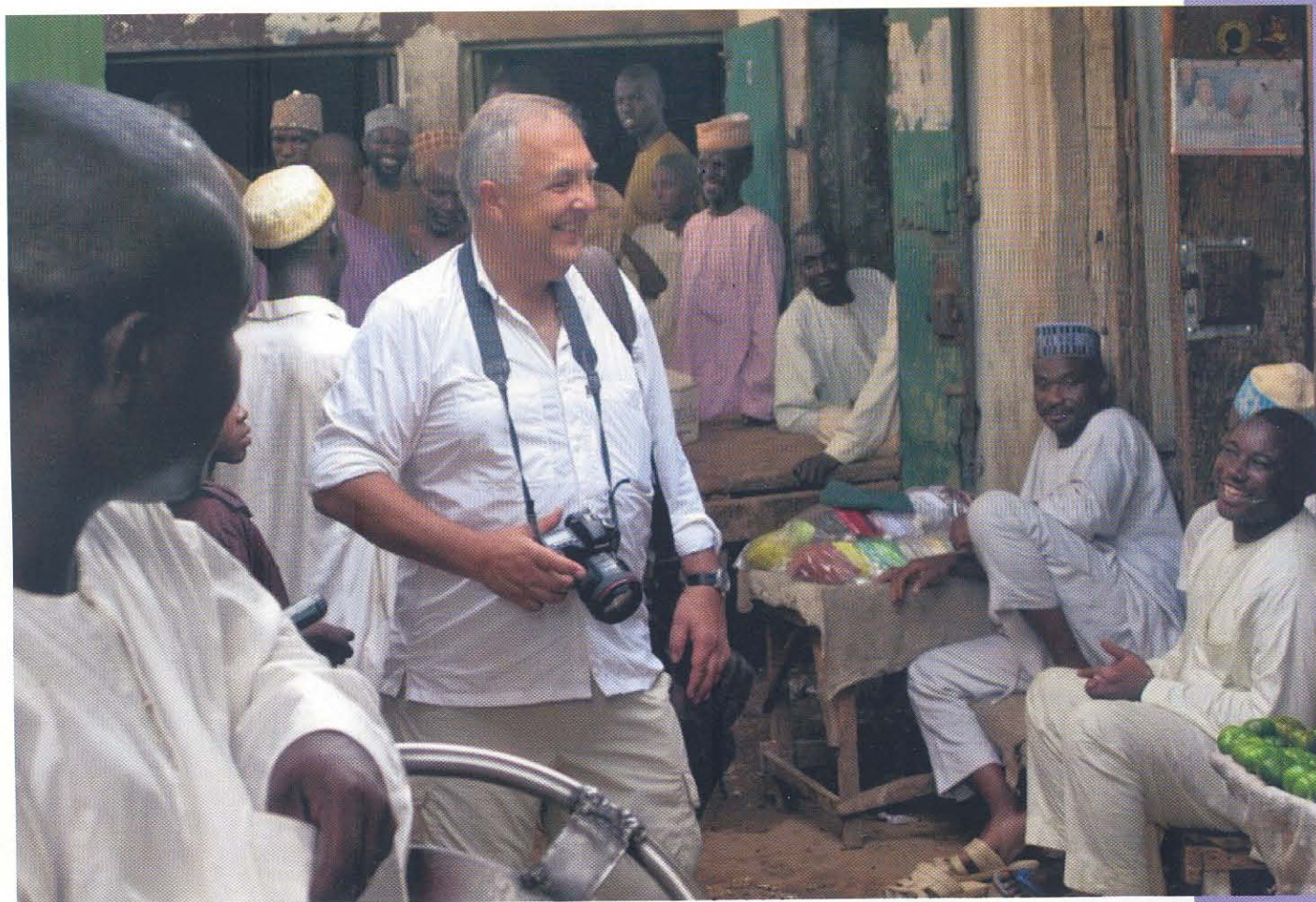


NIGERIA THROUGH THE EYES OF A GREEK PHOTOGRAPHER: VICTOR POLITIS



Victor in Kurmi market, Kano, Nigeria

“My journey to Nigeria began about five years ago on an invitation by senior officials to manage project development and financing in various sectors” says Greek-born photographer Victor Politis. “My first visits were to Port Harcourt, Lagos and Abuja. Trips to all three places told a common story: the people of Nigeria have nothing to do with the country’s negative reputation; a reputation created by a tiny minority. To discover that an insignificant proportion of the people were driving the reputation for the rest of the country’s hard-working majority was a complete surprise. Particularly, because Nigeria is a country of 150 million people” It was these initial and lasting impressions that drove a foreign business entrepreneur to pick up his camera and tell the story of the streets of Nigeria.

Photography began at an early age for Victor. As a teenager in his hometown of Volos, Greece, he

borrowed a camera from a local shop. As soon as he could afford it, the first thing he bought was his own camera, “If I didn’t have to overcome my own financial difficulties as a young person”, he says, “I probably would have gone in to the arts”. Today, despite a successful and hectic career in international project development, photography remains a fervent passion and his SLR is a fixture in his briefcase on every trip. “I have taken photographs from over 40 different countries”, he says, “but Nigeria has become a major focus for me. I have more photographs from Nigeria than all the other countries combined. I am continually amazed at the vitality of the country and its people”, he says, In the early days I quickly discovered that the majority of Nigerians are very much the same as the majority all over the world, mostly poor and not necessarily treated well by their own country people. I saw Nigerian kids and teenagers whose counterparts

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in many other countries would probably become petty criminals. In Nigeria they may be treated as petty criminals but they are in fact thriving business entrepreneurs trying to make a few naira a day to survive. As I got to understand the system in the country, I learnt about hope, disillusionment, more hope and more disillusionment, sometimes anger, and sometimes fear of what might happen if people did what they really wanted to do". Victor discovered how a combination of religion, government and other factors could keep a lot of people from doing what they really should be doing to claim their part of the wealth



