

# African News Beat Proves Frustrating

By Robert D. Lee

The old cliché that a well-trained police reporter makes the best foreign correspondent may be true. My ordeal in the stationhouse was undoubtedly too short (three months) and my dedication to the task probably insufficient to make me a case in point, *pro* or *con*.

I rather doubt, however, that any amount of experience with a domestic news organization would adequately have prepared me for the frustrations and sheer difficulty of gathering and writing news in Africa.

Few policemen or governments like to divulge information that does not reflect well upon them. African governments are no exception.

But in dealing with the local police department, or even Washington, an American newspaper has leverage. A lone newsman against, say, the government of Algeria, where the American Embassy has scarcely a toehold, is an unequal contest.

Actually the pitfalls for an itinerant journalist may be little greater in a country like Algeria, where most of the doors are closed, than in a place like Tunisia, where the welcome mat is out for Americans. There one finds himself inundated with brochures and documents and promised all the interviews he has time for.

## Glowing Reports

Zippering from one government-arranged appointment to another, I gathered more information about Tunisia in a week than I had been able to put together on Algeria in a month.

Robert D. Lee recently returned from a year-long trip that took him from Algeria and Tunisia south to the former Belgian Congo and then back up the West Coast of Africa to Morocco. He was traveling as the first recipient of the Overseas Press Club Foundation's William P. Gray Fellowship in Foreign Correspondence and writing on a free lance basis for several newspapers including the *Minneapolis Tribune*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *New York Herald Tribune*. A 1965 graduate of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, he has returned to Columbia this fall to do further graduate work, in African affairs. His father, Deemer Lee, publishes the *Esterville (Iowa) Daily News*.

I heard glowing reports on the country's economic, social and educational development and on the state of relations between Tunisia and the United States.

The only dark spot in this otherwise rosy picture, as far as the people I talked to were concerned, was a shortage of foreign exchange.

Now, the Tunisians have done well; there is no doubting that. But one still should expect a country undergoing as profound social and economic change as Tunisia to have a problem or two besides foreign exchange. Since I could not find out what the problems were, I wrote travel stories.

In some countries, though not in Tunisia, the line between friendliness and hostility was blurred by incompetence.

When I went to the Ministry of Agriculture in Algiers, a receptionist on the ground floor told me the press office was on the fourth; the fourth floor people told me to go to the sixth; and there I found an assistant press officer who took me back down to the second to meet his supervisor.

Later, after several interviews with low-to-middle level officials, I complained to a resident correspondent about my inability to find out what I wanted to know. He expressed surprise at what he regarded as my naivité. "What did you expect?" he said. "Most of those people can't help you because they don't know the answers themselves."

In all 10 of the African countries I visited, particularly in the Congo, less so in Nigeria and Ghana, the circle of informed officials who could be of help to a journalist is extremely small. Failing to see them, one is forced to rely too heavily on foreign embassies and businessmen.

The problem of getting appointments is compounded in Kinshasa, formerly Leopoldville, by a perverse telephone system. Since the city spreads out for miles along the Congo River, and since one gets heated up pretty quickly running from place to place trying to catch someone in, and since the telephone exists, it seems logical to use it.

## Morning's Work

In this case, reason should be disregarded. Making three or

four calls can consume a morning. First, virtually all government numbers have been changed since the last directory was issued. Reaching an information operator usually takes ten minutes.

Second, everybody's line always seems to be busy. Third, when one finally does hear someone answer, it is likely to be a wrong number. Once I dialed the same number with great care four times in a row. The first three times I got wrong numbers.

It should be added that the telephone systems of Lagos, Accra, Abidjan and Dakar are superb by comparison, and good by any standards. Nevertheless, eight or ten or twelve hours of effort often adds up to less than a full day's work.

The local press is of course an invaluable aid, as much for what it cannot report as for what it does.

For instance, students left the University of Dakar *en masse* last spring for a month and a half to protest the expulsion from Senegal of five of their colleagues. The government said the expelled students had been leaders of a demonstration protesting the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah as president of Ghana last Feb. 24.

In the ensuing struggle between students and the government of Senegal, Nkrumah was virtually forgotten and the issues became student rights, the future of the university, and its role in higher education in Africa.

## Late Coverage

That the Senegalese government attached significance to the affair from the start—mostly because it threatened to disrupt the First World Festival of Negro Arts, which opened April 1 in Dakar—was shown by the fact that coverage in the local press and on Radio-Senegal began two days late and consisted almost exclusively of government pronouncements.

One of the most important stories in the Ivory Coast is the Africanization, or lack of it, of management personnel in French-owned companies. The issue is so sensitive local newsmen do not touch it.

Even in countries such as the Ivory Coast and Senegal, where newspapers are privately or semi-privately owned, editors cannot afford to provoke government wrath. The difference between these papers and the party organs that pass for newspapers in Algeria and Mali is important in principle but slight in fact.

On the other hand, the Niger-

ian and Ghanian papers can be refreshing, and Congolese journalists sometimes show an initiative that is absolutely frightening in terms of the grief it could entail.

Foreign correspondents are freer than the local editors, but the extent of their freedom is illustrated by an official broadcast of the Congolese government last June. It followed by a few days the public execution of four Congolese politicians for plotting to overthrow President Joseph D. Mobutu's regime on the Pentacost.

"It is unanimously conceded that the freedom of the press is better guaranteed and respected in our country than in the rest of Africa," Radio-Kinshasa declared, according to an Associated Press report. "Here the foreign press has every opportunity for access to sources and news. No restriction has ever harmed its liberty of expression.

"But since the grave affair of the Pentacostal plot, the press has been given to exaggeration and has really abused our hospitality and good faith . . . We cannot tolerate this kind of activity by journalists. This is the last warning that will be given them."

## Knew Too Much

In the following month correspondents were expelled from both the Congo and Nigeria. The major fault of each of them, senior correspondents in Kinshasa and Lagos, was apparently that they knew too much.

The only place I encountered actual censorship was Ghana, in April, although Guinea's attitude might be classified as total censorship: I was denied a visa.

However, neither the threat of expulsion, nor the technical complications that reduce productivity, nor even the difficulty of obtaining information, is the major reason why reporting from Africa is exceptionally difficult.

A foreign journalist's chief problem is to understand what is happening there in terms of the traditional as well as the modern frame of reference.

This requires a kind of background that one is not likely to acquire in a police station. It also demands the establishment of social contact, as in every other kind of reporting.

A few days spent in a country is no substitute for the background and gives no chance to develop contacts. After a month in one place, I usually felt I had my feet on the ground, but by then it was time to leave, and I had typically made no more than two or three useful contacts.