

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

NUMBER 6 GASKIYA



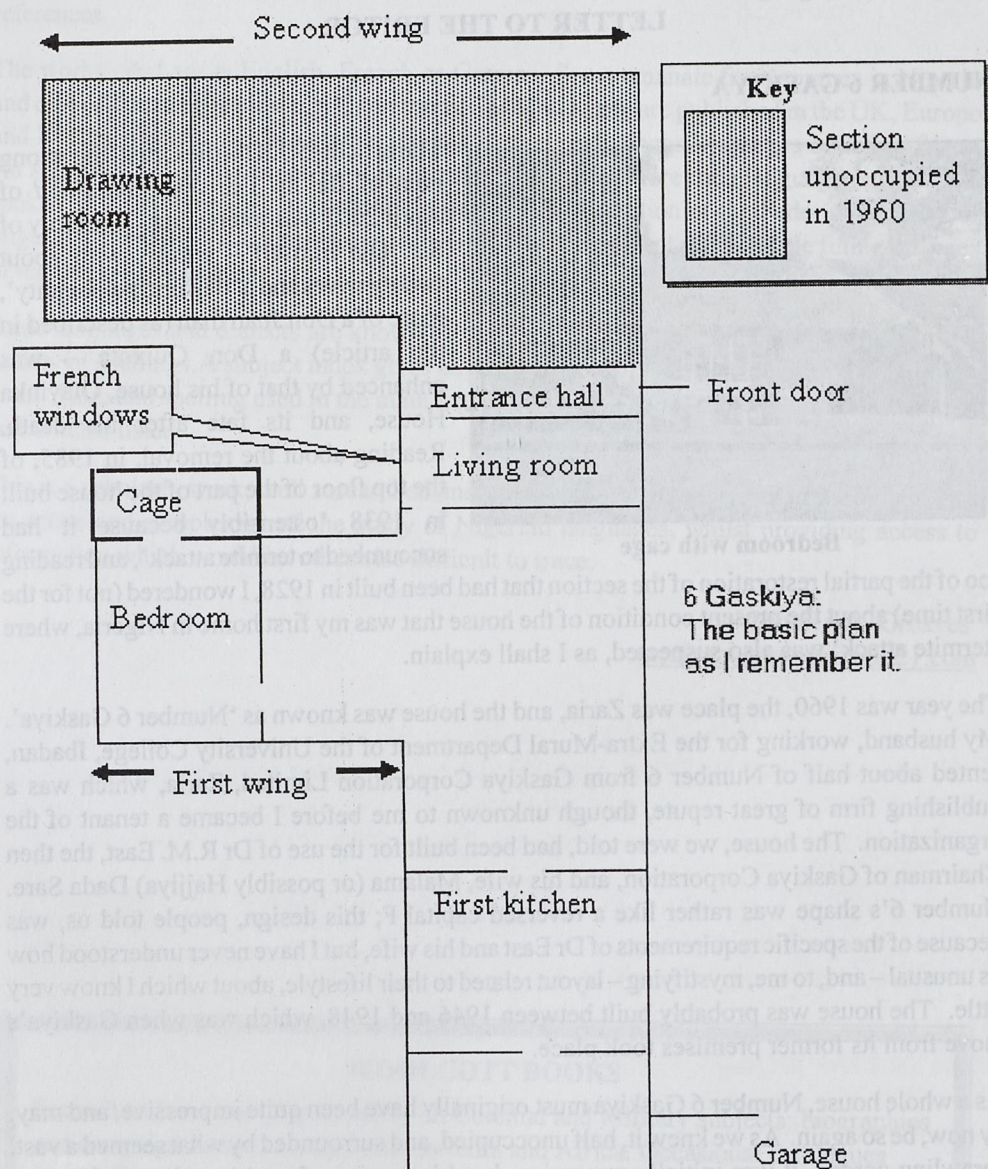
Bedroom with cage

The article 'S.J. Ola the Great: the strong man of Ife' in *The Nigerian Field* of April 2003 was interesting. The story of S.J. Ola himself – surely, with about twenty wives and a 'dashing personality', more of a Don Juan than (as described in the article) a Don Quixote – was enhanced by that of his house, Olayinka House, and its fate after his death. Reading about the removal, in 1985, of the top floor of the part of the house built in 1938 'ostensibly because it had succumbed to termite attack', and reading

too of the partial restoration of the section that had been built in 1928, I wondered (not for the first time) about the present condition of the house that was my first home in Nigeria, where 'termite attack' was also suspected, as I shall explain.

