

# How I Broke Into the NBC Studios

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A staunch member of the circle arrived late; this was Michael Olumide, who was the Controller of the Western arm of the Nigeria Broadcasting Service. He had received an urgent summons to report at the Premier's Lodge with a recording team. The Premier, Akintola, would make a broadcast that evening and he wanted it recorded. There was a possibility that he might even make the broadcast live, but he wanted to tape his speech in advance, just in case. Femi Johnson, ever insatiable for the inside scoops of politics and intrigues, pressed and pressed for a hint of what Akintola had recorded, but the stolid Controller of the media would reveal nothing, only that the Premier would broadcast, and that it would be at the usual hour in the evening.

The previous night, Maren had found

himself doing a curious thing, something that he could not explain. He had gone to the Premier's house. Those days, the beleaguered Premier hardly ever slept there, preferring both the company and safety of a mistress that he kept in Bodija. Maren had gone to his official lodge, for the first time in several months, in a state of mind that he could not fully explain. Perhaps he had indeed gone there in the hope that he would find Premier Akintola at home, so that they could talk in the peace of the night. He slowed down as he approached the gates, ready to drive straight through if there were cars or signs of the presence of party stalwarts and sycophants

The compound was deserted: that had become the pattern in recent times. He entered the house, hallooed but received no response. A steward came out, recognised him and reported that only

the mother was home, that she was already upstairs in bed. Should he summon her? For a moment, he hesitated, then told him not to bother.

In the immediate passageway before the private lounge, towards which he headed, there were two mammoth refrigerators - he was familiar with both. One stored beer and soft drinks, the other wines and champagnes. He opened the first, intending to take out a beer, sit in the lounge and drink while he waited in the hope that the man would return home before dawn.

And then, probably from habit, he also looked in the other refrigerator. He had never seen it so full; clearly a party was in the offing. From top to bottom, crammed into every cranny and the door shelves as well were dozens of bottles of champagne; pink, white, *brut*, *sec*,

*demi-sec, doux.* Slowly, he opened the other cooler, returned the beer, then gathered armfuls of champagne bottles and carried them to his car, quite openly, indifferent to the possibility that someone might appear to challenge him. Then he went back to the first cooler, retrieved his beer, sat in the lounge and drank. He was there for over an hour, but there were no movements in the house. He left, drove to the University campus and, selecting randomly, distributed all the champagne, down to the last bottle, to the astonished staff. He gave no explanations, simply dropped a bottle in each hand or left it at the door. If he paused that evening to ask the reason for his actions, he could not recall; only that it was something that he did on the spur of the moment, and that he went home afterwards, not even stopping at Risikatu which lay, conveniently, on his way home. He recalled, however, that he slept soundly, his deepest sleep perhaps in many weeks.

Femi continued to pester Michael for any titbits, any scrap at all from what the Premier intended to inflict on his people, but Maren found himself indifferent. What could it be beyond more threats, more arrogance of power, a desperate man's rhetoric to sanctify infamy by defiling the airwaves yet again with claims of victory? Every Intelligence report that came through to them confirmed the party's resolve to cling to power. And so, even the fraction of himself that he had brought to the feast took off abruptly, without warning; but he rescued it quickly, snatched it down to earth and anchored it deep into the bowl of pounded yam and *apon* stew, studded with cow's 'internal affairs', giant snails, venison and dried fish. No one noticed that he had been away. Still the light-headedness persisted and he knew why.

It was due to an unexpected sense of relief, and he wished that it were possible to invite Kaye Whiteman to the feast, a gesture of gratitude that would only have mystified the journalist. But for

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their chance encounter near Trenchard Hall, and the distraction of the transmitter that had resulted from his disclosure, the *Daily Sketch* building would by now have gone up in flames. Maren was by no means averse to the idea, only uncomfortable at the unpredictable effect of an entire tank of petrol engulfing the building, and the likelihood of its spreading to other buildings. However, the group had decided that it was a risk worth taking, and the *Daily Sketch* was nearly as physically isolated from its surroundings as it was alienated from the people. However, Michael Olumide had now unknowingly provided an alternative, one that, he was certain, would be welcomed by the others as eagerly as the ram substitute was by Abraham for his trussed-up son. In any case, this was one decision that he had taken instantly; what was more, the other Maren had silently excused himself from the company and commenced a fussless planning.

