

MY VILLAGE TO NEW YORK

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Stories Matter

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those who cannot remember the past
are condemned to repeat it

- George Santayana
American Philosopher

One

When I first heard of America, it was in my childhood, when I didn't know my gender. When the world was nearly as God made it, I was a little boy in my hometown, Umunoha, land of ancient wisdom. When the missionaries came to Nigeria in early 20th century, they visited and found solace in my town, which is of historical importance. Our culture and tradition testify to this, and that secured Umunoha a vantage position on the national tourism map. We eat what we produce and our “orie ama igwe” market where buying and selling expounds every eight days is one of the largest in Imo state.



Our 'mmanwu' masquerade is rare, unique and ancestral. It's like no other!

In those days going to America was like crossing over to Macedonia. Those who travelled there were rare and occasional. They were heralded and honoured as symbols of nobility and success. My cousin is a testimony. This was why families, neighbours, well-wishers and the community escorted them to the airport with traditional dancers and much noise. They flew in the sky, to the white man's land, while the entourage danced home, jubilating that their son would one day return in abundance and affluence. But stories were told of how the travelee escorted by community entourage washed plates, cleaned gutters and drove taxi cabs to pay school fees and make ends meet, in his new abode. It was called *ala bekee*, literally meaning "white man's land" but socially and by implication, a place of milk and honey, with plenty food, money and all the good things of life. Some returned after many years, to the warm embrace of families and communities, with proof of training, development, maturity and success. But others stayed beyond expectation, and reluctantly returned as symbols of failure, frustration and liability.

Olisa who returned with an American wife confessed that the lady helped him train as a medical doctor. When she sees Olisa's father in the morning, she would say,
"Good morning Sir, how're you doing?"

The old man would look at his son,
“What is your wife saying?”
“Papa, she's greeting you!”, Olisa retorted,
“Greeting me?”

Olisa's marriage was a disappointment to his parents who thought he would marry Adaku or any of the maidens who danced lavishly at the airport during his departure and arrival ceremonies. Infact the parents were optimistic that Olisa would marry Adaku who was his school mate. She was beautiful, quiet, cooked well and came from a respectable home. But on sighting the oyibo lady, she ran away, disappeared and vanished like nitrogen!

As I grew up, America became clearer to me. More people visited and returned but with less fanfare. Some were even deported for misconduct, forgery and crime. Yet America remains the centre of world attraction in industry, economy, education, politics, science and technology, fashion, agriculture and religion. Anywhere America is mentioned people, even the atmosphere, would react to an impromptu impulse of dynamics!

When the opportunity came for me to visit America I moved from the village to my residence, Umuahia, capital of Abia State. It is one of Nigeria's 36 states battling under development, unemployment and rural poverty. The people are more determined than national opportunities that reach them, to show their zeal and creativity. Umuahia is the birthplace of

Nigeria's first Military Head of state, Major General J.T.U. Aguinyi Ironsi, and the last stronghold of the defunct Republic of Biafra under General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. It holds the relics of the Nigeria Civil war, inside the National War Museum.

My visit to the United States of America in July 2014 began with my visa interview at the US Embassy in Abuja. The appointment was for 8.00am, so by 7.45am I was already with Embassy official undergoing security checks for my appointment. There were other visitors, possibly for the same purpose. Some came before me, and many others arriving after. All documents were supposed to be genuine, complete and original, no GSM set or electronic gadgets must be found on any visitor interviewee. These confirmed, I was ushered in at the exact time of my appointment. An open office with seats to accommodate over ten candidates at a time. It was all an open affair. Three embassy officials interviewing different people simultaneously. You would hear what they're asking others, and others would also hear what they are asking you. Perhaps I should say *probe*, because certain questions might put you off your feet. For instance, your income, status, occupation, why you want to visit US, and many other questions that might arise from your responses. Your documents including international passport are carefully screened, and your fingerprints captured. I think the officials also watch your countenance and your ability to withstand spontaneous questions. I also think they don't want you to manufacture tales, facts or figures to impress them. It's real business time. The system seems to be electronically

recording every session.

At the end of my interview that Wednesday in May 2014, I was told my visa would be ready in 48 hours, that's on Friday. I was quite surprised, I thought it would take a longer time, even for me to begin to track it.

As I left the visa interview arena, walking through the security gates, and to the distant first entrance gate, I saw many people streaming into the Embassy, some with their children and spouses. Certain on-looker asked me,

“How was it? Did you succeed? Let's celebrate it!”

The following day, Thursday, I received an E-mail from the US Embassy, telling me to come and pick my Visa on Friday.

