

**MICHELLE
ENGLISH:**

I'm Michelle English. And on behalf of the MIT Center for International Studies, welcome you to today's Starr Forum. We'll be screening "Where Powers Live," a film that chronicles the lives of indigenous faith believers in Nigeria, and the discriminatory attitudes they face. Immediately following the screening, we'll hear from Shola Lawal, who was the writer, producer, and director of the film.

Lawal is a Nigerian journalist, and the recipient of the 2019 International Women's Media foundation's Elizabeth Neuffer Fellowship. The fellowship brought her to MIT is a research associate at the MIT center for International Studies, and provides journalism residencies at the *Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*. She reports on issues of humanity and injustice, including the women's rights movement in Nigeria, migrants in Libya, forced reserves in Ghana, political upheaval in Togo, the Boko Haram conflict, and the migrant crisis in Mexico and the US.

Today's event is co-sponsored with a MIT Africa Forum. It's also listed as an IEP offering which requires us to collect attendance on MIT students. Before we start the film screening, I wanted to invite Ari Jacobovits to discuss. He's the manager of the MIT Africa Forum, and he can tell us a little bit about that.

ARI JACOBOVITS: Hi, everyone. It's a privilege to be here. Thank you. I'm Ari. I'm the managing director of the MIT Africa program. And we run a speaker series called the MIT Africa forum, which normally happens during the academic semester. We feature speakers basically on any topic related to Africa. The most recent one was a startup showcase featuring MIT students who are launching startups in Africa. We've had previous heads of state. We've had the current president of Sierra Leone speak. He was here in March. We've had numerous academics. So if you're interested in joining that mailing list, come and speak to me, and I will very gladly add you.

So as part of the MIT Africa program, there are students that travel to various countries in Africa through the MISD, which is part of the Center for International Studies here, which is my main work. So at this very moment, there are about 60 MIT students working on various things all across Africa. None of them are in Nigeria, unless they've went without telling me-- that I know of. But we have many in West Africa, and Ghana, and Sierra Leone, doing various things. So we have a [INAUDIBLE] vibrant program in Africa that really serves to educate

students on the nature of modern-day Africa, what it means to be working there, and how to engage.

So, very happy to be here, very excited to see the film. If you have any questions about the program, if you're a student, or if you're just curious about it, happy to chat afterwards, too. So thank you all so much.

SHOLA LAWAL: Thank you so much for coming out, everybody. First of all, thank you to Michelle and Center for International Studies for this privilege. Like I wrote in the [INAUDIBLE] guide that you have, it was quite a stumble trying to make this film, because I wasn't expecting the work that goes into making an independent documentary, and it was my first. And so I lost footage quite a bit. I lost time working on it. I mean, it took me about 200 years to film it.

[LAUGHTER]

I started filming in 2018. And by 2019, I still wasn't anywhere. So last year, I just had to ask myself a simple question-- why did you do this in the first place? And for me there was a point where the chief priest was talking. And that, for me, was the highlight of the whole film. My whole purpose for this film was to send a message, and just to let people know what we're doing to ourselves.

Because I grew up in Nigeria, where we would watch Nollywood movies a lot. And Nollywood is like the Hollywood equivalent of Nigeria. And there's lots of good movies there. But Nollywood also taught me that it was OK to make fun of people who were practicing Yoruba religion, or demean them. It gave me this picture of anybody who is practicing Yoruba religion is always an old woman or an old man that wants to wreak havoc on people's lives, wants to tear families apart.

And I encountered this lady. And she just shook my whole perception of that. And that was very interesting for me. And I thought everybody else had to see it. And so that message kept bringing me back, and kind of propelled me to finish it up.

And when I was finishing, I thought, well, at least I'm doing something for the minorities-- I mean, the 2% of people who are still practicing different traditional religions, not just Yoruba religion, across Niger.

And just a bit of history here-- when the colonialists came, what is now present-day Nigeria,

everybody had their own different tribes, and ethnicities, and they all had different deities. And so when the colonialists came, they just, like, cut up this part that is now called Nigeria. And everybody started following these different religions. But there are still people who practice their ancestral religions or spiritualities. And they're now about 2%. I mean, Muslims, Christians in Nigeria are about 48%. And it's just about 2%.