of the country. He recounts the story of a security guard at a hotel whose story echoes many from his income bracket. The man is afraid of taking a day off when he is sick knowing there are people lining up to take his job. With his salary of \$70 a month from which he has to spend a great deal on transportation and feeding many mouths. The security guard is often in deficit and getting sick because his immune system wearing off. The reality of his life makes his job obsolete. His poor health means he really cannot provide any security if lives depended on it. "I asked questions from which I got no answer" Victor adds, "I learnt a lot about the lives of the majority of the people and how they viewed the wealthier minority. The dignity, smiles and work ethic I witness everyday are at odds with their reputation. But I do not need

to say it. My photographs tell that story".

At a November 2008 exhibition and launch of his book "Nigeria Through the Eyes of a Passerby", Victor explained how his hobby turned into a coffee table publication. "With the country



By: Kehinde Aig - Imoru

increasingly becoming interesting", he said, "I looked for photography books and surprisingly there were none available. I met with the commissioner of tourism in Rivers State five years ago and asked for a brochure on tourism but he had nothing except an old map which had to be taken off the Governor's wall. There are so little material to promote the nation. I decided there was a need to tell the Nigerian story so I started pushing for European magazines to publish photos of Nigeria just to show the people, not landscapes. One of them accepted giving me the boost I needed".

Victor's photographs capture the fleeting moments and interactions in a frenetic country, "I do not pose anyone", he says, "I do not want to show beauty that is posed. That is very easy to do anywhere in the world which is what a lot of commercial photography is all about. My photographs celebrate people, their lives, dignity and beauty at work. I want to show the beauty of the people going about their activities without them necessarily knowing that I am there. My pictures elicit diverse reactions. A lot of people are puzzled, some are concerned about my safety, and some prefer not to see the reality of life outside the windows of their cars. My goal at the end of the day is to say to people: "keep your windows open, talk to other people. Many say it is difficult in Nigeria but it is not difficult. Each person has an option either to talk to the everyday people that appear in my photographs or to ignore them. When I talk to them they react and that is the difference. If five people decide to try it then my photographs are successful"