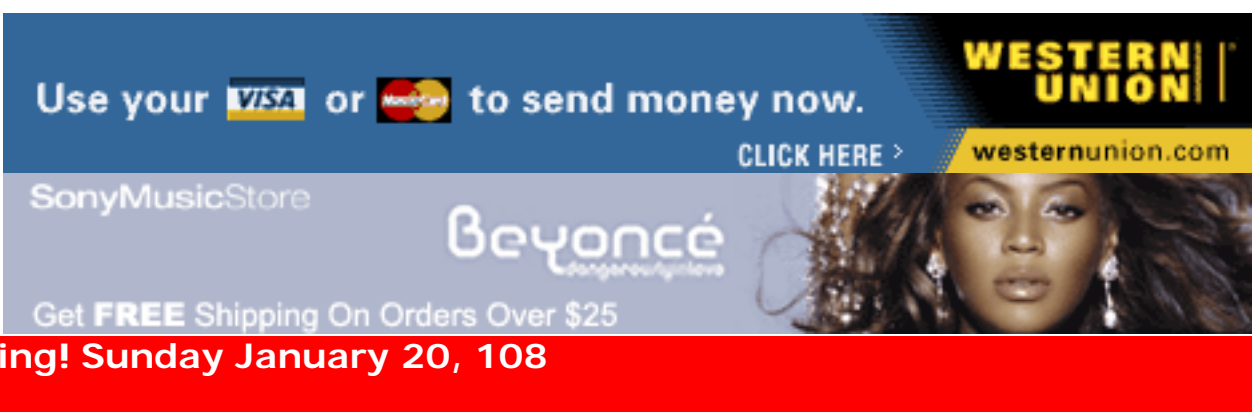




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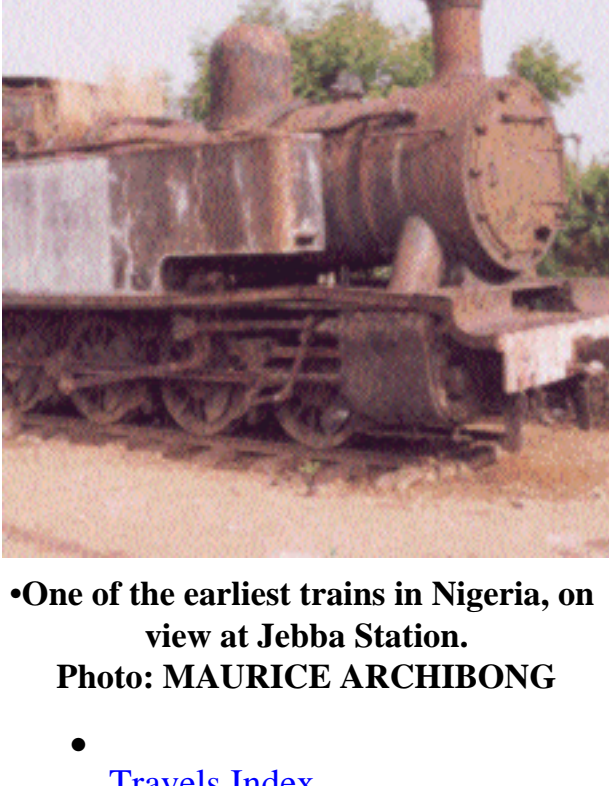
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More, on Jebba’s tragedies

By MAURICE ARCHIBONG
Thursday, May 5, 2005

Travelling through this town, which straddles both the southern and northern banks of River Niger, it was hard to believe Jebba once served as capital of then Northern Protectorate. Sir Alan Burns’ History of West Africa, reminds: "One of the main obstacles to the effective administration of the British Protectorate of Northern River Niger was the difficulty of transportation away from navigable rivers. For this reason, the capital was originally established at Lokoja", but in January 1900, the headquarters of then colonial government of the Northern Protectorate was transferred to Jebba, and later Zungeru before the seat of that regional government finally berth at Kaduna.



•One of the earliest trains in Nigeria, on view at Jebba Station.

Photo: MAURICE ARCHIBONG

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From capital, albeit fleetingly, of then Northern Protectorate, Jebba has whittled so badly politically that it is not even headquarters of Moro LGA, under which it falls. To worsen matters for this apparently sidelined town, Moro LGA headquarters, Bode-Sa’adu, lies about an hour’s drive away from Jebba. Travelling through Jebba, we saw very little of government presence. The town seemed overwhelmed by an economic downturn, which continues to haunt the locals. All over Jebba, there is an infectious air of depression.