I kept the appointment at the collection office, and by 9.00am I was called in to confirm my identity before my passport was returned with US approved visa for two years. It was delightful and impressive – the second expose of what the American system is: do things right, and you get it right; be qualified and you're passed; walk up the ladder honestly, and you enter! No hustling, no 'man know man', no gratification, no 'wetin you carry!' Chai, America, na you biko!

Having got my visa, I then arranged to buy my return ticket because the American Embassy advises that you should not buy ticket until you have a visa. Return tickets to the United States of America are quite expensive especially during

summer, Christmas or peak periods.

Now the next thing that worried me was the bag with which to travel to US. First an idea occurred to me that since I was going on a brief visit, I should use a briefcase. But almost immediately a counter idea cautioned me that if I dare land in America with a briefcase I would appear a 'suspect' and all search light would focus and follow me around, even when I am undressing for the night! But there's nothing executive about my trip, so why should I use a brief case – that hardware that is associated with insurance salesmen who would employ all persuasive techniques to compel you take up a 'policy'.

Again using briefcase would re-live the scenario in which those facially innocent but spiritually dubious citizens cart away hard currency in private jets.

I then thought of using the popular all-purpose, all-weather, all-accomodating budget-friendly zipper kombo-bag, that takes in everything, packed and unpacked, arranged and un-arranged, shoes and suites inclusive! We call it "Ghana must go" bag. Yet another option was to use portmanteau which used to be fashionable. But I doubted if it was still in vogue. My first portmanteau was bought by my late caring sister, Ijeoma, in January 1966 when I gained admission into Baptist High School Port-Harcourt. She also bought locker and other boarding school requirements. We lived with dad, siblings and other relatives at 61 Owerri Road, Port-Harcourt. Our

neighbour's shop was quite popular, uoo all wool and fancy stores, 61 Owerri Road Diobu, Port Harcourt. That time Port Harcourt was known as Garden City and also, 'pitakwa', when we danced Rex Lawson's Jolly Papa, Victor Uwaijo's Jeromi and Celestine Ukwu's Ije-enu. I still remember how I left college, Baptist High School Port Harcourt. It was on a Thursday morning in July 1967. The school bell summoned every student to the hall. The Principal, Chief A.B. Batubo, informed us that civil war had broken out in the country, that we should go to our homes and await further announcement. Some of us rejoiced and moved out of the hall in a holiday mood, thinking it was going to be a brief break. But alas, it became a full – fledged war: General Yakubu Gowon, commanding Nigerian Armed Forces, and Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu commanding the Armed forces of the newly-born Biafra Republic. People fought, people died, people wept, and for three years we forgot about school, discipline and friendship. Everyday it was either air-raid, mortar-shelling, conscription or “exodus” from one town to another, from the village to hinterland, from hinterland to farmland, and from farmland to nowhere! People suffered, eating rubbish and unbelievable things. Many lost home, hope and help, and died as a result of the avoidable fight by two brothers. For three years they killed their families, desecrated the land, and created milky way for western countries who talked of peace but, acted as catalysts, traders and exploiters! After the Nigeria – Biafra War, I went to Port Harcourt, searching for our residence. I discovered that the popular Owerri Road had been re-named Ikwerre Road, while 'Umumasi' had

become 'Rumumasi', and others like that! I still remember how I went to Baptist High School the first day as a "fresher". That my portmanteau and other luggages were put at the back of a brand new 'Austin' Tipper lorry dad just bought. He was contractor, former police sergeant and frontline member of Awolowo's Action Group. The new Austin tipper, "tear rubber" excited me more than a car. I sat in front with the driver, and off we drove to my school BHS, after Creek Road. Our Principal, Chief A.B. Batubo was a disciplinarian and an ardent Baptist. I likened his Christian zeal to that of Dr. Akanu Ibiam, former governor of Eastern Nigeria. He was a Presbyterian whose weekly powerful preaching attracted me to the Presbyterian Church Uwani Enugu later in 1970 while I schooled at a catholic School, College of the Immaculate Conception, CIC, Enugu. There, reading and friendship were impactful. Our revered Principal was Marist Brother Aloysius, disciplinarian like no other! At CIC, you would read and read, and you would pass and pass!

Enugu is Nigeria's Newcastle, where coal was discovered in 1905 by Engineer Kinston. In 1947 indigenous coal miners were shot dead by expatriates because they demanded for pay rise. Another frightening event in Enugu was on Monday, Eke market day, 22 March 1971. A python, "eke" swallowed a soldier at Miliken Hill, but was later shot dead with a machine gun by another soldier.