The year was 1960, the place was Zaria, and the house was known as 'Number 6 Gaskiya'. My husband, working for the Extra-Mural Department of the University College, Ibadan, rented about half of Number 6 from Gaskiya Corporation Limited, Zaria, which was a publishing firm of great repute, though unknown to me before I became a tenant of the organization. The house, we were told, had been built for the use of Dr R.M. East, the then Chairman of Gaskiya Corporation, and his wife, Malama (or possibly Hajjiya) Dada Sare. Number 6's shape was rather like a reversed capital F; this design, people told us, was because of the specific requirements of Dr East and his wife, but I have never understood how its unusual – and, to me, mystifying – layout related to their lifestyle, about which I know very little. The house was probably built between 1946 and 1948, which was when Gaskiya's move from its former premises took place.

As a whole house, Number 6 Gaskiya must originally have been quite impressive, and may, by now, be so again. As we knew it, half unoccupied, and surrounded by what seemed a vast, sprawling garden, it was initially unnerving, but I have since found it unforgettable, and remember it with great affection. Our part of the house had a garage, *three* kitchens, a storeroom, and a fairly small living room, which had been used as a dining room when the whole house was occupied. There was also a bathroom and one large bedroom with an attached 'cage' for semi-open-air sleeping. Between the bathroom and bedroom was an indeterminate area that could be used as a bedroom by anyone unconcerned about privacy.



Our first baby, born in February 1961, fell into that category, and so her cot was kept there.

The first kitchen was a strange, cavernous room with a bare concrete floor. It contained a Dover stove, a wooden table, wood to feed the stove, and a sink. It led straight into the second 'kitchen', which was really just a covered passage with 'walls' consisting of open

squares of strong wire, identical with those of our bedroom 'cage'. This kitchen housed a wooden table, on which was an electric ring. The third kitchen was next in line, and was part of the first 'wing' of the reversed capital F. It was more like my idea (in those days) of a 'real' kitchen, with another sink, and yet another wooden table, but also four chairs, shelves, and a large refrigerator. The floor again was bare concrete, but beyond this kitchen the concrete was painted a dark green. Turning left out of this kitchen into a corridor, one came to the bathroom and bedroom area, part of the first wing. Opposite, beyond an area of the garden dominated by a huge tree, was the other wing, unoccupied.

As tenants only of those kitchens and the other rooms mentioned, we had no right to use the unrented part of Number 6; this situation was reinforced by the appalling smell that permeated the drawing room at the far end of the unoccupied wing. The room had, as I remember, beautiful wooden shelving covered at intervals by large pinkish formations that I was told were caused by termites. The smell, my husband said, would be coming from dead rats in the roof. It's only now that it occurs to me that it would have been very obliging of the rats to die exclusively in the part of the roof covering the far end of the house where this potentially beautiful room was – that is, in an area we could avoid. I wonder now whether the source of the smell might have been the pink mounds on the wooden shelving, whether caused by termites or something more sinister. Driven from the room by the pervasive odour, we never paused to investigate. Do termite mounds smell? Strongly? The roof was probably made of corrugated iron. It was covered by thatch that had seen better days, but we never saw any rats on or near the roof.

Our section of the house was to the left of the front door; the unoccupied section was to the right. Walking back to the front door from the malodorous drawing room at the end of the second wing, we passed a room that might have been a study or a bedroom, then (I've forgotten in which order) a storeroom, a bathroom, and a bedroom. If this unoccupied section had had its own kitchen, it would have been the equivalent of a whole house. As it was, the distance from the kitchens to the drawing room would have provided healthy exercise for anyone who had to trot frequently between them. A strange house! I wonder whether there are others of a similar design.

In 1961, we went on leave, staying for several months with my parents in England. While we were away, it was decided that Number 6 was required for, I think, the Chairman of Gaskiya Corporation and his family, so our few possessions were moved down the road to Number 1 Gaskiya, the (whole) house we then rented until we moved to Ibadan in 1962.