Prior to the establishment of a railway station in Jebba, this town held one of the earliest bases of the West African Frontier Force (WAFF). All these, notwithstanding, the town has been put through confounding neglect, resulting in the prevailing atmosphere of gloom, here. Once upon an era, Jebba had a number of asphalt-coated feeder roads. The tourist can tell from the patches of remnant bitumen, which dot parts of some streets in this town like contretemps strands of hair tenaciously holding on to the balding pate of an ancestral citizen. Today, most streets in Jebba are dusty, pothole-ridden avenues.

Once upon a time, it was possible to travel to Jebba by rail. In fact, modern Jebba actually grew out of a railway station. This is the reason Jebba is sometimes called a railway town. Until the early 1980s, at least four passenger trains (two heading north and the other half moving in the opposite direction) passed through Jebba. Those days, apart from these passenger trains, about 10 cargo trains daily passed through Jebba, too.

Nowadays, it is not known how many times a train pulls up here per week. Alhaji Abdulkadir Oba Dunmoye, who worked at the Nigerian Railway Corporation (NRC) from 1960 to 1983, recalled he last boarded a train in Jebba around 1984. Another senior citizen, who spoke with us on condition of anonymity, offered his last train ride took place more than 10 years ago. The man, who is also an NRC retiree, submitted that sometimes that nostalgic hoot of an approaching train might not be heard around Jebba for weeks.

Alhaji Abdulkadir revealed that like many other retirees of the NRC, he hasn’t been paid any pension for 28 months. Countless Jebba residents are ex-workers of the NRC. This is another metaphor of the standard of living in Jebba, where countless elderly inhabitants are pensioners. With NRC retirees owed more than two years’ pensions amid ex-workers of the moribund Nigeria Paper Mill (NPM) that have been out of work for about six years, it is easy to imagine Jebba’s economic vicissitudes.

Some analysts hold the view that Jebba’s depression owes to want of representation at the local, state or federal government levels. The entire town of Jebba comprises only one ward. Moro LGA consists of 17 wards, and Jebba, a town of over 25 villages, makes up only one ward. And that ward includes Adekambi, which lies dozens of kilometers away from Jebba. Thus, it is virtually impossible to bring the community’s woes to government attention, the people claimed.

Observers think this town’s steep political decline owes to false figures posted as Jebba’s population from the 1963 census. Asked what that figure was, respondents said they couldn’t even recall as they considered it outright preposterous. However, there is some possibility some of Jebba’s natives deliberately avoided being counted for reasons of fear of taxation or superstition. These experiences are not peculiar to Jebba. It is common to hear some Nigerians say, "It is un-African to count children". As to what the community was doing to ensure a more accurate headcount in the forthcoming 2005 census, Mr. Abdul Raheem Ore, Jebba’s Palace Secretary, said Oba of Jebba, Alhaji Abdulkadir Alabi Adebara, had carried out extensive awareness campaign among the populace.

Getting there

This town is accessible by road and water. One can sail to Jebba via the Niger from countless destinations in various West African countries through which that river flows. It is also possible to sail to Jebba from River Benue through the Kogi State capital Lokoja.

Coming by road from the federal capital, Abuja, Jebba lies roughly 350 km. Ordinarily, this should translate to a little over three hours’ drive. But the trip, which offers the wayfarer glimpses of Lapai, Bida, Kudu and Mokwa along the way, lasts more than five hours.

Setting out from Lagos, Jebba is supposed to be 410 km away. Thus, you’d think you should reach that destination in four hours by road through Ibadan, Ogbomoso and Ilorin. In practice, however, the trip could drag as long as seven hours: Lagos to Ibadan, roughly 120 minutes, Ibadan to Ilorin (180 minutes) and Ilorin to Jebba (120 minutes) add up to about seven hours.

Coming over from Calabar near Nigeria’s extreme southeast, the tourist might want to do part of the trip by air. At close to 1, 000 km from Nigeria’s fabled Canaan City, the journey by road to Jebba could last more than 12 hours. Thus, the traveller might find it more expedient to fly to Abuja, Ilorin or Minna and then continue by road to Jebba. Although Jebba lies barely 100 km southwest of the Nupe spiritual headquarters, Bida, which boasts an aerodrome, the frequency of flights to the Niger State town is not known. Similarly, flights’ schedule to the Kwara State capital, Ilorin and the Niger State capital, Minna, may not be convenient for some travellers, which leaves flying to Abuja the best option.