So I did not use a portmanteau after all for my US trip in July

2014. I bought a leather bag that was portable and strong enough to withstand airport handling and flight changes.

I did not forget my history of America, which was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492. It gained independence from Great Britain on 4th July 1776. The country is predominantly whites, followed by Negroes, then Indians and Asiatic. Her GNP as at 2013 was \$16.768 Trillion while her per capita was \$53,001. America's currency is the Dollar, which exchanged for N172 during my travel. It is the currency of the global market and trading partners, and remains the most popular legal tender throughout the world.

My destination, New York, is one of the 50 states of USA. It's known as The Empire State. It has over 50 attraction spots, notably the Central Park, Empire State Building, Statue of Liberty, Rockefeller Centre, Times Square, JFK Airport, and one other that excited me most, I will mention it later.

New York's nickname is The Big Apple. which was first popularized as a reference to New York by John J. Fitz Gerald. He wrote many New York Morning Telegraph articles in the 1920's in reference to New York horse – racing, which adapted Apple for prizing. As it's generally said, “There's only one Big Apple, that's New York”.

I believe the greatest apples are grown in New York, which has The New York Apple Association, representing over 700

commercial apple growers. New Yorkers believe in Apple – they grow it, they eat it, they sell it, they cherish it!

At the time of my visit, America was ruled by her 44th President, Barack Hussein Obama. When he visited Egypt during his first tenure in June 2009, he admonished African countries to begin to build institutions rather than individuals. He said that was the panacea for development, stability and economic independence that would rescue African nations from being failed states. He must have based his advice from the experience of his own country whose first President George Washington created the continental Army that fought and won the American Revolution between 1775 and 1783. In like manner, the 36th President of the United States, Lyndon Johnson, who succeeded John F. Kennedy in November 1963 created a legislative programme called GREAT SOCIETY. At its inauguration on May 21, 1964, President Johnson said “we have the opportunity to move not only toward rich society and the powerful society, but toward the society that demands an end to poverty....”

Two

NOW MY JOURNEY

The check in time for my flight was 02.30am – 05.30am, and the departure time was 06.35am. I got to Murtala Mohammed International Airport Lagos early enough to relax and look around before checking in. I discovered more things about my country, Nigeria. The local wing of the Airport was busy and glittering with modernity. One old man, seemed to be visiting the airport for the first time, the way he was gazing in amazement, resisted his son's persuasion to come out from the painted airport tax questioned him in Igbo,

“Ebee di ihea?”, meaning “where is this place?”

The International Wing was more attractive. It's upstairs and necessities abound at slightly higher costs. Continental and local dishes are served as well as snacks and non-alcoholic beverages. Some travelers are also fashion – crazy, particularly ladies who seek for attention. Most men seek for relevance.

Inside the aircraft I looked out for the facilities and services I had read and seen on the airline's website. It was “confam”, as we say in local parlance, or “all correct!”

Every seat has its own TV screen, blanket and pillow, headphone, and other flight gadgets. The TV screen has buttons for the passenger to make his choice – music, film, flight destination map, temperature, height, etc. The Air hostesses were pretty and polite young ladies, dressed in attractive format.

Take-off was quite smooth, and shortly after we were airborne, it was meal time. It was full breakfast and quite satisfying. Within five hours we were at Mohammed V International Airport, Casablanca, Morocco. The kingdom of Morocco is a constitutional monarchy with a legislature of a single chamber. The king holds supreme civil and religious authority. The lingua franca is Arabic but French and Spanish are freely spoken. The country which has Islam as the state religion is administratively divided into 19 provinces and 2 urban prefectures – Rabat, Sale and Casablanca. The capital city, seen from the airport, is a beautiful model with bias for arts and culture. The national currency is the dirham, and one exchanged for eight Dollars.

When I made inquiry about currency exchange I was told to go to the bank. But there was none within the transit arena of the airport. The supermarket there demanded five Dollars for a normal bottle of coke. I did not need it because the airline gave lunch coupon to every transit passenger, to eat and relax at the five star Restaurant, while we waited the flight to New York.

When we boarded the Flight, it was another air craft belonging

to the same Air Line: bigger, better and roomy. Somebody might say, "Level don change", and I would concur. Because travelling to God's own country is not just an experience, it's beyond business and adventure. A country that aims at perfection would expect same from its friends and service providers.

So, we cruised at an altitude of about 40,000 feet. We passed through continents, countries, cities, lakes and oceans, notably the North Atlantic Ocean. Was there weather turbulence? Was it frightening? How did the aircraft maneuver? These are questions that would strike any mind. Even with the provision of blankets and pillows I did not sleep noticeably. I kept awake to see and experience details of trans continental journey. My phone was switched off in keeping with flight regulation but the television screen at any seat was a good companion. It provided music, films, and journey geography. Perhaps meals were served at periods of slight turbulence. But there was no disquiet or displeasure. The food was rich and the choice was personal – chicken or fresh fish, tea or coffee, wine or juice, coke or fanta? Yoghurt, ice cream, cheese, cake, bread and water came with the meals. I relished the wine which was served in branded small bottles, red and peach. Sipping it with chicken, and listening to western music with in-cabin headphone made the flight to New York pleasantly homely. After such a heavy meal you're likely to doze off and may not feel any weather turbulence.

