

Kano Diary

Polio

🕒 MARCH 17, 2014 BY BETSY 💬 0 COMMENTS EDIT



Polio's hallmark is the withered leg, a heartbreaking sight in rural areas.

Polio was nearly eradicated in Nigeria but in 2004 religious leaders declared the vaccine "unIslamic," warning the drops would spread infertility and death among Muslim children. In the year inoculations were suspended, nearly 3,100 children were crippled and 19 polio-free countries were reinfected with the Nigerian strain. Volunteer vaccinators find the job is still difficult and dangerous.

Wheels Up, Ring On

🕒 MARCH 18, 2014 BY [BETSY](#) 💬 COMMENTS OFF

ON WHEELS UP, RING ON

[EDIT](#)



Don't leave home without a "husband"

September 12, 2010

It's a favorite adage of a certain kind of businessman and some traveling reporters: when the plane takes off, the wedding ring comes off, too. The Road can be a liberating, placeless, anonymous world. An opportunity to reinvent. A stressful excuse to let off steam. For some men and a few women, anyway.

Broadly speaking, I don't think it's the same for women. Or, it isn't for me. Lone women in tumultuous locales don't generally benefit from extra attention. Even when I'm traveling with a photographer, as I am now, I find it's better to deflect.

That's why I wear a tin band on my left hand. In some places, it is a clear advantage to be married. In Lebanon — where a taxi driver won't take you anyplace until he's shown off his children and learned about yours — it's easier to invent a son than it is to explain that, yes yes, I'm in my mid-40s and don't have children, but please don't look at me that way, it was my idea.

Or in Iraq, where many men — and presumably the women — are so desperate to escape they would happily marry their way out. Even to an American.

Or rural Pakistan and Ethiopia (and many, many other countries), where children are one of God's tangible blessings. In some areas, family is more than a social unit: It's a salve and a shield

from poverty so unrelenting and extreme that everything else — including food, shelter and clothing — are negotiable.

How can a woman voluntarily refuse these blessings, this natural place in the cycle of life? I don't actually have an answer to that, let alone an explanation that would make sense to the 18-year-old woman who has been cast out of her village for her inability to conceive.

I know: My fake \$5 wedding ring is a tool of expediency. I'm trying to hide when I'm asking others to take me into their lives and confidence. I hope it could be seen as a sign of cultural sensitivity, rather than cynicism. But I could make both cases pretty easily.

So it was odd, on the way to the airport, to reach into the zippered compartment of my gray canvas travel bag and find my wedding ring is gone. I think this will be ok: I'll buy another when I can. Because I know what's mission critical for a trip like this: computer and cables, passport, cash and sense of humor. Everything else I can knit together on the fly.

So wish me luck, please.

Do Not Stay at the Top Rank Hotel

 MARCH 18, 2014 BY [BETSY](#)  COMMENTS OFF

ON DO NOT STAY AT THE TOP RANK HOTEL

[EDIT](#)

September 19, 2010

Do not stay at the Top Rank Hotel.

My first day was very productive, a great one. We met with Unicef, WHO, the Nigerian health ministry (the first of many visits)

and picked up some groceries at the designated Western supermarket. It is, of course, run by Lebanese. Then photographer Mary Calvert and I discovered our room had been tossed.

How long did you think it that would take?

I came back to the room at the Top Rank Hotel, Garki Area 11, not far from the Health Ministry annex. Our luggage had been strewn around — or as strewn as cabled bags can get. The lock on my big bag had been busted open and everything, apparently, touched. Things were spilling out of my backpack. Unbelievably: computer, quasi loose cash, money belt, and the treasury skirt were left untouched. The second two were disguised in plain sight. But the computer? Ohmygod. I grew nauseous with relief. Nothing was stolen from photographer Mary Calvert, either. Management was skeptical from the start. You left your bags open. You left a mess. You didn't lock the door. NO, we said, but even if we did, someone entered our room. That doesn't happen. Because, said the manager, it had never happened before. Besides, he pointed out, the "do not disturb" sign was on the door. He grew disdainful when we told that, miraculously — and, I will add, honestly — nothing appeared to be stolen.

