



Envision the new Nigeria

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Author: Onwutalobi, Anthony Claret

Abstract:



Have you been to Abuja recently? If you have not, you need to go there. Abuja is a "big London" an epitome of modern beauty. At City Gate, Abuja's main entrance, a huge sign reads, 'You Are Welcome'. It captures what seems to be the welcoming spirit of the entire country.

Visitors are enthusiastically ushered into the country by cheerfully smiling hosts who show no signs of their more than 15 recent years of military rule. Alex Benitah, a visitor to the Eastern Bloc after the collapse of communism, described people there as withdrawn. On visiting Nigeria at the end of military rule he was struck by the difference. "People in Nigeria are so friendly!" he exclaimed. "They're all so cheerful! Everywhere you go it's 'good afternoon, you are welcome,' with a big smile." Wilfred Shaap era Tile, head of the sociology department of the University of Abuja, cites democracy as the reason for Nigerians' high spirit. "People are happy because their yearning for democracy has become a reality," he said. "Modern societies prefer an atmosphere of freedom where everybody can pursue their legitimate goals and aspirations. Nigerians are happy because the democratic dispensation allows this."

With or without democracy, Nigerians have shown much resilience and unflinching ability to adapt to the most adverse situations that the late maverick musician, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, described the phenomenon in a song titled "Suffering and Smiling." Celebrating the ability of the average Nigerian to keep smiling in spite of everything, the song was an anthem during the heyday of Afro-beat.

According to Emeka Okafor, a senior lecturer of sociology at the University of Abuja, this indeed is what was happening. "Over the last fifteen years, most Nigerians suffered tremendously under military rule," he said.

Okafor believes military rule generated a lot of apathy toward the activities of government. "People no longer were bothered about what government could provide



for them," he said. "They [Nigerians] are very resilient. They can adapt themselves to whatever conditions they find themselves. In a way they have left matters to providence, since government failed them so often in the past."

Suleiman Mohammed, a political sociologist in the same department, agrees with Okafor. Mohammed pointed out that over the years Nigerians came to see government as the private property of a select few perpetually at the top and continuously recycling themselves into power. He explained, "This trend created a culture of alienation, poverty and a state of hopelessness." The new democracy has renewed people's spirit and their voice. Everywhere you go in Nigeria, people are animatedly talking about the new administration, their hopes and their expectations. Nigerians seem more than ready to give the new dispensation a chance.

One aspect of Nigerian life that seems to explain people's resilience is a deep attachment to religion. Churches and mosques abound. In 1984, Dangiwa Umar, then managing director of the Federal Housing Authority, complained that Nigeria has more buildings for worship than residences.

"God dey," meaning "There is God," is a common saying among Nigerians whenever they are faced with a seemingly intractable problem. The consolation of religion grew in popularity under General Sani Abacha, Nigeria's most brutal dictator. As Abacha daily imprisoned his opponents, frightened others into exile and executed those who defied him, many took refuge in religious institutions.

Fittingly, Abacha's death under bizarre circumstances has further entrenched belief that "God dey." Stephen Okafor, an auto parts merchant, said, "God is Nigeria. When the pope came to Nigeria, he prayed at a public square that God should take away anything that would constitute a problem to the unity and progress of Nigeria. God took away Abacha and brought President Obasanjo. We thank him for doing that."

But Tile refused to concede that the smiles on people's faces are a facade because of religion. "Remember, there is power in positive thinking. If people carry their heads up and their shoulders high believing that all is well, they are able to achieve a lot. After World War II, Japan was a shambles. But by restoring their sense of dignity and working hard to achieve their dreams, the Japanese people were able to drag themselves out of the doldrums. Today they are economic and technological giants. Nigeria, and Nigerians



as a whole, have a leadership role to play, not only in the sub region and Africa as a whole, but also in the world at large. We cannot afford to be down in a maze of withdrawal and frustration."

Flying toward Nigeria's capital, the carpet of green land stretches out in all directions like an emerald sea, dotted with small villages of red mud huts with thatched roofs, and broken only by the rounded granite formations unique to Nigeria's landscape. Then, suddenly, are modern buildings and a maze of highways leading in every direction. Cars and people abound, but the air remains sweet and the city swept clean of refuse. Arriving at one of the city's five-star hotels, broad smiles everywhere welcome tourists and businesspeople to Abuja.