And I thought, well, this could go a long way in trying to just get people to think differently about how we see them. I mean, I'm hoping that this really doesn't-- I mean, I made this film. And I'm happy-- for me, it was kind of like a failure. And I thought to myself, it could be better. Of course it's not Oscar-winning material. But it could be better, it could have more footage, it could be longer, it could be this, it could be that. But at the end of the day, it exists. And I told myself at that point, well, if you're failing, at least fail forward. And I mean, if an MIT screening is failing, then--

[LAUGHTER]

I'll have more of that. But I am hoping that now-- like, when I finished this film, I had a different message I wanted to pass. But now, having reported from the US-Mexico border, I'm really hoping that people receive it as not just like a message to-- they receive it as something bigger than religion or religious discrimination. They receive it in a way that helps us think about how we treat people who we think are different from us.

When I was coming to the US for this fellowship, I had heard about Africans traveling to Latin America to get to the US. And I thought, well, I have to see that for myself. And so, of course, I went to Tijuana. I went to Tapachula, on the border with Guatemala. That's like the southernmost part of Mexico.

And there I met some 3,000, 4,000 Africans just waiting to be attended to by the Mexican immigration authorities. See, they had been held there for six months when I got there. And most of them of course they sold everything they had to get to South America. And by then, six months in, they had no funds. So lots of people were living in tents outside the immigration center. And when I got there, you know, I mean, I already knew that I was going to speak to people, write a story. But then when I got there and I saw children, just like the number of children that were living in tents with their parents, that shook me to the core.

And I remember this woman particularly. She was holding-- so you can see-- sorry, we cropped that out. But that's the baby she's cradling in her arms. And he's five days old. And

she looked at me and she said, he hasn't had a single vaccine shot in five days. And that was incredibly hard. I mean, the whole reason that Mexico is holding them is because of this agreement that was made last July with president Trump to cut down the numbers of migrants who are coming in through Mexico.

And so the containment strategy for Mexico was to just hold them. Well, before it would give them exit permits to get to the US, just to travel through. By July, it had started giving them exit permits that said they could only leave the country through the south, so basically back to Guatemala where they were coming from. I mean, nobody was going to take that.

And when I got there in November, they had been protesting for the Mexican government to free them. And finally Mexico started processing these permanent residency cards. See, it was an easy way for Mexico to get out of the deal by not totally getting out of it. So it gave them permanent residency status so that they could move freely in the country. I mean, you even have the right-- you have every citizenship benefit if you're a permanent resident in Mexico, but you can't vote. That's the only thing.

And so they gave them those cards. And at least it got them to Tijuana. But I mean, if US has anything to say about it, of course Mexico would just be like, well, I just-- I don't know about that, right?

So by the time I got there in November, people-- see, this family, they just got theirs. They were the first family to get theirs. And so they were really happy to at least be able to move. And yeah, they would always come to this immigration center to queue. It was really slow to process. Of course Mexicans speak Spanish. And most Africans who come in speak Portuguese, English, French. And so there was always confusion at the center, and there was always clashes.

And I remember there was a clash, and the Mexican military, they had already assembled themselves. And you can see the migrants over here. And I just remember seeing this little boy. I mean, he-- anyways , this stuck with me. And then I took a picture.

And this is the little tent village where they were living in. And I say they were now, because most of them have now moved to Tijuana because they have those permanent residency cards.

But where are they coming from anyways? Most of them are from the Congo and Cameroon,

both countries currently in conflict, of course, thanks to colonialism again. Cameroon is an English and French-speaking country. And the French is the majority. The English speakers have been accusing the French government of oppression for years now. And when nothing was done about it, they started protesting in 2017. And that protest was met with brutal force from the military. So a lot of the men from Cameroon, the women from Cameroon that I met there were professionals. They were teachers, doctors, just hanging around, languishing in Mexico.

There's also, of course, another conflict, the one that you're probably most familiar with, which is the Boko Haram conflict in Nigeria. I mean, there was a lot of factors that contributed to the rise of the insurgency in 2009. And again, thanks to the colonialists, because I just like to blame them, but I mean, when it came to West Africa, the resources that they needed to take out of the continent were concentrated in the south. And so lots of development and infrastructure went there.

And so that meant that there was an unequal development between the north and the southern parts of most countries. It's like that. There's a line, and you can see that. Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, Benin, it's like that the development in the south and the north is not equal. And of course the Nigerian government has a big role to play in that as well. There's so much poverty in the north. There's an absence of education, health care, and just general prosperity. Corruption as well contributes to that.

And of course, this group kind of grew in those margins, and tried to fill those gaps. And now the humanitarian fallout is that 35,000 people have died. And that's probably a gross underestimation, because local authorities say about 100,000 people have died since 2009. Two million people are displaced.

