

## Chapter 6

### American Boy: Going to America

I cannot pinpoint when my fascination with the United States started. My earliest fascination came by watching movies (“cinema,” as we called them then). I enjoyed Tarzan movies, cowboy movies, and movies of pure adventure like the King Kong saga, dramatized tales of Sinbad the Sailor, and other kinds. American music of various types came along with the movies of various genres. Both the movies and the music were equally fascinating to me. The music genres included rhythm and blues, pure jazz, boogie-woogie, as well as Afro-Cuban music interpreted for Americans by Xavier Cugat, Perez Prado and others. My favorites were the famous jazz bandleaders Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington, and in the area of R&B (rhythm and blues), it was Louis Jordan. The best female jazz singer for me was Ella Fitzgerald, and the male singer for me was Nat King Cole. Cole particularly resonated for me because of his clarity. I could hear his words and follow his lyrics. One of our choir leaders at Ereko Methodist Church used him as a model for us to emulate concerning how to sing. The choir leader, Mr. M.D. Williams, was in his prime, a man well respected as a baritone. Lack of opportunity to travel and be trained abroad, I believe, robbed the world of the music of another baritone voice of latent eminence. Ereko Methodist Church was usually packed with many British expatriates intent on hearing M.D. soloing on European classical pieces.

As far as the movies were concerned, many of us preteens and older ones used to have our own heroes. I had two: Douglas Fairbanks Jr. and Cesar Romero. We imitated their way of speaking; we walked the way they walked. If they sang in movies, we somehow learned the songs and could sing them. The most comical among us liked to swagger like cowboys and used slanguage. By far, the most popular cowboy hero that I heard others raving about was William Boyd. As far as war movies were concerned, it was John Wayne. In dress and in language, we imitated our heroes. I had friends who would take a tailor to the movies so the tailor could replicate a particular outfit for them. I personally knew of two “dress fights” in which the inattentive tailors missed the scenes where the outfits were worn. The tailors were made to pay their own way again so as to fulfill their obligations to their clients.

American language usage was also fascinating to me. I noticed and admired American’s

lack of stodginess in contrast to our English overlords. Americans took liberties with words and refashioned them — “catalog” for “catalogue,” “gal” for “girl,” “nite” for “night.” I remembered that I was so imitative of using these words that many times, our English teacher had to warn me to be careful, and made me write the correct English spelling as impositions. That meant I might write a word like “colour,” which I wrote as “color” a hundred times, for instance. Admonishing me derisively, he said, “American boy, if you write these words this way in Cambridge, you will fail English.” I had to always be extra careful.

The fact was that if you failed English, you failed everything. That English teacher would not be the last to derisively call me “American boy.” I at least learned one thing for which I thanked the teacher. I must give the English credit for the way they were used to doing things. And if I wanted to be different, I would need to adhere to the old adage: “While you are in a boat sailing in a crocodile-infested river, never dare to thumb your nose at the crocodiles until you have safely disembarked on the other side.”

I was enthused about the United States, by the spectacular excellence of its black athletes. The achievements of Joe Louis, “the Brown Bomber,” sparked great interest in boxing in Nigeria after World War II. And Nigeria was to produce at least two world champions in boxing before 1970. There were other great black athletes, but none had captured as much notice as Jesse Owens. When I was at MBHS, a huge poster of Jesse Owens was placed on the outside of the back wall in a place where we students could always see it. The Chinese say a picture is worth a thousand words. This picture of Owens, I would dare say, was timeless. It was also more than the picture of an athlete taking off to run a 100-meter dash. There was Jesse Owens looking straight to the end of the race as if he had arrived at the finish line. It was as if before he took off, he had accomplished his goal. The poster reminded us as students to focus on our goal: to win. To me, the picture of Owens was an example of focus in any area of human endeavor. It represented a calling into existence something a person wanted to bring to life. It was also to me a metaphor of hope, as I knew some things about the conditions of life for black people in the United States at that time. It was as if he (Jesse) as their representative had decided to reach out to a glorious future, putting the hurt of the past behind.

Another aspect of my growing fascination with the United States came through my taking up the hobby of having pen pals. The key ingredient of it was to genuinely love people and be

curious about them and their culture. I was always good in geography and enjoyed seeing pictures of exotic places. The other ingredient in having pen pals was to be able to write sincerely and exchange things and ideas with your friends, wherever they might be. And as I discovered that I could write effectively, I felt bold enough to write to people overseas. Most of the people I would eventually write to were Americans. I discovered I could write effectively also by writing to our local newspapers like the *Daily Times*, *West African Pilot*, etc.

I wrote one particularly effective letter to the *Daily Times*. I was twelve years old then. It was to complain against how our area was neglected by the municipal authorities. At Ojo Giwa Street, we were always wading in floodwater. The mosquitoes were terrible, and the entire area was a health hazard. I accused the authorities of negligence and callous indifference and said there ought to be a change at least for the sake of us children who lived in the area. One day, as I was arriving from school, some people were cheering me. I wondered what it was all for. Then my auntie said that the Oba of Lagos and some people came to the grounds (Oko Awo playgrounds) right across from our house to inspect the area. One man, she said, came to our house, number 47 Ojo Giwa, to ask for me by name, saying, “Does this boy Folahan live here?” She said she told him that I did live there and that I had gone to school. She said the man told her to let me know that the council came and that they were happy I wrote them a letter. I was so happy at this.