That's when the manager demanded an apology.

Things spiraled to worse, then much worse. Repeated requests for towels and beer went unanswered. We nibbled cheese and power bars in the room rather than leave it unattended or risk whatever fluids they would stir into our food downstairs. The staff grew increasingly cold then aggressively hostile.

Busy days in Abuja. Easy to check out but no where to go. The \$240 Hilton was out of the question. So we stayed. I packed everything mission critical into the backpack and left it with our driver, holding my breath all the way. Mary checked her bag with the front desk, which would either increase accountability, or consolidate all the treasure into one portable package.

I've travelled far, faaaaaar off the 4-star circuit. I know about room security and personal safety. And I'll say that no amount of prep prepares you for the pounding heartbeat when you're actually breached.

Mary and I are in Nigeria to report on the effort to mop up and eradicate polio. You do that through vaccination. A vaccination is a small, often neutered dosage of the virus itself. The body can almost always fight off a taste of virus and build up the antibodies to fight a full dose from tainted water or infected feces.

Maybe there was a lesson to learn here. Truth is, this not-quite-robbery was like a taste of the real thing, and hopefully will keep us even higher on our toes. I'm not comparing a break-in to a fatal virus, but maybe there is more than one way to be vaccinated.

Things You Can Buy On The Road To Kano

 MARCH 18, 2014 BY [BETSY](#)  COMMENTS OFF
ON THINGS YOU CAN BUY ON THE ROAD TO KANO

[EDIT](#)

September 19, 2010

Things you can buy on the road to Kano:

Wafers

biscuits

shampoo

3 apples wrapped in plastic

tissues

matches

cigarettes: 5-cent loosies

cigarettes: 90-cent packs

eggs: raw
eggs: boiled
eggs: with chicken
hand-rolled sleeves of plantain chips
cornets of juice drink
gasoline: small jug
gasoline: big jugs
gasoline: plastic cup
phone minutes
phones
glucose cookies
peanuts: loose scoop
peanuts: canvas sack
political fliers for IBB
cement: blocks
cement: bricks
cement: Jersey barriers
big-ass hairy yams
wrinkled men's shirts (likely lifted from a laundry)
hubcaps
potatoes
tree limbs and trunks (probably for charcoaling)
roasted ears of corn
A Peugeot
plastic beads
loaves of bread
ducklings
Nigerian newspapers (at least 10, multiple languages)
break oil

What To Wear in Northern Nigeria

🕒 MARCH 18, 2014 BY [BETSY](#) 💬 COMMENTS OFF

ON WHAT TO WEAR IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

[EDIT](#)

September 21, 2010

WHAT I'M WEARING TODAY (SATURDAY)

We are off to visit the Koranic teachers, a conservative group meeting this afternoon in rural Kano. The Mulam is supposed to be telling them that polio can be stopped and everyone should welcome the vaccinators when they come to the schools next week. It is a tough crowd.

I have been advised — repeatedly — to buy a jalabiah, those long robes that cover a woman's body-long dirty bits with a billowing layer of polyester. But I only just got here yesterday and have not had the time.

So I am wearing a pair of baggy linen trousers and a long tunic-like overshirt in a fetching green and cream plaid. It falls well below the hip, and adds at least five pounds to my silhouette. And I'm fine with that because the dusty work boots have already diluted any appeal that has survived the unrelenting heat. Oh. And I've got a scarf over my head and around my neck, kind of like Benazir Bhutto but without the royal mien. I feel like modesty on the dusty hoof.

"Is this OK?" I ask the religious scholar facilitating the UN mission over there. I am expecting the usual absent minded nod of approval. I am wrong.

He studies me carefully, boots to hijab. "It will do for today," he sighed. "You look ... funky."

WHAT I'M WEARING TODAY (MONDAY)

But modesty is not enough.

