

FREEMASONRY IN NIGERIA

This is an account of English Freemasonry in what is now the Masonic District Grand Lodge of Nigeria, North, West, East and Lagos Divisions under the United Grand Lodge of England. The District today, like most English Provinces, has grown somewhat since it's inception in 1913 when the District of Nigeria was established, in the then Capital Lagos (*now Abuja*). But before that the first Lodge in Nigeria was established as Lagos Lodge No. 1171, Lagos in 1861. (134)

The last major celebration for the District was the 70th Anniversary in 1983. Having survived for now 82 (1995) years - I sincerely hope it will make it's 100th birthday - which I am sure it will if Nigeria survives !

A knowledge of the history and traditions of any institution of real value helps its members to take a proper pride in it, and while brethren in Nigeria are proud to acknowledge their allegiance to the United Grand Lodge of England the fact that many of them will never enjoy the opportunity of visiting or making contact with the Grand Lodge gives the District Grand Lodge, perhaps, a greater importance to them, and a greater claim on their loyalties, than it might otherwise have.

The District is now very different to its original form being now divided up into 4 divisions north, west, east and Lagos. This split occurred in 1989 for largely Political reasons, but I was fortunate enough to be present at the installation of the District Grand Master at a ceremony held in Kano. The ceremony was administered by the Pro-Grand Master (then Lord Cornwallis) and two Grand D.C.

To forestall any comment, let me say that much of the information I shall give here is probably true to a greater or lesser extent, of all overseas Masonry, and I make no claim that conditions in Nigeria are unique.

I would just like to pay acknowledgement to a former DGM of Nigeria RVWS St Lionel Brett who in 1963 wrote the forward to a document to mark the 50th Anniversary of the District and much of what I have been able to glean of the history is due to his efforts. There is no doubt that there are very few remaining copies of the anniversary document and therefore I was very fortunate to have been able to view it.

Time devours all things, as they say and in Nigeria time is assisted by the powerful allies in destructive insects and in the climate which, whether by excessive humidity, as on the coast or by excessive dryness, as in the north, greatly adds to the difficulty of preserving written records for long periods. With a settled Masonic population more use could be made personal recollections, but for reasons I shall refer to later it has always been one of the problems of Lodges in Nigeria that there has never been a settled population, and although Lodges have managed in a remarkable way, to preserve their own characteristic qualities, it is difficult to find anyone to give a reliable account of anything that took place any length of time ago.

A short geography lesson. The Federal Republic of Nigeria covers part of the bulge of Africa and was formed in 1861 from the former Colony & British Protectorate of Nigeria and the former Trust Territory of the Cameroun's. By the end of the year 1861 - 4 Lodges were meeting in Lagos.

In 1900 the Protectorates of Northern & Southern Nigeria were constituted. In 1906 the Colony of Lagos joined Southern Nigeria. So therefore we find that in 1913 the first title of the District was District of Northern & Southern Nigeria. In 1914 the protectorates were merged into the Colony & Protectorate of Nigeria.

In 1959 the Southern Province was split in two making East & Western regions plus Lagos Federal Capital. Nigeria received its independence from Colonial Britain on 1 October 1960.

- If you think that is complicated.- Since 1960 the country has been further split into first 12 then 19 and now 30 states - this map shows only 19.

Nigeria is large and is Africa's largest black nation covering some 300,000 square miles. Africa is huge and could engulf the whole of Europe, The USA and Australian continent. But that is another subject.

The climate on the coast is humid (tropical rain forest) with 70" annual rainfall, and temp. 70/95 deg F -as we move north we go progressively less humid until the Sahara about 200 miles north of Kano. In Kano we have very little humidity 25" annual rain and 110 deg down to as low as 50 deg. For much of the year a properly tyled Lodge can be unbearably hot for anyone not sitting close to a ceiling fan or air conditioning duct.

When Lord Cornwallis arrived in Kano for the DFGM Investiture in 1989 I was asked to try and dry the woollen Tail coat suits that he and the other Grand officers had been wearing the previous evening in Enugu. We had to literally wring them out before hanging out to dry !