One day in the *Daily Times*, I read a letter about someone from the USA wanting to write to Africans. I wrote him, but I got no reply. I figured that he probably got so many letters he could not reply to all of them. One thing led to another until one day, I got to asking myself that if I wanted to have pen pals, why did I not attempt to do what the American did—just write to American newspapers? To do that, I had to go to the United States Information Service on Broad Street. What was difficult at first—going to the USIS, which was so far from our house—became easy as I entered high school. The school was also located on Broad Street, where the USIS was located. After school, I would just stroll over there, spend an hour or so, and then head back home.

At the peak of my dabbling in pen-palism, I had ten pen pals. From them, I got interesting things, and I sent Nigerian craft things to them in return. This we called “swapping.” I got items like magazines, comic books, chewing gum, pens, pencils, billfolds, t-shirts, trousers,

belts, baseball caps, an occasional jacket—small items I would sometimes show or share with my friends in school. I got a lot of informational materials about the United States mostly through magazines such as *Reader's Digest*. A variety of information about science also helped win me over to the United States. The way World War II ended by the awesome use of atomic bombs was a wonder to me. It was for me an awesome display of power, and I believed that the world had become the American world, and I must be a part of it.

One time, I read that farmers in Nebraska found a way to make rain fall artificially. That got me thinking about a scenario which, just for fun, would pit an African rain stopper against an American rainmaker.

Every spectacular place I heard of in America, I longed to visit. The discipline I had acquired about being well-informed was extended to gathering facts about the United States. I became a reservoir of information about the country in the estimation of my peers, and this gave me a sense of worth. They started to call me “American boy.” I did not contest it, assuming I was entitled to it in light of my intoxication with things American and the American people. The only remaining thing was for me to go there.

I loved getting to know peoples other than Americans also, and I obtained things from those people in exchange for mine when necessary. I also had pen pals in Canada, in England, in the Philippines, Poland, and in Sweden. To facilitate my exchanges, I believed I needed an import license and obtained one. I sent for catalogs and enjoyed looking at them. The most interesting big catalogs were from the United States. They were Sears Roebuck, Montgomery Ward, and Alden. I asked for samples of small items. From England, I had catalogs of books, shoes, etc. I even became an agent for a greeting card company and earned small amounts of cash so I could finance my pen pal activities, as I had to buy postage stamps and Nigerian crafts to be sent out to my overseas friends.

Little did I know then that since most of my activities had to do with the United States, I was perceived as disrupting postwar international economic arrangements, and also disrupting the British colonial status quo. I was just a teenager, leading my life as I knew it, trying to cope, having a dream, and having fun. I could understand why my colleagues called me “American boy.” Outside of school, whenever I attended a birthday party or just visited friends, I wore some

of the things I got from the United States, such as knit t-shirts, pairs of trousers with permanent creases and pleats turned outside (mostly common then were pleats turned inside, the British way). My trousers narrowed at the bottom, and the bottom pleats rested nicely on my shoes (this was in contrast to the baggy British bottoms that flopped all over the place and dragged on the ground). I would wear crepe-soled shoes in contrast to the hard-flat-bottomed shoes the British deemed fit. I would or might put on a baseball cap with a distinct cut that was uniquely American. Those caps made me appear cocky and gave me a swagger and a lift. For a quiet person like me, did I need to say much about my orientation? I did not know that people like me were perceived by British colonial authorities in Nigeria at that time as a disrupter of the economic system in the post–World War II era.

One morning, our Latin teacher came to class and started the class session by posing a question to us: “What is a mendicant?” One boy answered, “A doctor who can’t heal people.” “No,” said the teacher. He then went on to point out that, although a mistake could be made if one did not listen well, the word had nothing to do with doctors or anything medical. Another boy had a crack at it. He said it meant something that cannot be mended. The teacher said he was wrong also. Then he asked us to open our dictionaries to look it up. He asked the first boy who found it to read the definition. The word meant “beggar.” Then the teacher revealed to us that during the teachers’ meeting the previous day, the principal had informed the teachers to warn us students against being mendicants. He said a report had come from the education office that many students were writing to Americans to beg for things under the pretense of having pen pals. All of a sudden, one boy shouted, “Oh, oh, oh...Soremekun.” Another one joined in shouting “American boy.” The eyes of the whole class were turned in my direction. One could hear a pin drop. “Is that true, Soremekun?” the teacher asked. I said, “No.” I was angry and defiant at the same time, but I kept myself under control. I explained what I was doing and told the class I saw nothing wrong in swapping items from Nigeria with friends overseas, which included Americans. The teacher, not knowing what to say, just said, “Be careful,” and he moved on with the class session. The teacher’s warning to me was apt and timely, as a subsequent event would show.

A few days before the class incident, I had checked at the Marina for American ships entering Lagos Harbor. Our school faced the Marina on one side and Broad Street on the other.

During school recess, I would usually stroll to the Marina to watch ships sailing in and out of the harbor. I knew ships such as the *African Glen*, *African Grove*, etc., which belonged to the Farrell Lines. And then there were the ships of Barber West African Lines. If I missed the latest scouting, some friends were sure to tell me. A ship came in, and I was praying that I would get a parcel.

About a week later, sure enough, I got three notices. I was joyful, and as usual, I went to my friends in the neighborhood (we usually did this to announce that we got something, jubilating as I announced, "I received! I received!"). Soon, a boy I had never seen in the neighborhood before showed up in front of our house waving a parcel notice. He had an accomplice, a boy I had only seldom seen in our area. In the casual open-air society in which we all lived, everything done by this duo was so naturally done that it was not easy to detect that I was being set up. It was late in the afternoon, and the parcel post office would be closed if I were to attempt to go there that day. The boy suggested we should go the following day. Later, I scrutinized the parcel notice, and it required Customs Department approval before one could collect any parcel. What this meant was that we had to go to the customs office first. Now this was an unusual thing. Why this departure from the usual? I mused to myself. I became very cautious.