After about nine hours non-stop flight from Casablanca, Morocco, we arrived John F. Kennedy International Airport New York, USA. The time was about 9.00pm but the weather and brightness seem Nigeria's 5.00pm. Our super jumbo air bus taxied to a stop at Terminal 1.

Terminal 1 and Terminal 4 of the 9 terminals handle super jumbo Air bus A380 aircrafts. The aeroplanes I saw on the tarmac were uncountable, possibly because over 90 airlines operate out of JFK. The airport operated its first airline flight on July 1, 1948 when it was dedicated as New York International Airport. The ceremony was attended by then US President, Harry S. Truman. It was commonly known as Idle Wild Airport until 1963 when it was renamed in memory of John F. Kennedy, the 35th President of US. In 2014 JFK handled 53,254,362 passengers, making it the 18th busiest airport in the world, and 6th busiest in US by passenger traffic.

The passengers streamed out, and stood by the conveyor machine, each person looking out for his luggage. The jet speed with which the conveyor machine threw out the bags seemed to be without control. When that my leather bag surfaced and dropped, I grabbed it, as if on impulse. Some surprise! The fanciful side key had been pulled out. But the small key with which I locked the zippers after security checks at Murtala Muhammed airport Lagos was intact. I began to wonder where my bag had been damaged. Was it at Lagos, was it at Casablanca or was it at JFK? The more I thought about it the more ideas conjured up my memory in that arrival arena, full of people of different cultures, different characters, and different intentions. I thought of complaining to the airline about the damage to my bag, but would they accept responsibility? Well, if that was all that could vex me through out the long journey from Lagos to New York and all my belongings remained in tact, then let it be. Let the sleeping dog lie. In fact let it continue to sleep! I then stretched my hand at the wheel carriage, and a faceless voice cautioned,

“Five Dollars!” I withdrew.

My bag did not weigh more than 23 kilogrammes after all. So I rolled it manually to the frontage. It was bustling with activities – crowd, vehicles, movement! Almost immediately, I heard a voice,

“Brother James!”

It was my brother Stanley. We have not seen for some years. It was a very joyful moment as we greeted and hugged. He lifted the bag into the boot of his cosy car as we cruised past the clean and expansive JFK International Airport. I began to see the beauty of New York, the 19th most populous city in the world. It has a population of about 8.4 million, followed by London (20th) with a population of 8.3 million. The first is Shanghai, China, with a population of about 24.1 million. New York is the home of the United Nations, and the centre of global finance, business and communications. It is made up of five counties called boroughs namely, Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island, The Bronx and Manhattan.



Three

My first formal outing was at the 7th biennial convention of Umunoha – USA Association. It took place at the Obi Igbo Community Centre, New York. It was a gathering of Igbos, Nigerians, Americans and other foreigners. It began with the rendition of the Nigerian National anthem, “Arise O compatriots” and the American National Anthem, “The star spangled Banner”. The two national anthems are of national importance. “Arise O compatriots” was collectively written by five Nigerian Lyricists and put to music by Benedict Elide Odiase. It was adapted on 1st October 1978 to replace the Independence national anthem, “Nigeria we hail thee”, written by a British lady, Lilian Jean Williams. “Star spangled Banner” was written by an American Lawyer and poet, Francis Scott Key while on board a British fast naval ship during the British bombardment of Fort Mc Henry in Maryland in 1814.

The beauty of that Umunoha event was that we were all dressed in native attires. I told the audience,

My brethren, I commend you for your courage to uphold this convention in spite of obvious challenges. I join you to celebrate America, which is “Ebe ano”, the reference point, End of discussion! In fact anybody who's not been to the USA has gone no where. Any wonder some people who live in London when they come to America they scream, “Wa ooh”, and soon become residents. America is land of opportunity, and I employ you to

continue to make best use of these opportunities, and to remain resourceful Ambassadors of Umuohia and Imo State of Nigeria. I am particularly excited about the venue of this event, OBI IGBO COMMUNITY CENTRE, which I am told is owned by Igbo Associations in New York. It's a testimony to your efforts in sustaining Igbo language and culture. As most of you know, I am a broadcaster, novelist and poet. My 4th book is due for public presentation in Nigeria this 4th quarter, between September and October. It is still in the custody of the publisher. But because of the relevance of your convention to our fatherland, I pleaded with my publisher to release some copies to bring to this convention for you to know what we are doing at home to sustain our mother tongue, Igbo. The book is entitled EKWE MGBA, as entertaining as expository on contemporary Igbo lifestyle and circumstance in Nigerian Society.

