

Questionnaire to Professor John Edward Philips for an interview on paper

1. Welcome back to Japan from Nigeria. Please describe your own profile for the common readers of the 'e-meeting' column.

Thank you. It was good to get back. I'm a professor emeritus 「名誉教授」 of Hirosaki University. I did my undergraduate work at the Pennsylvania State University where I got a Bachelor's Degree in History with certificates in Folklore Studies and African Studies. I did my graduate work at UCLA where I met a visiting Japanese student of African languages, Ritsuko Miyamoto 「宮本律子」, we fell in love, got married, and I took her to Nigeria with me on my Fulbright Scholarship to the University of Sokoto (now Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto). After she wrote up her MA thesis at Tohoku University and I spent an academic year as Teaching Assistant in US history I came to Japan to write up my dissertation. Her career took off and we're still here together.

2. What prompted your interest to Nigerian people and culture as a signal in your academic life?

I should probably mention what got me into African history first: my first exposure was reading in the Encyclopedia Britannica about the medieval west African Islamic Empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay. I wanted to know why I hadn't learned about them before. Why had Africa seemingly been written out of world history? Finding out was a long story itself.

As for Nigeria, the first time I went to Africa I visited four countries in west Africa. They were four different military dictatorships with four different kinds of dictatorship. Nigeria was the only one which had an obviously free press and free speech and was in transition to an elected government. Additionally this was in the mid 1970s when Nigeria was booming with oil wealth. The potential for development was obvious to me and I wanted to know more about this country. That's why I made Hausa my language for my African Area Studies MA degree at UCLA, and why I studied Nigerian history and politics there, eventually choosing a Nigerian historian for my Ph.D. supervisor.

3. So far as we are informed, your partner Prof. Ritsuko Miyamoto, a cultural anthropologist of Akita University, is of Ohmachi's origin, and you've been sometimes in Nagano-ken. What are your impressions on Ohmacji City and Nagano-ken?

Although my wife is from Ohmachi and grew up there, she wasn't born there but in Miyazaki.

Her family moved to Ohmachi when she was 2 years old. As for my impressions, I love nature and wilderness, so when I met her parents after coming into Japan through Tokyo I told her I was so happy that she was from a place like this instead of Tokyo or Osaka. I like to be able to get away from crowds and noise and just enjoy quiet alone in the woods. I should also mention that Ritsuko is a linguist, not a cultural anthropologist.

4. Have you been finding any characteristic merit for making research and teaching on African history in Tohoku region of Japan?

Not really. There is a Tohoku regional African studies meeting and I enjoyed time with some of my Africanist colleagues, but Japan does not have the area studies infrastructure I think it needs. I've watched 地域研究 go from meaning "area studies" to meaning "local studies", from a kind of 国際研究 to 国内研究 or 国学. I know area studies took a hit in the US with the end of the Cold War, and I was surprised that Islamic Area Studies didn't really expand after 9/11, but I was disappointed that it didn't expand more in Japan than it did.

5. What was your scheme of the latest visit to Nigeria? And, could you fulfil your purpose this time even under COVID-19 conditions? Your travelling back to Akita must be very difficult under the pandemic situation. Could you disclose some of your experiences?

I went to Nigeria shortly after retiring to research Boko Haram, which I had been invited to do by Abubakar Garba, the late director of the Centre for Trans-Saharan Studies at the University of Maiduguri, who came to my farewell lecture at Hirosaki University. I got a lot of information and insights while I was there, in addition to attending two conferences on the topic, in Kano and Adamawa. Then I came back to Japan to write up what I had gathered. After briefly visiting Hawaii for the annual American Studies Association conference, where I talked about American studies in Africa, I touched base in Japan and headed back to Nigeria. I was supposed to present my research to the university in Maiduguri and attend another Boko Haram conference there. I did give a guest lecture about colonial language policy at the University of Abuja which was covered on television, but then the pandemic hit, all flights, domestic and foreign, were cancelled and I was stuck in the country, unable to travel to Maiduguri. I spent the next few months trying to stay safe and get back to Japan. There was an evacuation flight to the States but I didn't take it and I'm glad. You know about the situation there I think. Eventually I found out about an evacuation flight to France and I was able to make a connection at the same terminal so that I didn't need to go through French customs and immigration. My wife came down to meet me at Narita, I got tested and went into quarantine for 14 days. I'm waiting for the vaccinations to roll out and then I have to renew

my yellow fever vaccination and get another visa and I hope to be off before too much longer to get back to Nigeria. In the meantime I'm trying to work on my writing while putting my financial affairs in order. I had no idea retirement was so much work!