We have bought the jalabiahs and have been wearing them every day. It turns out that you can wear the robe, as we are, or these extraordinarily colorful cottons custom tailored into a flattering skintight dress that is then sabotaged by a couple of loose wraps. Photographer Mary and I don't have a tailor. We've gone grandma.

She has selected a plastic pale lavender gown that, despite a scattering of rhinestones and flower embroidery looks like the housecoat your neighbor's mom would wear on wash day. Her thick red hair is bound up under a matching scarf that looks a little like a diaper as it inevitably comes unravelled. Mary is a beautiful woman. But not today.

I'm no better. I've selected an oversized black polyester oven bag with gold starbursts machine embroidered down the front. The throat and cuffs are embellished with enthusiastic geometric stitching that I hoped would have a certain art deco flair. It doesn't. I look like a nun escaped from a Dubai nightclub. My head is tightly cinched inside a black polyester scarf so wispy and slippery that our local friend has had to tie it tighter than a bride's corset. I already know that when it lands, in about an hour, the pressure- and pollution-fueled headache will be non-negotiable.

NOT BEAUTIFUL, JUST A MIRACLE

For the last few days I've been tagging along with the polio eradication teams in rural Nigeria, areas that don't see a lot of foreigners.

That explains the prolonged glances and the crowds of children that gather behind me when I'm trying to talk to someone. We look different: we invite curiosity.

However, I can't quite figure out the puzzlement, the gasps, the suspicion I sometimes get when I step out of the car and stride into the village office, or casually join up with an eradication

team.

It can't be that i'm so fetching. They've certainly seen white women before. Ah, it's my sunglasses. No one here wears them, which I've noticed but wear mine anyway. It's not that no one has ever seen dark lenses before. They have. On the blind.

Searching for Fela

🕒 MARCH 18, 2014 BY [BETSY](#) 💬 COMMENTS OFF
ON SEARCHING FOR FELA

[EDIT](#)

September 17, 2010

The fun of travel, even to difficult places, is finding the culture and digging in. That means Fairuz in Lebanon, the qawwali in Lahore, or the dude with the oud outside Baghdad's Hamra Hotel. In Nigeria, I want to find the next big band, fronted a charismatic leader with something to say. There is a deep and varied musical tradition in Nigeria, and if a country with more than 50 percent illiteracy can keep a dozen daily newspapers afloat, there has to be a songwriter with the chops to pull it off.

That singer is not in Kano. But that's another story.

Nigeria has a musical history to rival in Africa. At least, I'm pretty sure they do. This is not my area of expertise. Senegal, Mali, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and of course South Africa have exported their own superstars, who have conquered small progressive corners of America where 'world beat,' for lack of a better term, is embraced. But Nigeria is special.

Kind Sunny Ade was descended from Yoruban royalty, and

popularized an upbeat, dancy style called juju.

Fela Anikalupo Kuti was the politicized son of a feminist agitator from the Ogun region, whose highlife was infectiously rhythmic and highly critical of the government.

The two big bands from different parts of Nigeria hit the United States and Europe at roughly the same time, in the late 1970s and early '80s. Fela and King Sunny each fronted a stageful of percussionists, guitarists, bassists, reed players and dancers whose style influenced the most adventurous rock musicians of the day. There were costumes. Chants. Call-and-response. A bit of story telling from the mic. A concert could last half the night and everyone danced until they were too tired to stand.

Or so it looked to me. I never saw either one live, but I was lucky enough to hear them on the radio, and I probably read about them in Rolling Stone. Even as a teenager, I knew I was missing something.

I discovered King Sunny first, and I was entranced by, well, the foreign-ness of it. So many people on stage, such long concerts, so many drum lines, and what kind of singing was that?