At the formation of the District in 1913, six Lodes were operating in Nigeria. The District today consists of 31 Lodges of which 8 meet in Lagos. (*Refer to map.*) The remainder in the main regional towns of Kaduna, Enugu and Ibadan. In the ports of Calabar, Port Harcourt and Warri. In the commercial and industrial towns of Onitsha, Kano, Zaria and Jos. Although the railway does link these Masonic centres, the service is both unreliable and inefficient. Air transport is fast but expensive and can be quite a traumatic experience in Nigeria, and could be classed as a subject in itself, therefore I will not dwell on it here. Thus the main transport used to travel to Lodges is the car. Most main towns are now linked with fairly good tarred roads, although there are exceptions, and journeys can still present discomforts and difficulties.

When the DGM in 1949 was carrying out his last tour of the country, he was advised against travelling from Ibadan to Warri - 294 miles - on the grounds that the road condition was so bad there was actual danger to life in attempting the journey. And in 1983 some Kano brethren on their way from Kano to Jos to attend a Royal Arch Chapter meeting found a bridge impassable through floods 150 miles out of Kano and had to turn back to Kano and take an alternative route; in the end they covered 678 miles in 15 hours travelling between the two places 140 miles apart as the crow flies. Many brethren who are spared the necessity for heroic measures of this kind regularly travel great distances to attend Lodges.

I have mentioned before the Senior Deacon in Kano Lodge during my year in the chair travelled 800 miles from Minna to Kano every month during that year to attend ceremonies. Although I must say this was an extreme case of dedication.

English Constitution Masonic membership in Nigeria today exceeds 3000, Masons, and also both Scottish and Irish Constitutions are represented. The Scottish having the highest membership, which may exceed 8,000, I say *may* because information of this nature is extremely difficult to obtain in Nigeria, especially since many Scottish Masons are members of many more than one Lodge, and some are members of both English and Scottish Lodges, and because Nigerian record keeping is not the most efficient, this therefore does distort the statistics. It was for this reason that the English District Grand Lodge was sub-divided in 1989, to prevent the planned formation of a United Grand Lodge of Nigeria and a split from London.

Since 1913 there have been 12 ruling District Grand Masters for Nigeria, the present District Grand Master being Chief Olu Holloway the B'obaguruwa of Lagos (his Chieftancy title) - *although having an English sounding name, I can assure you he is a full blooded and proud Nigerian.*

Most Lodge meet throughout the year. It is difficult to generalise but apart from Installations or other special occasions a total attendance of 40 would be considered good in Lagos and 25 elsewhere. Meetings are usually held at 6.00 pm and black or white dinner jackets are normal dress. Outside Lagos Saturday is the most popular meeting day, as being the most convenient for brethren whose business takes them on tour during the week, or who have to travel some distance in order to attend. Some Lodges regularly have "festive board" banquets after the meeting, while others will reserve this for the occasion of installation or initiation. In either case the arrangements for preparing it are in the hands of the Junior Warden, who is often assisted by the wives of the members of the Lodge in the preparation of the food, and the employment of professional caterers is rare.

The frequency of meetings and the slowness of postal communication make it impracticable to require members to give advance notice of their intention to attend a banquet, and as many Lodges extend a general invitation to brethren to visit them and stay for the banquet, the estimation of the numbers to be catered for can present difficulties, though these always seem to be overcome in a remarkable way. Visiting on the strength of a general invitation, or in exercise of what is said to be the right to visit any Lodge, is

frequent, and it is not uncommon in smaller Lodges for the visitors to outnumber the members, and even be called on to help in the ceremony. Brethren from any recognised constitution visiting a Lodge are always welcome, on proving themselves, and a letter of introduction to the District Grand Secretary is often a newcomers first means of making friends in Nigeria.

I will be looking briefly at the lack of tenure of offices from year to year in most Lodges. The same reasons apply in the course of each year, and make it almost unheard of for the entire team of officers to be present at every meeting throughout the year. The Stewards are usually warned on their appointment that beside carrying out their duties over the supply of refreshments, they are expected to hold themselves ready to discharge any office in the Lodge other than that of the Master, having once achieved the appropriate degree, and even a brother who has not yet attained a Stewardship may find himself called upon at short notice; it is not unknown for a Fellow Craft to have to act as Junior Deacon for a Passing.

The result is that many brethren acquire a fair knowledge of the ritual at an earlier stage in their Masonic careers than would always be the case in England. A knowledge of the ritual is far from being the only thing required to make a good Mason but that is no reason for neglecting it, and I would say that the standard of working in the District is high.