6. Please give us some concrete ideas on the significance of staying at Kaduna in order to understand Islamic heritages and status quo in Nigeria and in West Africa as well. If we observe the Nigerian society of federal republic with a pluralist eyes, how should we approach to its cultural, ethnic, societal, and historical structures? What is the position of Kaduna in the current political trends in Nigeria?

That's a lot of questions in one. Kaduna was the final capital of the former Northern Region of Nigeria. The house of the premier of the Northern Region became Arewa House Centre for Historical Research and Documentation after his death, and holds a large collection of documents and other materials relating to the region, not only pertaining to Islam but also to the large Christian minority in the area. I often stay there and use the collections for research. I even got a grant from the British Library's Endangered Archives Program to preserve and digitize their holdings of the first Hausa newspaper, *Gaskiya ta fi Kwabo*. It's a good base for research, and much safer than Maiduguri, which is constantly threatened by Boko Haram. Kaduna is also in the Nigerian "middle belt" which is an important region. Most of the military have been recruited from there traditionally, and it is very ethnically diverse, often a critical area in national elections. The current governor, Nasiru El-Rufai, is very ambitious and will be a person to watch in the next presidential elections in 2023. Southern Kaduna is predominantly Christian and is very much a swing district in a swing state, so has influence beyond its size. It is also a very volatile place in a very volatile country. See my chapter "**Domestic Aliens: the Zangon Kataf Crisis and the African Concept of Stranger**" in *Être étranger et migrant en Afrique au XXème siècle* v. 1 pp. 375-401 (edited by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, Odile Goerg, Issiaka Mandé, and Faranirina Rajaonah) (Paris, 2003). My chapter was later republished in Nigeria. As for the Islamic heritage of Nigeria it began in Bornu in the 11th century, where Maiduguri is now the capital, but it later shifted to Sokoto as a result of the Jihad of Usman Danfodiyo and the creation of the Sokoto Caliphate.

The configuration of the Nigerian federation has always been contentious. The British left an unstable, loose federation of three regions, each dominated by one ethnic group. The first military government imposed a unitary state but that was explosive. The next military regime created a federation of 12 states, moving many powers to the center. This caused the Biafra War in which the Eastern, oil producing region tried to secede. Successive military governments have continued to divide the country into 36 states in all, also moving more and more powers to the central government. Nigerian politics is a very fascinating topic. Many of

us who start to study other aspects of Nigeria find ourselves increasingly drawn to study of its politics as well.

7. Could you kindly brief the origin, social basis, and actual influence of Boko Haram in Nigerian society? Do you notice any linkage among Islamist groups in West Africa or Muslim World as a whole? Was there any sign of menace for Westerners during your stay in Nigeria? If you can point out any remarkable tendencies on the other side, let the readers share the hint of information about the development of positive movements among Muslims over there.

Again, this is a lot of questions at once. Try reading [Boko Haram: Context, Ideology and Actors](#) which you can get from my [academia.edu](#) page: <https://hirosaki-u.academia.edu/JohnPhilipsHirosaki> Yes, there are linkages. To put BH in context, most Muslims think jihadis are crazy. At least before 9/11 most jihadis thought Al-Qa'ida was crazy. The Islamic State (ISIS) are people who got thrown out of Al-Qa'ida because Al-Qa'ida thought they were crazy. Boko Haram joined the Islamic State but got thrown out for using little girls as suicide bombers (among other things) that made ISIS think they were crazy. That led to a split in the group with a major faction going back to ISIS and agreeing to take orders from them. There are still two Boko Haram groups terrorizing Nigeria. As for threat to westerners I didn't see much. There is a general lawlessness from Fulani herders in rural areas but in the cities I felt pretty safe. Even in Maiduguri, where I could hear gunshots and helicopters from the edge of town at night, it reminded me of police helicopters and gang shootings when I lived in ghettos in the United States. On campus I could hear the noise of the conflict but I felt relatively safe.

8. Have you specifically noticed peculiar ways of management, if any, to confront with COVID-19 during your stay in Nigeria? How did you observe the situation in the USA from Nigeria?