Abuja Federal Capital City, which in 1991 replaced Lagos as Nigeria's capital, lies in the eastern corner of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Abuja. It is the Nigerian melting pot, populated with people from all parts of the country.

"Lagos was becoming unmanageable," said Solomon Ewuga, Minister of State for the FCT. "It was determined there was the need for an alternative. Circumstances created a yearning for a place that would represent the interests of Nigeria; unity can be an acceptable selling proposition for a city."

Rich in natural resources and accessible by air – including international flights – as well as by road, Abuja is a city in sync with its environment. Softly rolling hills, stark highlands, grasslands and forests all combine to give the city a unique blend of Nigeria's scenic beauty and modern convenience. The region experiences two weather conditions: the rainy season, which typically runs from March to October, and the dry season, characterized by bright sunshine, extending from October to March. Promoted as a multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan city, Abuja's 1.5 million inhabitants are looking forward to a bright future.

The Capital's Genesis



The idea for constructing a new federal capital was on the table long before Abuja was created. Immediately after assuming power in 1975, General Murtala Mohammed established a commission to select a site for the new city. The search for a location was not an easy process; some leaders believed Lagos should have remained the federal capital, while others held that its limitations in size, security from external attack, accessibility, congestion and the fact that it was essentially uni-ethnic created the need for a new capital. After exhaustive debate and countless interviews with local leaders and intellectuals, the panel chose Abuja Emirate.



The city gate welcomes visitors to the country's fast growing capital.

Decree Number 6, issued in 1976, created the Federal Capital Territory, an area encompassing 8,000 square kilometers of land carved out of three states – Kaduna to the north, Niger to the west, and Plateau State to the east and southeast. The city's master plan divides Abuja into sectors that, in turn, are made up of districts. Four phases of development are envisioned, with phase II currently under way. By the time the plan is complete, Abuja will be home to more than three million people.

Almost overnight, this sleepy rural town exploded with construction activity. Intense building began in 1980 with the basic infrastructure, despite a series of setbacks and delays, completed by 1991. The main federal buildings are now in place along with a series of residential areas.

Ewuga, compared some aspects of Abuja's genesis to that of Washington D.C., another designed capital built from scratch with a clear idea of its function: "We can learn from Washington, but our cultural requirements are quite different from Washington's because we are in a different ethnic setting. People tend to be very sentimental about their origin. They want the city but they do not want to leave their old ways."

The transition of power occurred over a 15-year period when, on Dec. 12, 1991, President Ibrahim Babingida officially declared Abuja the Federal Capital. A meeting place for



Nigeria's multiethnic culture, the new capital is developing into one of Africa's most dynamic centers of government and business.

Beyond Government



Photo by Salunde Afolabi
The national mosque, a symbol of Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity.

While Lagos may still be Nigeria's financial center, Abuja is fast becoming more than just an administrative capital. Under the successive military governments, business was hesitant to leap too far too fast. However, the new democratic government of President Olusegun Obasanjo has brought with it a commitment to good governance and transparency, that has instilled confidence in once leery investors.

Economically, it took a while for things to get going, explained Karl Franck, general manager of the Abuja Sheraton Hotel and Towers. "Initially, people were hedging and waiting to see," he said. "It wasn't the time to become adventurous overnight. There had been promises of democracy before; this time people wanted to make sure it was real." But when business people saw there was money in Abuja, the wheels of investment began to roll. "Slowly, gingerly, cautiously, we saw the signs that the government was fine. Then foreign investment began."

"Democratization carries a lot with it a lot of fertile ideas," Ewuga explained, "a mixture of opportunities and people's vision about what they can achieve. That is what democracy brings, and that is what the vision of Abuja should be: a fertile ground for every culture in Nigeria." He said culture, as well as investment, was envisioned as an integral part of the capital's future: "If Abuja positions itself properly, no doubt whatever investment comes in will affect the way culture is treated in the city. The potential for Abuja to develop its own culture is very strong because of its unique geographical location."

It was the transition to democracy and the accompanying foreign presence that finally gave Abuja the boost it needed to become a credible capital city. "All of a sudden, foreign dignitaries were coming to town – something which had not been seen here during my days. And that brought more confidence," Franck related.