Lodges are encouraged to practice Emulation working as set out in the revised edition which does have the detailed directions which were previously developed for the Nigerian Ritual book. These, while not claiming merit for rigid uniformity do help to prevent the perpetuation of mere blunders in the constantly changing set of officers. There are few formal Lodges of Instruction in Nigeria, but it is common for Lodge members to rehearse the entire ceremony twice or three times on weekday evenings in the weeks between the Saturday meetings.

A matter which calls for much attention from the Master and committee of most Lodges is the management of the building where the Lodge meets, which is commonly the property of the Lodge built at the expense of the members. Hotels have never catered for the Lodge meetings, and shared ownership, such as is common in England, has not really found favour with Lodges in any of the towns where more than one Lodge meet, indeed in the past the custom of every Lodge which did not yet possess a Hall, seemed to be to build one. Today, since ground rent, electricity, rates and overhead expenses are steadily rising, and the cost of building a Hall is becoming prohibitive, the wisdom of building a new Hall where it can be avoided seems very doubtful. Only one new Hall has in fact been built since 1939, and that not at a cost to the Lodge concerned; things have changed since 1909 when it was reported to the newly formed Northern Nigerian Lodge that a Hall could be built of stone at a small cost and with prison labour. £334 was enough to build and furnish a Hall and equip it with acetylene light and a piano.

The actual work of redecorating and repairing the Lodge invariably carried out by the members. I recall many happy weekends laying "Marley" tiles in the Hall in Kano, and attempting to repair leaking roofs in the building which was constructed in 1927, and feeling the worst for wear.

The history of organised Freemasonry in Nigeria is the history of the brethren who introduced it in 1861 and who have practised it from then until the present time. Its future depends on the brethren who are practising it now and who hopefully will continue to do so in the years to come. Any account of the past history and any attempt to assess the future involves a consideration of the lives the brethren have led or will lead in Nigeria. English Freemasonry knows no distinctions of colour or creed, and while it was introduced into Nigeria by Europeans (including in that term - persons of European decent) it has never been an exclusively European preserve. The records show that the first African candidate was initiated into Lagos Lodge No. 1171 - Nigeria's senior Lodge - in the year of its formation 1861, and since then brethren of every race and colour have met freely and harmoniously in Lodges.

However, the circumstances affecting European brethren have been different from those affecting African brethren, and it will be convenient to consider these two classes separately. It is true that in the past most lodges have been predominantly of one race or the other in membership, but without going into all the reasons for this I do not think they derive primarily from any feeling of racial distinction, although I do believe that it would be generally agreed that it is easier - I do not put it higher than that - for one expatriate to judge another's fitness for membership of the craft than for a Nigerian to do so, and of course the reverse equally applies. I shall say no more on this delicate topic, but shall proceed to look at these two classes from which the membership has been drawn.

Expatriates of European decent did until recently form the majority of subscribing members of the Lodges in the District, though now no longer the majority of members residing in the District. For a variety of reasons however Nigeria has never been a country of European settlement - unlike say South Africa or Zimbabwe - and the expatriate element of the population has probably never exceeded the proportion it possibly is today. A census is a difficult operation in Nigeria - but my estimate is in the region of 50,000 in 100 million or 1 in 2000.

It has consisted in the Colonial past of persons employed in the civil service or the armed forces, post Independence in banking, and commerce and today primarily manufacturing industry and trading with a few remaining in the Christian missions. For health reasons, tours of service have never exceeded 18 months, and today a ten month tour or even five months is becoming the norm, while home leave has always been on the generous scale: a weeks leave for each month of service is the general rule. A lot of the businesses which employ expatriates operate all over the country, and during his time with a company an employed person can expect to be posted to any part of the country.

Distances between centres of population are considerable, particularly in the North, and a man may find himself serving in a place too far from any Masonic centre to allow him to attend his own or any other Lodge.

This in fact happened to me when I moved away from Kano for a period of 3 years.