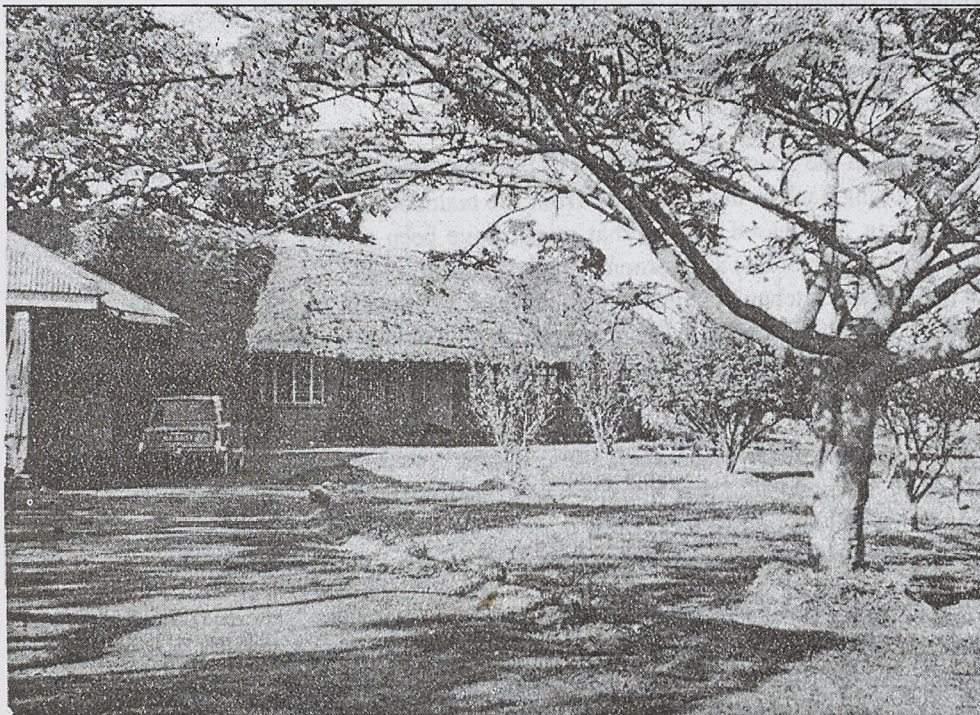
A few years ago, I wrote to Gaskiya Corporation Limited, asking about the history of Number 6, but have received no reply. I do have two books which contain much interesting information: *50 Years of Truth: the Story of Gaskiya Corporation Zaria 1939-1991*, edited by Husaini Hayatu, and *Abubakar Imam Memoirs*, edited by Abdurrahman Mora. There is the same photograph of Dr East and his wife in both books.

The photographs that I am enclosing show 6 Gaskiya in 1960. Since then, the house may have been neglected, or it may by now be updated and well cared for. Maybe it looks much as it did in 1960. I simply do not know, but I would very much like to. The garden was edged with bougainvillea, and dotted with guava trees. I wonder whether those trees are still there.

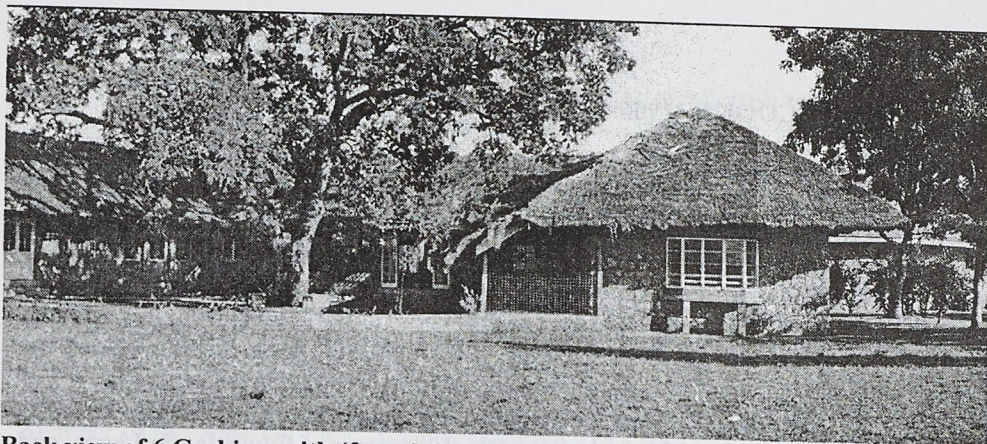
Three years ago, I wrote to *The Nigerian Field* about the various colours of oranges, from green to orange. I would like to thank the people who took the trouble to send very interesting replies both to me and to *The Nigerian Field*. I'm hoping that I may be similarly lucky now and hear more about Dr and Mrs East, Number 6 Gaskiya, and/or our deterrents to exploration, whether termites, rats, or something quite different.

Yours sincerely,

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Front view of 6 Gaskiya, showing the main entrance, with living room to the left of front door; storeroom to left of living room



Back view of 6 Gaskiya, with (from left) second wing, living room, first wing, kitchens

LAGOS BRANCH VISIT TO IBADAN NOV. 2003.



Dr. David Ladipo of CENRAD (back to camera) speaks about rare Nigerian trees to members of Lagos Branch visiting Ibadan.