"It has a lot to do with infrastructure," said Ewuga, referring to Abuja's qualifications to be a national center. "Infrastructure is no small thing, given that a new city has to be

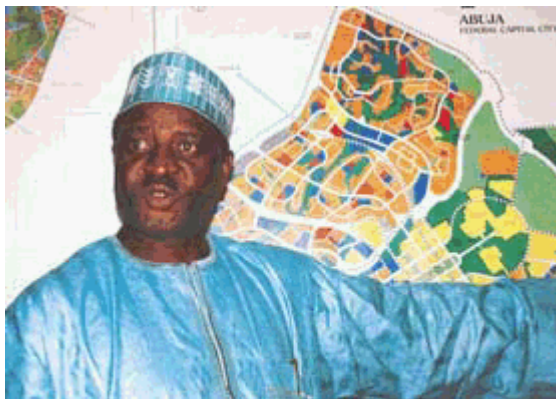


Photo by Jennifer Barsky
Minister of State for the Federal Capital Territory Solomon Ewuga points to the proposed metro line already in the planning stages.

developed within a set model requiring international acceptance. This is so that it doesn't only become a seat of government, but people can come and enjoy a level of freshness and modernity. The maintenance of the first development infrastructure becomes paramount. Once that is done investments will follow."

For many, Abuja is a symbol of everything Nigeria is trying to become. "It is a process of opening up," Ewuga explained. "It creates the opportunity for us to reach out

to our long lost friends and for them to reappraise out country. Abuja has become of cardinal importance to perceptions of the emerging democracy, and to our being integrated into the world community."

Banking has gained a strong foothold in the FCT, with private and public financial institutions fueling growth. Key arrivals are development banks such as the Urban Development Bank of Nigeria (UDBN), Abuja Investment and Property Development Company Limited (AIPDC), Nigerian Development Bank Limited (NIDB), Nigerian Bank for Commerce and Industry (NBCI), and the Nigerian Agricultural and Cooperative Bank Limited (NACB).

Natural resources and agriculture also represent long-term opportunity in the region. One of the features the FCT derives from its central location is that it combines the savanna grassland of the north and the richness of the tropical rainforest in the south. As a result, the capital city, with a total of 8,000 square kilometers is endowed with rich and vast arable land that can support a variety of crops as well as having a huge potential for livestock and fisheries production.

In the Abuja Master Plan, about 70,000 hectares of farm land has been earmarked for grazing reserves development to meet the growing needs of the various livestock located in the territory. Animal grazing – Fulani shepherds are still seen watching over



their cattle even in the city center – can support about one-fourth of the total migrant herds of cattle from the far north.

Commercially viable quantities of minerals such as iron ore, tin, lead, marble, mica and granite are also waiting for investors to discover.



Photo by Abuja Sheraton Hotel and Towers
The Sheraton's Lady Kwali Conference Center is a venue for conferences and important government functions. The hotel's general manager is featured above with President Obasanjo and his wife Stella at his inauguration dinner.

Though the minister says the government is still waiting to determine its incentive scheme, the FCT already has a number of incentives in place for investors wishing to tap the city's agricultural and solid mineral potential. Entrepreneurs inclined to establish ventures in and around Abuja will find a minimum of hindrances and instead will be granted pioneer status, which in turn, offers investors a three-to-five year tax clemency. Investors are also free to repatriate 100 percent of their profits.

As a growing city, investment opportunities in construction abound. The availability of gravel and sand plus a large pool of skilled and unskilled labor make helping build Abuja an attractive idea for foreign companies. Seeking to build on the city's growth and opportunities, Abuja Investment and Property Development Company (AIPDC) began operations in 1994. "The fact that this company was established is an indication that the FCT is serious about attracting investors to the city," said Lawal Dan-Musa, managing director of AIPDC.

One of the roles of AIPDC is to act as a both a facilitator and information resource for prospective investors. "We facilitate access to land for interested investors," he explained. "We are also able to liaise with some research institutes like the Raw Materials Research and Development Council and others to establish deposits of mineral resources."

AIPDC can also help investors raise funding for their ventures through joint ventures, core financiers and bank loans either through local banks or AIPDC's own Aso Savings and Loans Limited.



"We have conducted so many feasibility studies in so many areas that all investors have to do is tell us what areas they are interested in and we will show them the study or have our investment unit draw one up and begin their investment," Dan-Musa said.

Transporting Investment

As the Nigerian government recognizes, transportation is a prerequisite to investment and development. Though the FCT has a relatively well developed network of roads that tie the Territory together, gaps in public transportation remain.