He ate as casually as he could, anxious to be off, then took his leave, conceding

early defeat in the competitive feasting. Nothing had been planned for that Saturday - it was, by agreement, their day off, once the Eastern team had left. The problem of rounding up any members of the *Credo* group was near insurmountable - most of them had also gone on their own version of Saturday unwinding. In the end, there were only three available. Now he wished that he had kept at least one of the tapes that Ukonu had taken back to Enugu, especially the one that called for an uprising throughout the West.

No longer surprised at the phenomenon, he watched his companion self move like a programmed automaton, homing in on resources that were recalled from dormant hideouts of the mind, recalling the shape and layout of the Broadcasting House, the reception room, the stairs, corridor, the side entrance that opened into the road across which stood Obisesan Cinema Hall, the Cooperative Building, while on the same side was the Insurance Building with its attractive mural that had been executed by the German. Once more, he went over the transmission studios as he last saw them, several weeks before, when he had been looking for Femi, and was told that he was across the road, in Michael's office...stopping to say hello to the pioneer writer, Amos Tutuola, who worked in a poky little office on the ground floor - but no longer as a storekeeper - up the stairs again and through the corridors once more...mentally recalled where the split-level began and the corridor sheered sharply away from the rear wall, made of decorative blocks that exposed the corridor to any curious eyes from outside, from the Kingsway Stores; then fell to wondering who might be on duty on that fateful evening, only hours away.

It was already late afternoon, and there could only be feverish improvisation. He had already marked down a young American research student who owned a tape recorder, a professional brand, that used just the kind of spool that was



Premier Akintola during a public broadcast in Ibadan

needed. Tracked down, he was given no option but to make his equipment available. Since he was accustomed to his own tools and a good technical quality was essential, he also had to supervise the recording of the new message, quickly scripted by Maren. The apartment of the medical photographer, Frank Speed, was commandeered - he was away from the country at the time. By five o'clock that afternoon, the message was on a spool, and they had made a spare copy that would be sent to Enugu, just in case. All that was left was to pick up the trio, drive casually through the vicinity of the Broadcasting House and select positions for the woefully inadequate band, school them on what would be required of them if things went wrong, or right.

And then it had to happen, the worst imaginable affliction that could attack a

body tuning up for a mission that required precision, and was limited by time - a running stomach. The combination of the peppery stews and the beer at Femi Johnson's maybe, exacerbated by the to-ing and fro-ing on the pot-holed roads and the rutted tracks between the lumberyard shacks at Oke Foko, looking for Kodak, appeared to be working havoc in his stomach. Or perhaps it was the possibility that he might actually end up shooting the Premier, if he did show up, and there was no other way to stop him. Gaining entrance into the building early required hiding in the record library, which he alone knew well. He kept up his telephone calls to the very last possible moment, making casual enquiries about Akintola's intentions. By then the six tablets of Thalazole that he had swallowed all at once - instead of two, three times a day - had stopped the subversive tap that was threatening his

evening out.

There were two scenarios, and both were straightforward. One was if the Premier decided to come in person, the other if he stuck to the recorded message. The first had to be played by ear, everything was left to the on-the-spot decision of the three men who would be deployed around the Cooperative Building, the Kingsway Stores, and the Insurance Building opposite the Broadcasting House. They could take on the motorcade, concentrating on his own vehicle, using the advantage of the night and of surprise. They tried to guess which route the motorcade might take, but it made no difference anyway. The first man along the route held the decision: if he chose to act, the other two must follow. If not, they would simply melt into the night. One barrage would accelerate into the next, and then into the third. At night, beyond a token response in the general direction of



attack, the escorts would not stop to investigate further enquiries or go in pursuit of the attackers. That would be suicidal, since they would have no idea how many were involved in the ambush; also their first duty was to take their charge out of the danger zone. In any case, the loyalty of the guards was already a source of suspicion and complaint for the isolated Premier. The logical response of the party, whichever way one looked at it, would be to speed off as fast as they could gun their motorcars. Maren squelched all argument about who would actually enter the studios and insert the new tape. He knew the interior better than the others and that was that. Moreover, the inside person had the responsibility of creating a violent diversion that would disrupt all activity, if the Premier did come in person to do a live broadcast, successfully braved the ambush and entered the building. This was best done by starting a fire in the record library and he had planned exactly how it would be done. Whatever it took, the broadcast must be prevented.