I was stuck in Nigeria at first because all overseas and domestic flights were shut down, as were the trains, and interstate travel. There was total lockdown which hurt the economy and people at the bottom were really suffering. Relief emergency supplies were distributed, but I had no cooking facilities where I was staying and had to send out for food. Masks became commonplace. That said, the pandemic was handled differently in different states. Since the virus came in from overseas it was worst in Lagos and Abuja, the major cities with the international airports. In addition there was an outbreak in Kano which was only noticed because a large increase in deaths caused someone to investigate. In Kaduna, where I stayed,

the governor travelled to Abuja for a meeting and became the index case in the state. He took stern measures, closing markets, mosques and churches, and was able to contain the virus. The weddings and other functions that Arewa House often holds were cancelled, and it became difficult for me to get food, although I could still order from a few places. Nonetheless things may still get out of control. I don't think anyone really knows why Africa hasn't been hit harder than it has, much less whether it will be hit harder in the future. As I mentioned I was not interested in evacuation to the States and if I hadn't been able to come to Japan I would have stayed in Nigeria. A close friend of mine from UCLA has already died in the US. It's a very disturbing situation there now.

9. How did common Nigerians hear about the news of BLM movement in the US? Did you have chances to observe reactive echoes to it in Nigerian society?

I haven't been to Nigeria since BLM broke out, but there has been a similar movement against police brutality in Nigeria, the "End SARS" movement. There is also the issue of state police that was big in the presidential elections five years ago but which seems to have been all but forgotten in the presidential elections last year. In Nigeria there are no state or local police, only federal, despite the country being a federation of states. Of course in the United States there are no federal police, only state and local, although there are specialized federal law enforcement agencies such as the FBI, ATF, ICE, etc. In Japan, as you know, there is no federation, but there are no national police either, rather a separate police department in each prefecture. In Nigeria the issue of state police became important in the context of the struggle against Boko Haram.

10. Generally speaking, how do common Nigerians foresee the future of decarbonized world as citizens of the largest oil-exporting country in sub-Saharan Africa? Are they prepared with the global environmental policy trends worldwide?

I fear that Nigerians are not ready for the post petroleum world. Many of them don't even realize that they are going to have to make that transition, or even that their own oil will run out. Recently I have begun to see solar panels begin to appear, but for a long time the popular struggles in Nigeria were to keep domestic petroleum prices low through subsidies. This meant that there was little incentive for people to replace diesel generators or even electric water heaters. In addition, as one Nigerian explained it to me, the long term cost of solar water heating is less than that of electric heaters, but the initial outlay is greater. Nigerians are not used to thinking in terms of long term investments so it is difficult to sell solar power equipment to them. I like to explain to them that Japan has so much water that people think

it is a problem to get rid of it all. Perhaps I should explain to Japanese that Africa has so much solar energy that people think it is a problem to get rid of it, and they haven't thought so much about how to harvest it and exploit it yet.

11. When Nigerians came to know that you were an American scholar from Japan, how were their attitudes? What are Japan's images among common Nigerians in your estimation?

It's very mixed. There is not much knowledge of Japan in Nigeria, or Africa in general. Some people think it is a country in Europe. The Europeans tell them only Europeans can manufacture autos or electronics, so when they see these things from Japan they assume Japan must be in Europe. This is changing as Chinese manufactures become more common. A few years ago someone explained to me that they thought Chinese things were cheap but low quality, while Japanese things were expensive but high quality. There are people who are interested in martial arts, and I've met others who are interested in manga and anime, but in general there are far fewer Japanese cultural influences than I am used to from California. On the other hand, there are also Nigerians who are fluent in Japanese and who have studied in Japan. While there is not as much Japanese studies as I think there should be, there are some people who are quite familiar with Japan and who are even experts on the country.

12. Please tell us some interesting episode or topics for the Japanese, even if essences, in the course of your field works in Nigeria as an important corner of the Islamic World.

Oh, wow. I have so many. I have a lot of thoughts about that and maybe I should just get back to writing the book I'm supposed to be working on and let you buy that when it comes out. I'm trying to put the Boko Haram phenomenon in historical perspective, especially that of the Lake Chad basin and the Bornu Caliphate that emerged there in medieval times. I wrote an article about it some time back that Rezrazi al-Mustapha published in Morocco (see above). I had my wife translate it into Japanese because he said he was going to publish a book in Japanese but nothing ever came of that. I have some personal interest in it, especially from their bombing of the Kano Central Mosque. I knew the Imam of the mosque when he was an academic at Bayero University Kano and consider him a personal friend. I had Ramadan breakfast in his living room many times. When people say these Islamic terrorists kill more Muslims than others that's not propaganda, it's just a statistical fact. I'm glad to say he's still alive, though.

By the way, you might be interested in the review I wrote of *Handbook of Islamic Manuscripts: Nigeria, Section 1: the Nigerian National Archives, (volume 1)* Prepared by Baba Yunus Muhammad. Edited and annotated by John Hunwick. (London, Al Furqan Islamic Heritage

Foundation, 1995). in *The British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* v. 23 no. 2 (1996) pp. 243-245 I also have some publications about Japanese studies of Africa that I could share with you if you are interested.