Interestingly, even at 960 km from Calabar, the Cross River State capital is not the farthest state headquarters to this northern Kwara town. Jebba and the Taraba State capital, Jalingo might both start with the same letter, J, but by way of road travel, a distance of 1, 030 kmseparate both settlements. However, even at 1, 030 km away, Jalingo is still not the farthest state capital from Jebba. The record in this regard goes to the Borno State capital, Maiduguri, which stands more than 1, 200 km away. More than most towns, Jebba boasts a lot of tourists’ attractions, even though Nigeria’s tourism authorities appear incapable of selling this aspect of their nation’s wealth.

Welcome to Jebba, where the SS Dayspring, the first steamer to visit River Niger met its waterloo after colliding into the "Juju Rock" on October 7, 1857. Dr. W. B. Baikie was on board the "Dayspring", when it went down.

Although Mungo Park died at New Bussa, some people say his body floated to Jebba, where it was recovered and buried. However, there is no DNA confirmation that the corpse was Park’s. In any case, Jebba holds a cenotaph in memory of this British explorer and Richard Lander. The towering tombstone bears the epitaph: To Mungo Park, 1795, and Richard Lander, 1830, who traced the course of the Niger from near its source to the sea. Both died in Africa for Africa.

That memorial stands atop a hill on the northern banks of the Niger. This part of Jebba, called Jebba North, falls within Niger State. However, Jebba South, where the town’s monarch lives, holds another memento: A part of the boat that Park was travelling in, which was wrecked from a collision with "Juju Rock", and led to Park’s drowning at New Bussa. These remains, on view at Jebba Station of the NRC, carries a descriptive tag which reads: Historic monument of Mungo Park boat relics of the SS Dayspring which was wrecked on the rocks at Jebba on Octorber (sic) 7-1857 led to the opening of the inland route from Jebba to Lagos...Protected under Section 14 of the antiquitie (sic) ordinance No. 17 of 1953.

The literary and graphics quality of this tag is a reflection of the seriousness with which issues concerning tourism in Nigeria are handled. The inhabitants of Jebba are warm, sincere and hardworking. Moreover, this town is a lot healthier than Lagos because in Jebba you won’t find cudgels wielding, rheumy-eyed junkies euphemistically called Area Boys harassing motorists along major streets.

Etymology

Oba Adebara spoke to Sun Travels inside his palace in Jebba. Also present at that meeting were, Alhaji Mohammed Sanni Arojuwaye (Baale of Jebba), Abdul Raheem Ore (Palace Secretary), Alhaji Abdulkadir Oba Dunmoye (Bobajiro of Jebba), Yahaya Sulaiman (one of Jebba’s elders), Mr. Aminulai Olarewaju, Mr. Salmanu Atanda and Abubakar Akanbi alias Babakekere. To what does this town owe its name? We put this question to Alhaji Oba-Dumonye. The Bobajiro said the town’s name evolved from Uje Baba, a Nupe phrase that translates as "Thanks Dad". Uje is Nupe for thank you, while Baba stands for dad. It is not known, who was thanking his father or for what favour but there is no doubt today’s inhabitants of Jebba have no reason to thank anyone, given their misfortunes.

The aborigines of Jebba are predominantly Yoruba, Nupe (also called Tapa) and Hausa. Oba Adebara said the Yoruba of Jebba probably migrated from Ajase-Ipo clan of Kwara. The Ajase-Ipo people are believed to be descendants of the founders of Oyo.

Although the Yoruba of Jebba were not immune to the violent thrusts of then expanding Nupe Empire, members of Jebba’s various ethnic groups now live in peace together. Natives of countless other ethnic groups also can be counted among present-day inhabitants of Jebba.

Antique Railway Station

In the normal situation, a train is supposed to ferry goods and passengers. But in the central Nigerian town of Jebba, trains used to be carried across the (River) Niger.

The rail service to Jebba was an extension of the line established in 1896 from Ebutte-Metta on the Lagos Mainland. Sir Alan Burns again: "A railway to develop the hinterland of Lagos was established in 1896 from Ebute-Metta on the Mainland, opposite Lagos". In 1900, the line was extended to Ibadan 120 miles (roughly 190km) away. Nine years later (1909), the tracks were stretched to Jebba. However, the Jebba terminal came after an extension from Baro in 1907.

For about seven years, after the Nigerian railway tracks were stretched to Jebba, there was a lacuna at the Niger, which meant that no train could continue its journey without being helped over that river. However, that ostensibly unusual and cumbersome exercise stopped in 1916, when a rail bridge across the Niger was completed.