Also, the jihadi threat is growing every year. Boko Haram split in 2016 into two groups, one backed by ISIS central. And now they hold a position that is strategic in the Lake Chad Basin area that bands four countries, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad, so that they're able to mount attacks in all these separate countries. It's so crazy.

But for me, when I went in May to Borno State, where the insurgency actually started, what stood out for me-- what has always stood up for me in the Boko Haram war is the way that children have been targeted. You see, of course, the group wants to create an Islamic caliphate, and establish-- or purify Islam, as they say in the north. And nothing, I guess, makes

them more angry than seeing innocent children learning about Western culture and ideology. That really, I guess, irritates them.

I mean, Boko Haram has gone to schools and shot children in their beds. They were sleeping, and they shot children in their beds. Of course you know probably they attacked Chibok, and kidnapped 276 girls in 2015. They've kidnapped quite a number of people over the years, but those kind of like high-profile ones that we mostly hear about.

When I went in May to Borno State, I went to this school. This is a school-- actually this is one of the schools that was attacked by the militants. It was destroyed. But I was happy to see that children were playing on around the school. Borno State is slowly coming back to life. But there is no denying the fact that the insurgency has created so much damage. And for me, that showed me, when I went to report on this story about this young man who had been-- they had escaped Boko Haram territory.

Of course, when they were there, they were they had to do stuff. Because Boko Haram kidnaps children, straps them with suicide vests, and sends them out. Because obviously they're less likely to be detected. About 2/3 of their suicide bombing attacks have been children and women. And so these young men escaped Boko Haram territory.

Unfortunately, when UNICEF was working with them, trying to get them back into their communities, there was a backlash. And Nigeria has always been-- well, most of Africa, really, a place where social connections are so important. And we always say a child is raised by the village. And so when I saw villages rejecting children, that's when I knew that the damage that Boko Haram has caused for us will take generations to repair.

This young lady, she picked up arms and joined the civilian joint task force, which is helping the military to fight the insurgents with local intelligence. And she did that because her brother was killed by Boko Haram militants. She is also in-- we have, like, reintegration stage with UNICEF. And they sent her out to learn skills so that she could earn a living.

Another case that's interesting, and that I covered in Borno State was of these two women. See, when the insurgency started in 2009, the Nigerian military, which has always had a military-only or garrison-only response to the insurgency, would go out after a bombing, and just round up young men on the streets, and say, well, you look like a Boko Haram [INAUDIBLE], why don't you come with us?

And so since 2009, thousands-- we don't know how many, probably 10,000-- men have disappeared in Borno State. And this woman is now leading a group that is advocating for the release of these men. Now, to be very truthful, the Nigerian military does not have a reputation of being the most disciplined force. And these women, they're not silly. They know that their sons and their husbands are probably dead. But they told me, well, we just want the dignity of a response. And you can see, this woman, actually two of her sons were rounded up after one of those attacks.

Right now, I'm looking to do more stories about solutions. Because it's been 11 years. And where are we heading with this? We don't know. More people are dying. Just recently, 89 soldiers were killed in Niger.

So I'm looking-- I was asking analysts just yesterday about how we can improve the response to Boko Haram. And they we're talking about reintegration and bringing back dialogue, which we had that response back in the early days of the insurgency, but the Nigerian government botched it, and one negotiator was killed. So now they're talking about, like, we have to start talking to people again, understanding especially locals who know how the group works. Because when an attack is imminent, two villages down, they've probably had intel, like villagers are passing information, like you guys need to get out. And that's kind of how it works.

But the Nigerian military has not really put itself in a place where locals can come forward confidently with information and know that they're safe. So that's kind of where my work is going now, solutions. Because this has gone on for too long. Too many people have died. There's too much damage.

The US is saying that it's time to pull out and reduce operations in African countries facing insurgency. And just in case there's a policy man in the house, please, that's not the solution, I believe. I think it's time-- I mean, ISIS has links with Boko Haram. That says everything, that this now is the time for countries to band together and fight this war together. Because it's no more a Nigeria problem. The moment Boko Haram declared or pledged allegiance to ISIS, it became an all-of-us problem.

And so I think now is the time to pull together and fight this war together. And hopefully-- I mean, it probably won't end soon, but we can start a process that creates conditions for finally ending violence in African countries facing insurgency. And I will stop talking now. Thank you so much for coming again, and for [INAUDIBLE].

[APPLAUSE]