Normally, there should have been someone to drive the car, wait for the one who would enter and whisk him away at the end. However, there was no one to spare. Three one-man ambushes, even of the hit-and-run kind, against a three- to five-strong motorcade was bad enough; two would be too ludicrous for effectiveness. There was only one answer; recruit a willing outsider who would know enough to obey instructions but would not be exposed to risk. Maren's walking image did not need to think for long; within Orisun, there were three whom he knew he could always count upon for such limited chores; he chose Jimi Solanke. Jimi did not even have driver's licence but he could move a car, put it in reverse and take a corner with safety. In case, Maren would take the wheel as long as he was in the vehicle. To make driving easier for Jimi, in case he had to drive, he swapped his car for a friend's Volkswagen, explaining that he had a tryst to keep,

and did not wish to be spotted by the girl's protective parents.

It meant parking the car somewhat further away from the Broadcasting House than he had planned, placing it on the slope on Lebanon Street after the short link between Lebanon and Kingsway Streets. The police were stationed in the lobby and on the frontage of the building itself. If there was a hue and cry, it made sense to assume that they would all rush in, by which time he would be through the corridor on the top floor, waiting at the foot of the stairs to the side, until the police had quit the front to investigate the commotion. Then he would walk briskly to the waiting car, while the others dispersed as they had arrived - individually.

When he stepped out of the car, he told Jimi to take the driving seat; if he was not out in fifteen minutes, he should simply drive off and return the car to its owner. In the darkness, he could not see Jimi's face to see how he reacted, but he knew he would do as he was told.

So he watched himself walk through the short link road, saw the third man in the presumed route move slightly in the shadows, watched himself raise his hand casually to acknowledge that he had noted his presence and that nothing had changed in the arrangements. This stranger ducked into the entrance to the side stairs, arrived at the corridor, walked past Michael Olumide's office, onto the split-level corridor and then into the studios. The tape was being readied for broadcast. And then there was this voice, which he had last heard in the guest lavatory of Obafemi Awolowo's house, and using the same alien language, all within one week. He watched them hesitate, saw on their faces the look of disbelief, the momentary wonder if it was all joke, and then, of course, almost at once they knew it was not. So there was no need at all for him to fulfil his threat and shoot an idle console to remove all doubt that the gun was real, and that he meant business. He had a

distanced notion that he ought to be amused by the eager response of Oshin, the Shift Leader, as he stammered, 'No, sir, no need at all,' scrambling to off-load the Premier's spool, but he was not.

Instead, he reached for the discarded spool, saying briefly, 'No, I'll take that.' He stuffed it beneath the loose *agbada* he had selected for entombing the gun and spare magazines. The Shift Leader's hands were trembling and the intruder became nervous that he might not succeed in threading the tape on time, since the Premier's voice must not be kept waiting but must resound to the people on the second after the Announcer's introduction, but Oshin got it right in the end. The recording had been carefully made with the main message at the beginning, since he had no intention of remaining in the studio once the tape was up and running. Still, he wanted it to run as long as possible, so he heard a cold voice issuing from his head, warning them not to touch the tape, that there were others with guns trained on them, right inside the building, and that not one of them would reach home alive if the tape was turned off. It appeared to have worked. It was some other duty officer who rushed into the studio after the seditious message began, tearing off the tape. But by then the 'Premier's message' had gone out to his people: 'This is the voice of the people, the true people of this nation. And they are telling you, Akintola, get out! Get out, and take with you your renegades who have lost all sense of shame...'

It had all taken twelve minutes from the moment that he stepped out of the car. Jimi was still in the driver's seat, the engine running. He slid over to the passenger seat and Maren entered the car, nodding to him. 'I'm glad I made it in time. It would have been a long walk home.'

'I had no intention of leaving, sir,' Jimi replied, 'however long it took you - whatever it was.' **GR**