Beside depriving a number of worthy people the opportunity of ever joining the Craft, this has other inevitable consequences. In private Lodges even such offices as that of Secretary or Dir. of Ceremonies change hands much more frequently than would be usual in England. This may take place during the course of a year with literally no advance notice. In such a case the relieving Secretary is put in an impossible position, and I hope it is not unkind to suggest that there is occasionally a temptation to recall what Dr Johnson said when he compared a women's preaching to a dog's walking on his hind legs - "it's not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all." In addition, a brother's path to the Master's chair is rarely a steady progression from one junior office to another.

It is the exception rather than the rule for a brother to fill the offices of Junior Warden, Senior Warden and Master in three consecutive years, and many a Warden been disappointed of his hopes of the Masters chair by an inconvenient posting or having to leave Nigeria altogether.

A large proportion of subscribing members are now of African decent and their position is naturally somewhat different. However, until relatively recent years the education to give sufficient command of English to understand the ceremonies was the privilege of a small minority. This did not always apply to the Nigerians of course, have been operating their own businesses, or in private practice as lawyers or doctors since the 19th century, and have risen to the highest rank in the District. Nevertheless, they remain in the minority until recently, and it is only since the 1950's that their numbers have shown a rapid rate of growth. Today the number of Nigerians qualified in one of the professions seems to increase daily, and the senior positions in the District are now almost entirely filled by Nigerians. Masonically this will make for stability in the future. It is noteworthy, and I would add regrettable that although Northern Nigeria contains some 60% of the population, hardly any members come from this region. This is no doubt partly due to the fact that until recent years educational policy was such that the necessary command of English was infinitely more common among Southerners than among Northerners, but there is a further reason. The mistaken belief that Freemasonry is a specifically Christian institution exists even amongst our own members, who have evidently forgotten the No 1 Charge of a Freemason: "Let a man's religion or mode of worship be what it may, he is not excluded from the order, provided he believe in the glorious architect of heaven and earth etc." and failed to realise that the VSL is the revelation from above which is binding on the particular individual who is being obligated. I am convinced that this misconception has tended to discourage Northerners, who are predominantly Moslem, from showing any interest in the order. I would hope this will not persist but don't see much change occurring at present.

This problem of misconception of the basics of Freemasonry was the cause of the Kano State Government, in 1991 revoking the Certificate of Occupancy on the Kano Masonic Hall which had been held by the Lodge since it's foundation in 1927. The Lodge building was subsequently destroyed, however this again is another story.

As regards the future, changes are unavoidable and Lodges will have to adapt themselves or go under. The total number of Europeans making their careers in Nigeria has been steadily growing less as Nigeria has assumed command of its own destinies and as qualified Nigerians have become available for posts of all kinds. This trend will continue, and the number of Europeans active in Freemasonry will inevitably decline. As for Nigerian brethren, the traditional Nigerian culture is perfectly in harmony with the principles of Freemasonry, and as more Nigerians come onto the scene who add the necessary degree of education to the moral qualities which their own culture is designed to foster, there will be no lack of potential candidates for the order among the Nigerian of tomorrow.

With the rapid changes occurring in the world today, it is hard to predict with complete confidence to what extent an institution of which the external form was developed in another country, and of which the governing body is situated 3000 miles away, will retain its appeal among the citizens of a highly independent country like Nigeria, but while I would not expect any startling increase in the numbers, I see no reason at present to doubt that there will always be enough Nigerians who value this cultural and fraternal association with England to ensure the order continues, as brethren both Nigerian and expatriate have known in the past.

I have tried to give an outline of the circumstances in which Freemasonry is practised in Nigeria. I would like to end by quoting the words of Sir Lionel Brett DGM for Nigeria who in 1962 for the 50th Anniversary of the District said "To summarise the ways in which Freemasonry in Nigeria differs in emphasis from its practice in England, I would mention two points in particular. In the first place the fact that our membership has been drawn from two comparatively small classes of the population, and that there is less opportunity for other social and cultural activities than in England, means that the bond of Freemasonry seems stronger and that those who are able to be active in Freemasonry give a greater proportion of their time to it. Secondly, just as the various problems that face us present a challenge to our perseverance and ingenuity, so the overcoming of them gives that special feeling of satisfaction that only comes from the consciousness of difficulties jointly mastered. Without presuming to take any credit to ourselves for it, we may say that if individually we have to work harder for our Masonic pleasures we probably derive an extra degree of enjoyment from them."

Certainly as true in Nigeria today as it ever was.

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