I gave out some copies of EKWE MGBA, which portrays Igbo as a living language, dynamic and beyond extinction. Later my niece, Ogechi, wrote an appraisal and told me what I didn't know about my 'newborn'. She said, "For the first time, Igbo is accessible". Lest I forget. That event was also attended by notable Americans including a democrat who told me he's an original Barack Obama supporter and would contest the next US congress election. His vision is anchored on community empowerment, better education, jobs creation, quality healthcare, affordable housing and reforms.

Four

BEAUTIFUL NEW YORK

New York is eco-friendly. The grasses are green, the trees are green and the flowers flourish with beauty. Around residences and in neighbourhoods assorted plants and flowers are nurtured to look lively. Water is splashed them from source as at when due. Every house has a garden, decorative and aesthetic. Water supply is regular and there's heater in every home. The streets of New York are clean and calm but one day I passed through certain area that looked like old "Achara Layout" in Enugu, spotted with pot-holes. Enugu has since been re-modeled by Governor Sullivan Chime, whose father was the city's Mayor long ago and had one of the widest roads in town named after him, *Chime Avenue*.

On some days I saw City Road Maintenance Team with their men and truck effecting repairs, yet not causing traffic chaos. 'Just mind your business and go your way', seems to be the unwritten law. And talking about traffic, in New York you're ticketed if you drive any how. The traffic lights are functional, and as you approach you slow down, you don't drive on amber. Pedestrians equally have rights of way. Indicator image lights are there, at times stretching too long to test your patience. Once a pedestrian steps his feet to cross the road at a junction or interjection, all vehicles stop, and wait, and watch the guy who's not rushing or running to cross the busy road. There are no check points by police or other security outfits asking, "wetin you carry" or your

particulars nay “money culars”. But mind you, closed circuit cameras are around and virtually everywhere, watching you and your activity. Even along express roads stretching quite a distance I saw cameras on hilltops and else where! So if you are preparing to comit any crime in New York, prepare to be caught in a jiffy. Hydrants are rampant along the streets and you do not park your vehicles near them.

The era of siren which is still booming in my country is out of fashion in New York. Only ambulance or fire service vehicles use siren. The governor, Mayor, Army chief, police chief, legislators, Secretaries of state, bullion vans – all pass unnoticed and unannounced. Cars are exceptionally clean, and car-wash is a thriving business in New York. The Train Service in New York is effective, exciting and cost-saving. I used it the day I went to Harlem pear Park, Hudson from Brooklyn. Not one train takes you to a far journey. You hop into the coach and listen attentively to stop at your destination, and possibly join another train. Inside the coach you are warned not to stand by the door but to sit down. Some do stand correctly when the seats are fully occupied. There's no segregation – black or white, man or woman, young or old – you sit where you like. It's a fast moving train, clean, regular and punctual.

The Harlem Pear Park is located near the Hudson River, a recreation site to behold. The Hudson River is a tourist centre, named after an English navigator, Henry Hudson. He explored the waterways in the early 17th century. It is one of the most important commercial waterways in the United States, and connects New York with the Atlantic Ocean.

This indeed is a tourist centre. It was nightfall and people of all races gathered to unwind and relax, to see and feel nature in its natural habitat. I strolled to a

nearby supermarket and returned quickly to join sister Flora to watch a documentary on the life and times of a vocal Kenyan woman activist, professor. Her type is rare, and probably no more. She was well-educated , believed in agriculture, mobilized and empowered the women folk. She vehemently exposed the corrupt government of her time to the listening world outside Kenya.

FASHION

New Yorkers are fashionable and the ladies look quite attractive, particularly black Americans. Some fat ones ignore their obesity and put on skimpy dresses. Informal dressing is without exception. Generally people wear shorts with snickers because its summer. Some of the ladies' shorts are "hot paints" which you dare not wear out of your house in my village. It could be branded "ndi gba oto", the naked people! But it's their custom, it's their culture, it's their life. Tattoo is in vogue, and some crazy youths tattooed where you least expected.

HEALTH

New York is a healthy city in a healthy environment. No mosquitoes anywhere. Throughout my stay I did not suffer headache, fever or any ailment. Exercise is a routine and many homes have sport facilities, gymnasiums and swimming pools. One morning I joined my sister, Flora, to work from the 14th floor of her skyscraper residence to the ground level, and up again. We ignored the elevator. I was expecting to repeat the exercise but she said, "No, it's time for breakfast".

