodgson celebrate the coronation.

We stood in line at the local airport in the upstairs Arik office, and after 30 minutes exchanged 82,000 Naira (approximately 150 Naira per USD1) for a roundtrip ticket to Freetown. Flights from Lagos and Freetown are Wednesdays and Fridays and Sundays, leaving at 8 am and arriving at 9:30am; and from Freetown to Lagos are the same days, leaving at 5:15pm and arriving at 8:30pm. During the summer, Nigeria is on United Kingdom time (United States time +5h) and Sierra Leone is 1 hour behind

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Top, middle, Arik Air office in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Above, Sierra Leone from the air. Upper left, views of Freetown from harbor and from IMATT. Lower left, Miss Zain and Dr Dodgson in Freetown.

(United States time +4h).
 My flight from Lagos to Freetown was on time and uneventful. The cabin crew did not want any pictures taken, and the passenger in front of me was very upset when I was taking pictures through the window after the captain had told us to shut down any electronic devices. I told him that my Canon E50 did not transmit signals, so technically it does not meet the definition of an electronic device.
 I was met at Freetown's Lungi Airport by Miss Zain and her cousin, a very tall soldier named Michaelo Jamiru. Three weeks later Michaelo loaded all the

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Sierra Leone's Green Party celebrates the reopening of its headquarters in Freetown 18 months after its destruction by thugs, above, with the United Nations representative (light skin). One week later, Dr Alfred Fawundu was laid out in the headquarters for the first official funeral rite. Pictures from the 3 days of rites in Freetown and Bo below.

donated supplies onto a military truck Miss Zain hired to drive to the provinces.

Lungi Airport is Sierra Leone's main airport, and Freetown is the main city. However, they are not close, getting from Lungi to Freetown and to where we stayed, up in the hills near the new American Embassy. First we had a 20-minute taxi ride, then a 30-minute ferry ride to Freetown, then a 30-minute taxi ride past Choithram Memorial Hospital just before IMATT, the International Military forces bar-



racks, and the Roman Catholic Seminary. However, before we headed for the hills we stopped by Brussels Airline to check if they had Miss Zain's suitcase. They did.

Ten days into our stay, I needed to change my flight tickets back to Lagos, and back to New York for 2

When you give to Amuloma Development Foundation, you work towards creating wealth and health through agriculture. ADF dreams that Pendembu and surrounding districts will no longer bury daughters and infants dead in child-birth when efficient agricultural techniques are learned and employed. Contact ADF executives born of the soil of Pendembu: Miss Zain (Zainab Wai-Lansana): zainabwai@yahoo.com: Alfred Jamiru: maadajaamu@yahoo.com

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reasons. First, the ship carrying the donated supplies still had not arrived and Miss Zain and her son could not stay longer than their planned 3 weeks. Secondly, Dr Alfred Sallia Fawundu died. He was a prominent Sierra Leonean statesman, 2012 presidential candidate and Miss Zain's uncle.

Changing the ticket back to Freetown was easy, the Arik Air office in Freetown, on the same street at the Amnesty International office, is well-staffed with polite, uniformed men and women. I walked in, they asked me what I wanted, they said it will cost USD50, and it was done. I asked them if they could change my ticket back to New York. They told me no, I could not do anything until I arrived in Lagos and handed over cash. I called Chief Lookman, who by now had returned to New York, who was told the

same thing.

I know that all airplane tickets can be changed for a small or large sum of money, and so I started looking for telephone numbers to call until someone agreed to change my ticket. Miss Zain called Ms Jeneba, a Sierra Leonean accountant in Brooklyn and a great friend of Amuloma Development Foundation Inc, who linked me to the New York Arik Sales Manager, who changed my ticket for USD290. After I talked with him, I decided that a Sunday return from Lagos made more sense than the Tuesday we had agreed on, but I was not sure whether I was able to move it to Monday. After that, I accessed the internet to see that money had been taken from my credit card, so I knew I had a ticket from Lagos to New York, but I was not sure on

Bottom right, the Paramount Chief in charge of Pendembu and surrounding Chiefdom presides over the distribution of gifts from Amuloma at his family compound. Sister Dorothy greets Dr Dodgson; middle, measures Sao Vandy's blood pressure; chats with the Paramount Chief; chats with Mary Flora. Computers shown were donated by Helping Hand Foundation through United African Congress.



