

OMEP World Assembly and International Conference/Workshop

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A week in Lagos – a reflection

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Until my visit to Lagos as the representative for OMEP Ireland I had never been particularly conscious of myself as a white person. This all changed when I boarded the flight in Paris for Lagos on August 1st this year. It was so striking that a doll being held by a child struck me – it was a white doll. Everyone else was of the African race. This was reinforced during my week in the city of Lagos. While being transported in a mini bus between hotels I used to sit up front with the driver – I scanned the crowds for people of other nationalities but to no avail. This was a very dramatic experience for me especially considering the fact that Ireland in the recent past has become a very multi racial society. I have travelled in the U.S.A., Canada, Europe and South Africa and have never had a similar experience.

The welcome at the Airport from the local OMEP committee was amazingly warm, friendly and colourful. The very young daughter of an OMEP member in her colourful native dress presented a bouquet of flowers to the OMEP World President. When we eventually made it out to the car park, disaster, the vehicle was in the process of being clamped. I can assure you that the OMEP ladies made a very convincing case to the officials and the clamp was withdrawn – ah not so very different to home, I thought!

Lagos is the main city of Lagos State which is the smallest State in the Nigerian Federation. The Federation gained independence in 1967. Part of the city retains the impressive buildings which were the hub of the colonial financial centre. The area of the city in which the conference was held was an incredible mix of the mansions of the rich and the hovel dwellings of the poor. It is a gated city in so far as security guards are stationed at each building prohibiting free access. I was again very struck by this complete lack of personal freedom and it probably accounted for the fact that I did not see foreigners on the streets. One did not leave the compound as this could only be done if accompanied by our Nigerian hosts.

After breakfast on the Sunday morning we were transported to a television recording studio as an interview with the OMEP World President, the National OMEP President and the Vice President for Africa had been arranged. This was a new and interesting experience for me.

The World Assembly was held on the Monday and Tuesday. It was an opportunity for me to gain a fuller understanding of what OMEP world wide was engaged in. It was my first introduction to Education for Sustainable Development – a theme that ran right through the week.

The conference opened on the Wednesday morning with great ceremony and with an amazing number of dignitaries including the Minister of State for Education who gave the keynote address and the Chancellor of Lead City University. Also present was the Oba of Lagos, who is the main native chieftain, accompanied by nine other chiefs. There were two presentations by OMEP children who gave a lively and enthusiastic display of dance and movement to the delight and pleasure of all. The prayerfulness of the organisers was very noticeable. The members of the OMEP committee had prayed and fasted for our wellbeing during our stay in Lagos. God's blessing was called for by a Christian lady at the beginning of the ceremonies and at the close by an Islamic representative.

The war that was raging in the North of Nigeria was between government forces and Islamic extremists. Yet, in Lagos the Mosque and the Christian Church stood side by side. On two of our visits, the first to the grounds of the State Assembly and another to Lagos State University this was very evident. There is obviously a desire at government level that both traditions be freely available.

The theme of the conference "Learning to listen, listening to learn" was very appropriate since the UN Conventions on the Right of the Child has its 20th Anniversary this year. Articles 12 and 13 remind us that we should listen to children so that their views may be heard and respected. During the conference we had a short introduction to African drumming and our World President, Ingrid, was very sporting as she joined in the dancing on stage to the beat of the drum.

Early Childhood Education in Lagos appears to be entirely private provision. Many of the OMEP National Committee members were school owners with most of the schools providing for children up to age eleven which is the end of the primary period. Some of the schools had an enrolment of 250 children. An outing was arranged to visit two private childcare facilities and a public primary school. The childcare centres were fine buildings well equipped and laid out with good play areas. The contrast with the public school was vast – bleak, bare concrete, windowless, no furniture apart from wooden benches – I think we were all rather shocked at what we saw. Seemingly teacher retention is difficult as trained teachers receive better salaries and superior working conditions in the private sector. Public school starts at age six but I understand that it is difficult to register all children as there is so much movement into the city from the rural villages. Perhaps churches provide some early education for the poor Nigerian child but I was unable to ascertain if this was the position. I was told that the government is trying to improve conditions in the primary sector and that now there is also the recognition of the importance of the early year's sector. I believe that the UN and the Van Leer Foundation are actively working at government level to advance the situation.

We had an outing, one evening, to a social club, where we enjoyed the local beer and good fun and chat. We were told that because the traffic is so bad that many people come directly to the club from work to perhaps eat and socialise delaying the journey home until later when the traffic has lessened.

Another very memorable outing was to the early year's centre/primary school located on the campus of Lagos State University which caters for the children of staff.. During our visit there was a summer camp in progress and the children entertained us with a routine of exercise movements. Later each delegate was presented with a certificate of attendance at the conference and a really delicious lunch was served. A large number of OMEP members were present so it was an opportunity to mix and get to know them better. Everyone was always so open and friendly and eager to get to know us.

The final event of the week was a banquet which was held in the assembly hall of one of the private schools. It had been finely decorated for the event and caterers provided a really scrumptious meal. Some of us wore colourful African dresses with matching headdress which had so generously been given to us earlier. The highlight of the evening came near the end when each participating country was asked to do a party piece. Hugh and Janet Morris from the U.K. started off with a hilarious rendition of 'A bicycle made for two' based on an old music hall song. The two Korean delegates gave a touching, delicate performance of a traditional love song but the stars of the evening had to be the Swedish group and their cast of hundreds (practically everyone in the hall) as they organised everyone on stage for a children's game ending in a tug of war.

I found the whole week an amazing experience and was honoured to meet so many wonderful people all committed to the education and care of the young child. I particularly recall Victoria Bilewu, Vice President, Africa Region and Abimbola Are, President OMEP Nigeria National Committee, both of whom spent a lot of time taking care of our needs. I will finish with Victoria's words – Long Live OMEP Nigerian National Committee, Long Live OMEP African Region and Long Live OMEP World.