I came to Fela later, in college, and he was electrifying. Known as much for his pro-democracy politics as his high energy musical scene, Fela was the bad boy. Not bad like the boyfriend who drops you, bad like the guy who called out the military government on human rights abuses and got thrown in jail — repeatedly — for his smart mouth. Where *was* Nigeria, anyway? If King Sunny was like the Beatles, then Fela was the Stones. Now, I know — that's over simplifying all four and fair to none. But it's kind of true, isn't it? And isn't it marvelously odd that of the two, Fela would be the first to Broadway?

I am in Kano now, a dusty and poor region in northern Nigeria which does not appear to have have any music at all, let alone enough to export to Western dancefloors.

I've been asking the young Nigerians I meet who I should be listening to. Who is the next Fela? Where is the young King Sunny Ade? I am sad to say, as I shout slightly over an insipid tune from some Anglo boy band, that they do not know what I am asking for.

Lyric Of The Day

🕒 MARCH 18, 2014 BY **BETSY** 💬 COMMENTS OFF
ON LYRIC OF THE DAY

EDIT

September 24, 2010

That dog is peeing
On the trash
The goats are eating

— driving through downtown Kano, Nigeria

Unexpected Treasure

🕒 MARCH 18, 2014 BY **BETSY** 💬 COMMENTS OFF
ON UNEXPECTED TREASURE

EDIT

September 22, 2010

We hear the snarling mutt before we see him, thankfully chained to a corner in the concrete walled courtyard. A guinea fowl stutters and coos. There are dirt floors and the inevitable laundry hanging motionless in the dusty air. I've been in this courtyard a dozen times — in Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya and even refugee

camps — but I am still unprepared for what awaits me.

In the corner is a rough wooden pedestal with carved base and a kind of chubby hour-glass shape. It's got proportion and texture and I'm surprised to find I want it. This one has been knocked around a bit ("authenticity") and the top is splitting from water damage. It's holding up a crappy plastic bowl filled with scary water. I want to give the father cash and carry it home, where it will become a glass topped end table with a story.

A sister or cousin is "washing" greens in a rubber bowl. The texture looks familiar and then I realize why: it is made from an old tire. Beside her is an indifferently stacked pile of bowls, from nut cup to party wine chiller. A few have faded from black to deep teal blue. I gawp, and the woman stares back without expression. These would look great on Bill's counter. Are they safe to eat out of? Ka-ching!

Around the corner, grass has been tightly woven into a water skimmer, with a tree branch for a handle. And a rice bag has been reinforced with long slender branches, and rolled half down to close off a hallway.

My shame grows, as I find the handiwork momentarily more interesting than the story. But oh, look! The tops of 7"-high slabs of tree trunk have been shaved into a tush-sized groove, making a set of stylish stools for a coffee table or overflow seating.

This small space is suffocating, yet intoxicating. It is as if ABC Carpet & Home has staged a 3D window display and hired dirty children to live inside.

My inner urbanite wants to make a bid on the whole courtyard, including the guinea fowl, and tell the driver to carry everything away. These are the furnishings of the poorest people on earth, a family supported by a subsistence farmer or perhaps the man who sells phone cards in traffic. And I want their stuff. I am ashamed of myself, when everyone around me talking about polio. Nonetheless....

Hey, Paulette Cole! The family lives in Kwachiri ward, Fagge district, Kano state, Nigeria. They eat paste made of pounded yam and drink water that will torment their bowels forever. When your scouts and buyers get here, please be generous.

The Superstar of Polio

 MARCH 18, 2014 BY [BETSY](#)  COMMENTS OFF
ON THE SUPERSTAR OF POLIO

[EDIT](#)

September 26, 2010

It's hard to overestimate how much Bill Gates has electrified the polio-industrial complex here. Everyone who's ever had any contact, however distant or glancing, finds a way to name check him within moments of shaking hands.

The Emir of Kano, possibly the most influential leader north of Abuja, managed to get his name into a 20-minute interview no less than six times. "Only yesterday His Highness got a letter from Bill Gates on the eradication of polio in Kano," the Emir's translator tossed off during a rare interview.