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Far left, Meeting of agricultural engineers in Freetown, all graduates of Fourah Bay College. They have formed a company aimed at increasing agricultural production.

Above, Abdullai Wai won a competition by linking growing and manufacturing poultry feed and flour.

Bottom, My hosts in Freetown, Mrs Hawa Turay-Bah and her sons.

which day.

For the next 3 days I was involved in the funeral rites of Dr Alfred Fawundu. Dr Fawundu worked for many years with the United Nations, and was the uncle of Miss Zain, of our host, telecommunications executive Mrs Hawa Turay-Bah and of agriculturalist Mr Abdullai Wai.

Dr Fawundu's funeral involved a United Nations helicopter and his body lying in state in Freetown at 2 locations, and 200 miles away in Bo at 3 locations, with a civic and public funeral the third day, culminating in burial in a concrete grave after the saying of the Sierra Leonean Pledge of Allegiance and the playing of Taps by boys from his school, the Bo School.

After the burial Miss Zain, her son and I travelled back to Freetown to organize their departure for the United States, which was delayed 4 days by the airport Brussels Airline personnel not having her name on the flight list, even after she had confirmed her flight 3 days before at the Brussels Airline office. I heard the customer representative tell her "Have a pleasant flight Madame", and saw them shake hands. When the flight left without her, she was sent back to Freetown without knowing when or if she would be flying out on a subsequent flight. We speculated that someone in the airline had been offered money for 2 seats, and so sold that person Miss Zain's seats. Four days later, Brussels Airline honored Miss Zain's ticket.

The next day, Miss Zain still did not know when she and Cecil would be returning back to New York, but I left anyway for the provinces on a rented military truck with 6 relatives and 4 soldiers and the donated supplies.

The Sisters of the Order of the Holy Child in Sierra Leone in Pendembu and Freetown are caring for children whose families cannot.



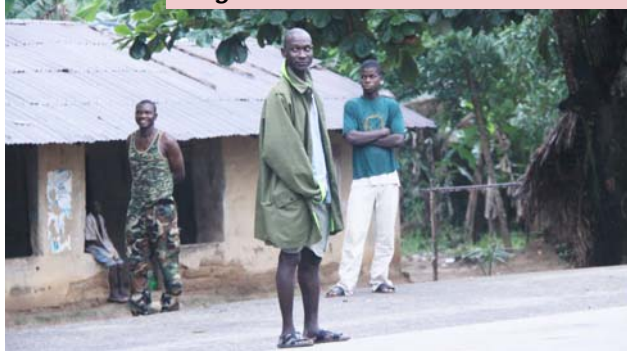
A little money goes a long way in Sierra Leone; if you are interested in helping these children, being guests of the nuns, and being given frequent reports about their progress by the nuns and the children themselves, please consider sending them 50 dollars a month. That is enough for an excellent education of one child.

The Lookman Group, MJoTA and Amuloma Development Foundation can put together a travel package for you in Freetown and in the eastern provinces to visit these children. Publisher@mjota.org.

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The police checkpoint 229km from Freetown where the bus returning from Pendembu broke down. Left, the police officer who gave up his bed for Dr Dodgson, below left, the military detective Terwally, right, the checkpoint at dawn, below right, the replacement bus. Miss Zain's brother Joseph Wright, in black jacket, is talking on the phone. We gave the officers our live rooster.



Twenty-four hours later we left 62 miles of pot-holed red clay road and drove into the Paramount Chief's compound in Pendembu, a remote town in the eastern provinces where gasoline was USD5 a gallon and electricity was generated an hour or 2 every other day from gasoline-fueled generators.

My phone did not work in Pendembu, and I had no internet. But I could have, if I had been using the phone service of Sierra Leone's leading carrier, and if I had been using their internet stick. Next time, I will do both. Even in the remotest part of Sierra Leone, where drinking and cooking water is all drawn from UNICEF-built wells and all electricity comes from gasoline generators, the mobile phone network is working and internet can be accessed. I saw mobile phones being charged, for a fee, at the mobile phone shop in Pendembu.