MEALS

Burgers are regular meals, and burger out-lets are many. With about \$2 you will take a good bite, and for less than \$5, a sumptuous meal of assorted edibles. Self serve coke are chilled at eateries, and it's 'pay for one and drink as many cups'. If you enter, an eatery don't go and sit down because nobody would serve you. Queue up and place your order. Menu and prices are displayed conspicuously. The queue culture is adhered strictly. After eating at an eatery no waiter clears your table. You collect your disposables and empty then in the trash bin before leaving. No burgers, pizzas or potatoe chips are kept in wait. You see young men and ladies prepare them, fast and according to choice. They are served as easy take-away in attractive petty bags. Ice cream, chocolates and peanuts are ready-made.

LAUNCHING CEREMONY!

One day in New York I attended a fund raising ceremony. It was in a hall, welldecorated and peopled by folks from all walks of life. The donors were disposably generous, and the audience clapped and clapped and clapped. One guy, eloquent and fashionable and clad in expensive lace agbada pledged \$4,000. The clap was deafening. When I was given the microphone to speak, I took it, looked at it, it was the same type of codless microphone we use at events in Nigeria. At times Disc Jockeys use it to create musical sensation and crack expensive jokes. I placed it a foot from my mouth. The microphone is my tool of trade because I spoke on Radio for 35 years, so I know its secret. It has a substance called the crystal, which converts sound notes into electrical impulses. The man who discovered the microphone is James E. West. At eight years, as he tried to repair a faulty radio he was badly shocked by 120 volts of electricity after he plugged into the socket. But that

mistake inspired him to further his studies in electricity, leading to his triumph as an inventor! Let me inform you that Americans don't just value their national currency, the Dollar. They treasure it. They can do all things for you – gift, food, entertainment – but to give you the Dollar, wahala!

Five

BARACK OBAMA

While I was in the United States of America, precisely on Monday 28th July 2014, President Barack Obama renamed his young African leadership initiative to “Mandela Washington Fellowship”, for young Africa leaders, in honour of former South African President Nelson Mandela, revered world selfless and effective leader. That day President Obama met with a group of 500 young Africans chosen from about 50,000 applicants from across the continent, to participate in the Washington Fellowship Exchange Programme. This initiative was launched by Obama in 2010 as part of a long term investment in the next generation of African leaders to sharpen their skills, to improve their net works and to strengthen partnerships between America and Africa. It gives Africans aged 25 – 35 years the opportunity to study at top 20 universities in the united States. I watched President Obama say that day, that beginning from 2015 the first centres would be established in Ghana, Kenya, Senegal and South Africa for young Africans to network, access the latest technology, and get training in management and entrepreneurship. He also said that American universities, African institutions and business partners like Microsoft and Master Card foundation would also partner on setting up and running the centres. Yet Obama cautioned ,

“even as we acknowledge the real hardships that so many Africans face every day, we have to make sure that we're seizing extra ordinary

potential of today's Africa, the youngest and fastest growing continent”.

Also on Wednesday August 6, 2014 while I was in US, President Barack Obama hosted a summit with about 50 African Heads of State. That was the era of Ebola outbreak. So that morning in Washington, Mr. Obama told his guests,

“The United States and our international partners will continue to do whatever we can to help our African partners respond to this crisis, and to stand with the people of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone”.

The President of Sierra Leone, Ernest Bai Koroma and his Liberian counterpart, Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sir Leaf could not make it but Mr. Alpha Conde, the President of Guinea, attended despite the fact that as at that day official figures from his country gave the number of deaths as 358 while 485 were suspected cases of Ebola. At that meeting, President Barack Obama and African Leaders including Dr. Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria, discussed Trade, investment, security and governance as well as crisis in Gaza and Ukraine.

Infact the white house killed two birds with one stone on that day; for while President Obama was meeting with African Leaders at the Dean Acheson Auditorium, White House, his wife Michelle Obama and America's former first lady, Laura Bush were hosting the spouses of visiting African Leaders at the Kennedy Centre, Washington. Michelle Obama told Africa First Ladies,

“You have to change attitudes before you can change behaviours. Until we prioritize our girls and understand that they are as important and their education is as important as the education of our sons, then we will have lots

of work to do”.

The two world models first made a joint appearance in Tanzania in 2013 when Mrs Laura Bush (Teacher and Librarian) hosted a forum for African First Ladies, and invited Mrs Obama. This time around, Mrs Michelle Obama (a lawyer) is hosting African First ladies and invited Mrs Bush. To give her wife support for the forum and to further honour the invitation of Michelle, former President George W. Bush, dressed in black suit, attended the African First Ladies forum at the Kennedy Centre. He told the women to promote efforts to fight AIDS, breast cancer and cervical cancer in Africa.