Among the aid and development communities, Bill Gates is bathed in a buttery, golden light. His investments in public health and basic human dignity have jump started aid and development efforts with the same force his software transformed information and education. In these circles, the man needs no introduction, although everyone is desperate to be introduced.

It's not just the players who are besotted, it's the powerless as

well.

The self-crowned king of cripples, Aminu al Wada, the Founder and Chairman of the Kano State Polio Victims Trust Association, pines to get his association's business proposal into Mr. Gates' hands. He will furtively hand it to pretty much any American with a passionate plea, "the most powerful man in the world needs to see this."

Another polio survivor — a muscled 50-year-old welder who uses an electric torch to join steel and rides a motorcycle outfitted with hand cranks — says Bill Gates has inspired him to improve his family's finances. Kabieu Nuhu has never touched a computer. He has never learned to read. Yet Bill Gates is his idol. It is not too far a reach to say that somewhere on Murtallah Mohamad Street, in downtown Kano, there is a small boy with twisted legs and absurdly muscular arms who sluices through traffic, begging for alms and dreaming of the day when he will scrape together enough of a stake to start a business of his own. And his role model will be a skinny college drop out whose official bio says he enjoys playing golf and bridge.

Me, I'm Apple all the way, but I get it.

This is not the blind hero worship draped across the shoulders of a bratty basketball player or last night's starlet. I believe the praise is nearly universal for the Gates' Seattle-based organization and the power of money, intelligently applied.

A bit of background: The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation spends hundreds of millions of dollars annually to eradicate polio, as well other preventable diseases and conditions. The Foundation underwrites the work of NGOs and partnerships active in improving the life of what could be called the bottom billion, or the poorest of the world's poor. The group has placed consultants in strategic positions in the Nigerian health ministry. The Gates' initial charitable contribution was a precedent-obliterating \$30 billion.

But it's not Gates' legendary self-made wealth that electrifies people here, it's his time. The man has personally shown up for polio immunizations, testified about health issues before Congress, and publicly courted Nigerian officials (who, without question, got a lot more mileage out of the visit than Gates himself). He won over the hearts of society's lowest in June, when showed up in Abuja to sign the well-autographed soccer ball to "kick polio out of Africa," the World Cup themed public service campaign.

Malama Aisha Isyaku Kiru, the Minister of Health for Kano State effusively praised the Microsoft founder during a recent conversation.

Bill Gates gave us moral support and energized us to do more," she said.

MDG #7

 MARCH 18, 2014 BY **BETSY**  COMMENTS OFF
ON MDG #7

EDIT

September 27, 2010

I have been watching the annual UN General Debate on TV, what little of it is shown on CNN and almost no where else. And it gives me the same happy, warm feeling of comfort anyone would get seeing pictures of home. That is, if home were magnificent superstar of '50s architecture inhabited by 150 presidents and prime ministers, all of whom talking over each other like self involved adults at Thanksgiving. But that's the annual debate, and I've covered it every single year since 1996. To the extent one can: like I said, everyone talks over each other but not to each

other. It's a dialogue of the deaf with the volume at 11. In addition to the monologues at the GA podium, there are countless side events, pseudo-summits, roundtables, press conferences and official readouts of private meetings. As a result, very little gets covered in any depth. But that's another story. The dominant side show this year was yet another stocktaking of the world's performance on the MDGs, the Millennium Development Goals conceived in 2000 by former secretary general Kofi Annan to improve the lives of the poorest of the poor, the so-called bottom billion.

I couldn't really tell what was going on, but the crawl at the bottom of the screen was pretty dismal ... world failing to meet targets ... goals on health and education unmet ... poverty rising ... etc. Most of the developed world tunes that out as so much guilt and money-grabbing. They are not all together wrong, and I can certainly understand why they hear it that way.

But this year, I'm not attending any of the briefings or listening to speeches. I'm deep inside MDG reality, where there's nothing more vital than #7, improving access to water and sanitation. Nigeria's oil profits don't go very far up here in Kano State, where village roads are lined with stagnant puddles fermenting into a toxic brew of polio, cholera, hepatitis, feces and stink. These garbage stews also offer an attractive place for malarial mosquitos to rut.