In Pendembu I had 3 tasks. The first task was to present the donated supplies to the Paramount Chief (in Nigeria, his equivalent is a king; in the United States the closest equivalent is a mayor elected from and by a handful of families), and put in place an effective strategy for distributing clothes to the needy, medical supplies to health professionals - mainly sterile gloves, hospital shoes, swabs and bandages donated by King's County Hospital. *Amuloma Development Foundation* also donated 3 blood pressure machines.

My second task was to work with the community to put together a plan to set up a library with 1,000 donated books and 2 new desk-top computers (donated to the United African Congress by Gordon H Tapper, a former United Nations diplomat from Jamaica from *Give Them a Hand Foundation*). The books were stored while a library was being built.

My third task was to find information about the pos-

sibility of generating income from agricultural enterprises: I was shown a 40-acre swamp where rice is grown, the maximum has been 4 acres.

I was welcomed in Pendembu, and I left with a live rooster, a gift from the parents of a young girl of 6 of genius intellect whom I promised to find funds for so she can have the best possible education. She is well cared for by Roman Catholic nun Sister Dorothy, a Nigerian nurse from Anumbra who is one of the few health trained health professionals working in the district. The rooster ended in the pot of police at a checkpoint, see above pictures.

All this excitement and no contact with the outside world left me late planning what I would do after I left Freetown by Arik Air for Lagos. The options were, my first choice, fly to Lagos on a Sunday night and then, back to New York 2 days later. And my second choice, which was fly to Lagos on Sunday night and then immediately fly to New York on a second Arik flight. I heard in Sierra Leone that this is a choice that is being made in Freetown with citizens with West African passports who do not have to pay the hefty visa fees I had to: USD112 to Nigeria and USD140 to Sierra Leone.

Three days before I was due to leave Sierra Leone I discovered that I was indeed going to be spending 2 days in Lagos. I called Chief Lookman, whose arrangements collapsed when my expected host had to be in Abuja for a financial conference, where her phone did not work. A call to New York resulted in Miss Zain calling around and getting a phone number from Ghanaian mechanical engineer Saddick Abubakar. Miss Zain told me arrangements were made, and I should call this number in Nigeria.

It turned out the number was to an Assistant Inspector General of Police, Mrs Ivy Orokwa, a gra-

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George Gandor in Freetown. After matriculating from Bo School, he worked for 2 years in a Sierra Leonean non-profit company with the goal of empowering citizens by creating wealth and health. He is now studying international relations in Fourah Bay College. He helped prepare Dr Dodgson for her trip to Pendembu.

cious lady, who told me she would get "one of her commissioners" to take me in because she had heard I refused to stay in hotels. The commissioner turned out to be PC Mr Marvel Akpoyanibo Esq, a triple-degreed lawyer in charge of the security of all of Lagos State.

Because of the police connection, my feet did not touch the ground in Nigeria. As I was wandering towards customs, a tall man asked me if I was Dr Susanna, and told me everything was being taken care of. I spent 2 days being driven in a car with an armed escort, and eating chocolate in the home of the Commissioner and his family. His middle son, a chemical engineer, came from Scotland a few hours after I arrived, and carried with him a lot of chocolate candy.

I also attended a police press conference, when the Police Commissioner announced his men had caught a dozen or so armed robbers. The Police Commissioner is proud of the record of his watch: with a reduction in violent crimes and car thefts. Reported kidnappings in Lagos State are down to zero: the Police Commissioner wants everyone to

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Lagos State Police Commissioner Marvel Akpoyanibo Esq presides over a press conference Ikeja High Command and announces capture of armed robbers.

know that Lagos State is safe and all law-abiding visitors are most welcome.

My flight from Lagos to New York was my fourth on Arik, my fourth flight that was smooth and uneventful and left on time.

I returned to New York earlier than the published time, and was home in Brooklyn by 5:30am on a Wednesday morning, refreshed from enough sleep, and ready to start work.

By MJoTA Publisher

MJoTA Publisher, Professor Susanna J Dodgson BSc(Hons), PhD earned her doctorate in Physiology from the University of New South Wales, Australia, and spent 35 years working in academia and the pharmaceutical industry in New Jersey.