NEW YORK POST OFFICE

Even with the emergence and popularity of the GSM which has almost silenced 'P & T' in my country, the New York post office is quite busy and active, providing 24 hours digital service to the public. When I got into the place, I joined the queue for services such as mailing letters and parcels, as well as buying cards of all seasons and occasions. The cards are neatly displayed to attract one's attention, at moderate costs. Parcels going to far away cities in US are delivered on the 3rd day, and cost about \$5. The GSM cannot do that, and can't convey tangible decorative cards that express emotion, love, care and salutation in a chosen language. Rather with GSM our emotion is concealed, our words are economic and our language is corrupt and ungrammatical.

From the Post Office I went to a near – by bank.

A very spacious modern bank, but only two clients were inside. I was the third. If any novice had asked, "where are the customers?" The answer would have been, "Cashless", because in US people don't carry cash about so may not frequent the bank. What you must have on you always is your credit card. It's usable at any purchase point, even at the petrol filling station. You may not need an attendant. Just slot in your card, press the button for what you want, about \$20 fuel or so, and drive away. Also cheques are commonly used in America. People hardly pay cash. They issue cheques even for amounts that

are low.

SHOPPING

At New York shopping Mall I saw goods and services of assorted nature. You could spend hours moving around ground floor before using the elevator to journey upstairs, which seems larger. The eateries are quite generous as their front girls walked about with tasters of their menus, stocked to toothpicks. Prices at the shopping mall are moderate and offer you good bargains. It's an outlet for manufacturers not only traders. Infact what you don't get there, you don't get else where! At the cosmetics section a young lady persuaded me to her stand, and sampled a lotion on my skin, which she said was soft. I stretched out my left arm as I sat comfortably on a stool while she robbed the lightly – perfumed cream. She expected me to buy one after the sampling session, and I patronized her. Many shops displayed sales notices and price reductions as was common during summer. They were real and some items as low as 50% less.

However most children's wares bore their normal prices of \$15 up while some adult dresses could be picked at \$2! A modern suit is about \$80, shoes or snickers, \$35, jewelry \$3 up and medium suitcases \$50.

“Chai, things are really cheap in America”, I said.

As I walked away from the mall admiring and studying my new environment, I halted at a junction where I discussed with a man and his female partner. They offered me a ride which was a short distance to my destination. As I alighted from the car, we exchanged pleasantries and the young man told me “I am a Jew”.

Almost immediately my mind went to the Bible. The Jews are a chosen people of God. They are a formidable race, indomitable! They are unassuming but creative and productive. When I produced a documentary on Nike Lake Resort Hotel Enugu at its inception many years ago, the Jewish builder told me, "What makes a 5 – star hotel is not the building but the facilities..." In America, Jews make up only 2% of the total US population but 1/3 of American multi millionaires are Jewish. 45% of the top 40 of the Forbes 400 richest Americans are Jewish. According to statistics also 20% of professors of American leading universities are Jewish while 40% of partners in the leading New York and Washing DC law firms are Jewish. Also 25% of American Nobel Prize Winners are Jewish.

WORSHIP

On a Sunday New York seems a Christian city. I and brother Lambert worshipped at the Christian Cultural Centre Brooklyn. A modern church you would call it, that facilitates general worship, meditation, praying and singing. It's not compulsory that women should cover their heads, it's also not compulsory that women should not wear trousers to church. The temperature inside the church is as cold and comfortable as that of St. Savior's Anglican Church Wuse Zone 5, Abuja, which is fully air conditioned. The preacher reminded me of those powerful American Evangelists, T.K. Jakes (born 1957) and Jimmy Swaggart (born 1935). Also I remembered my Evangelist friend in early 1980's, Ernest Angely, who distinguished between Fasting and famine, and emphasized that JESUS SAVES! The Sunday Preacher's text was displayed on the screens, which also showed lyrics when the gospel band sang. It's for every worshipper to follow and be part of the religious activity. When it was time for offering and tithe, cheques were written and

dropped in the envelopes. Only few people gave cash. The Christian Cultural Centre congregation was predominantly black, and it cut across all age brackets. The Holy communion was self-serve, and those who did not prepare for it did not partake as it's obtainable in christiandom. At the end of the service the facilities at the worship centre became evident – Library, bookshop, cafeteria, rest room – all classic. By the way the Christian Cultural Centre, CCC, is a non-denominational mega church founded in 1979 by former Banker, Dr. A. R. Bernard. It occupies a land space of 11 acres and has over 37,000 members. It is the largest evangelical church in the New York region, and one of the largest independent churches in the United States.