Euwww.

It's simplistic to say that these open sewers are the root of sickness and misery here — there are many other problems mere sanitation cannot address. But if it were possible to drain these urban swamps, child mortality would probably fall, and fast. I'm not a world leader. If I could bend the ear of all these rulers, that's what I'd whisper.

Tick Tock

🕒 MARCH 18, 2014 BY [BETSY](#) 💬 COMMENTS OFF
ON TICK TOCK

[EDIT](#)

September 30, 2010

You don't need a calendar or a clock to measure time on the Road. You can tell the driver to come round at 7am and, depending where you are, the response will be "inchallah." In Ethiopia the calendar has 13 months. In the Palestinian Territories and parts of Afghanistan, the clocks are off by 30 politically petty minutes.

If you're filing daily stories, the only time that matters is the one where your editors are sitting. And you're always on deadline, and you're always almost late. Always.

On an extended trip, like this, I tell time a different way.

At the beginning of the journey, I am always astounded by the learning curve. You can do all the research you want — when you have the luxury of planning — but the first conversation you have on the ground will knock the cocky right out of you. The cab driver from the airport will mention a political theory or discuss a problem with such a casual intimacy and finesse I want to grab my notepad. This is the best part. It's exciting. I travel to learn and pretty much everyone on the ground can teach me something. And at the beginning of a trip, I have the energy to hear and mentally organize an avalanche of information.

A few weeks in, things start to slow down. Poor eating habits, daily strain, occasional dehydration and possibly exhaustion will take a toll. The brain has saturated and conflicting accounts or theories are more difficult to take in. It's harder to sit down at 8pm, after a full day of reporting, and synthesize what I've seen

and heard and pound out a cogent, elegant story that moves events forward. At this point, my health starts to soften, but not yet suffer. Organisms my body used to vanquish start to get the upper hand. It's not serious, but it is a warning. A bacteria across the bow.

I know it's time to start looking for the exit when the first bout of intestinal distress kicks in. It probably won't be severe, but it will come from a meal I've already eaten at a place I trust.

Which is to say, it won't make a lot of sense. But it does. It's another form of time, the one that measures how long you've been out, and how much longer it makes sense to be there.

I'm in northern Nigeria now, reporting a story about the 2005 explosion of polio after a calamitous decision by local and Islamic authorities to suspend vaccinations because of safety concerns. I'll be here for five weeks, and not filing dailies. It's almost a luxury, although I do secretly pine for the adrenaline of a few info-sprints.

So far, I'm fine. I like to start a trip with a few servings of the local yogurt, if there is any. I also brush my teeth in tap water, if it feels like the odds are in my favor. I wouldn't do that in Goma or Gaza, but it makes sense in Islamabad and Abuja. You can usually trust the capital — generally, it's the most developed city in any country outside America. I've been gradually and carefully extending my palate to get out of the hotel and live on the local economy — because that's why I'm here. I'm not ready for that slimy green soup with pounded yam, but I have enjoyed goat stew and pumpkin puree and ... well, I don't actually know what that was. But it had kidney in it, I'm pretty sure.

But I notice it's time to start being more careful instead of more adventurous. I know this because my brain is starting to saturate. My stomach is slowing down but still orderly and responsible. I'm craving Coca Cola — something I never drink at home — because it's got sugar and caffeine and sometimes it's

cold.

There is a restaurant here that serves beer but I won't tell you what it's called because that's a really dangerous menu item here in Kano state. Its not on the menu but the bill, it's listed as iced tea, and that's the way you ask for it. Nigerians work there, but most of the clients are foreign, or Nigerians from the mostly Christian south. I've eaten here a few times, even the salad, with no consequences. Dining here is, literally, a way to stop time. So far, so good. I'm here for another two weeks, and I think I've still got the altitude to keep the story moving.

Inchallah.