But Abuja is tackling its transport dearth, with a metro line already in the planning stages. The minister blames previous regimes' corruption for the city's missing necessities. "The way resources were managed crippled our sense of future. So many things were just not done: it was a classic case of graft."

The issue of mass transit will be crucial for Nigeria in coming years – not addressing it he says could be disastrous. In Abuja plans are also under way to improve overland transport: buses and an inter- and intra-city rail system. "These things will happen," Ewuga averred. "We have the resources. It is just that they have always been diverted for the wrong purposes."

It was Abuja's resources that saved the dream of what the capital could one day become, according to Ewuga. "Without them," he admitted, "we would have broken up. All the pockets of irredentism and the 15 years of mindless damage to the people's social and political psyche." But now things are finally on the mend, he said.

The greatest factor in Abuja's success, along with its central location, and its status as Nigeria's seat of power, will be the ethnic mix that already inhabit it and will have a hand in its development. "A lot will be evolving around that," Franck said. "Just a couple of years ago it didn't exist, there were just a couple of villages here. So there is not just one tribe. Abuja's future population comes from all over the country. I think there was a plan to do this deliberately, to avoid ethnic rivalries – I have never seen any here." In a nation whose history is peppered with internecine conflict, Abuja reflects plans for a more tolerant, harmonious future.

Local planners hope that tourism in the FCT will become a factor in the development of the Territory as well as the world's interest in Nigeria. Home of the ECOWAS secretariat



and the National Women's Development Center, Abuja and its environs boast a comfortable climate, an exotic topography and a various recreational opportunities.

International Hotel Culture

Abuja's Sheraton Hotel and Towers is symbolic of more developed climes: a measure of



Photo by Abuja Sheraton Hotel and Towers
The Abuja Sheraton Hotel and Towers offers visitors to Abuja the comforts of a five-star hotel in the heart of the nation's capital.

the city's achievements and commitment to becoming an international center.

The Sheraton, one of two five star hotels in Abuja, is a key destination for western businessmen and Nigerians alike. Boasting 590 rooms, a large conference area (over 1,900 square meters) in addition to a variety of restaurants and night clubs, life here is never dull.

"Without hotels, how can anything happen?" Franck said. "You have to have good, decent accommodation where you

feel at home and looked after; good management, trained staff. Without that there would be no successful development – just like you can't hope to have an international city without an international airport."

The airport is already allowing tourists and investors from Europe to enjoy Nigeria's new capital. "It's very important in bringing in foreign investors," said Ewuga. "We have to be on our toes because it means Abuja is identified as a potentially rich area for leisure, tourism – and other things that will follow. It reduces pressure on other cities like Kano and Lagos: people can now fly their goods here, so it increases economic and customs activities." Apart from British Airways, Nigeria's most important foreign air provider, another 2 airlines are requesting to fly direct to Abuja.

Knowing to step in and invest when Abuja and the country itself had reached the necessary point in its political evolution was a skilled decision, Franck explained. "In a capital city you have to have the government infrastructure, and that was basically in place. Then you need the diplomatic infrastructure, roads, water, airport, electricity, telephones and so forth. International first-class hotels, operated by international hotel



companies that know what they are doing in this part of the world, are a very important part of the overall infrastructure."

Franck saw his moment and seized it. "I was fortunate, I saw the opportunity, I saw the vision and was given the latitude and support," he explained. "There was us, another international hotel and some local hotels that saw a niche. It has been a very fast evolution."

One of the Sheraton's primary advantages over the rest of the market is its world class conference facilities, including a banqueting hall where the new administration's inaugural banquet was held, along with its other major public functions so far. "All of a sudden, when the first signs that general meetings Franck said. "Our conference business exploded year over year 300 to 400 percent during some very stagnant times."

In a city only now experiencing traffic congestion for the first time, the hotel trade is a telling indicator that economic fortunes are on the up. Of the foreigners staying at Abuja's hotels, the country hopes an increasing number will become investors, participants in the reforming and rebuilding of Nigeria.

Robert Stevens, a mining specialist coming to explore investment opportunities in the FCT and a first time visitor to Nigeria, remarked that the Sheraton's service compared with the best offered in many Western hotels. "Often people in the US have an image of African countries as being relatively backward. Well, coming here has certainly impressed upon me that Nigeria's spirit, its people are one of the greatest resources and reasons to invest in the country." [View Nigeria Gallery](#)

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