BUILDINGS

In New York houses are as different as their environment. No fencing of buildings or compounds. The houses whose main components are wood, are detached. Blocks are rare. In Queens the predominant bungalows are similar, looking like cones standing on rectangles. Each has a heater outlet on top of the roof. In Brooklyn the predominant storey buildings share space with skyscrapers which dominate midtown Manhattan, a borough of New York City. But Times Square is not just a tourist site, it's something and somewhere else! You really need to see it – neon signs and bill boards light it up at night – looking gorgeous, romantic and exhilarating. Here you see tourists in double decker open buses on site seeing, taking pictures, looking happy. This part of New York is always busy, with heavy traffic. One day on my way to Times Square, I observed street – trading – a young black man was peddling table water in 50cl plastic containers. There was traffic hold up, he was sweating and moving from car to car, saying “one dollar”, one dollar!” I blinked my eyes, closed them, and looked at him again to ensure I was not in a dream in Abuja

or Port Harcourt. But it's New York. Cold water sold on the street at \$1 per bottle? Waooh, just like pure water sale in Lagos! When that guy visits his African home and exchanges his street collections to local currency, he becomes a millionaire. Yet his relatives do not know that he sales water on the streets of New York.

HOTEL SERVICE

The front desk staff are courteous and friendly. The room and its self-serve beverages, toiletries and facilities are impressive. I complained of nothing during my stay. The internet service was effective and free for guests just as the hotel's shuttle bus. The location is central being a walking distance to some busy parts of New York. It is in the vicinity of the JFK International Airport and being a five star hotel, some cabin crew also lodge there. When I enquired about GSM sets, I was told of T. mobile shop, and offered the hotel's vehicle to take me there. But I opted to walk the distance, to know my environment. Less than a quarter hour of my stay in the shop, I heard a voice say,

“Brother James!”

I looked up, I saw my sister Nelly. Her white car parked in front of the building.

“How come” who told you am here? How did you locate me?” Three questions in inquisitive succession!

“The Hotel staff”, she replied. I followed her, and off we drove to another part of Queens.

It is one of the five boroughs of New York City. It has the second largest population (behind Brooklyn) of 2.3 million residents, about 48% of them

foreign-born. Queens was established in 1638 as one of the original 12 counties of New York, and was named after the Portuguese Princess, *Catherine of Braganza* (1638 – 1705). She was at that time, Queen of England, Scotland and Ireland. Queens became a borough of New York City on January 1, 1898.



Catherina Braganza
***Queen of England/
New York Queen***

Seven

BLACKMAN DIES IN POLICE HANDS!

While in US, I watched television news of an unfortunate incident that took place on 17th July 2014, at Staten Island, the smallest borough of New York. It was the death of an unarmed black man in a choke hold during an arrest by a New York police officer. 43 year old father of six, named Eric Garner, dressed in knicker and T-Shirt, was being arrested for peddling untaxed “loose” cigarettes. He was alleged to have been arrested earlier for selling untaxed cigarettes, marijuana possession and false impersonation. Days after the incident, television stations went agog with the video of the encounter, shot by a bye-stander. It showed Garner resisting arrest as a plain clothes police officer attempted to handcuff him. He told the policeman, “This stops today”, which is said to be a rallying cry for protesters in New York.

As the struggle ensued, eight year New York police department veteran, Daniel Panteleo, responded by putting his arm around Garner's neck in a chokehold, and wrestled him to the ground with the aid of other officers. Garner was heard gasping, “I can't breathe!” He was later pronounced death at a hospital. The New York police Department out-lawed checkhold over two decades ago, saying they could be deadly if administered inappropriately or carelessly.

Garner was visibly obese, as he was said to weigh 350 lb and also asthmatic – two factors that the medical examination said contributed to his death, which was pronounced, homicide.

At his funeral that July, the reverend Al sharpston said,

“Let's not play games with this one. You don't need no training to stop choking a man saying, “I can't breathe”. You don't need any cultural orientation to stop choking a man saying, “I can't breathe”. You need to be prosecuted”.

The police officer, Panteleo, was stripped of his gun and badge while investigation took place. Garner's death ignited protests and rallies in New York and other parts of US.

CELEBRATE BROOKLYN

My story of going to New York will not be complete without the mention a great Arts festival which I attended. It's called, “celebrate Brooklyn”, which holds annually at the Prospect Park. It's a performing Arts Festival founded in 1979. According to the President of BRIC (the organizers) Leslie Schultz, it is a summer-long festival of free music, dance, and films by talented and innovative artists, to help catalyze a performing arts scene in Brooklyn. It provides resources to launch, nurture and showcase local artists and media makers, accompanied by accessible, relevant educational and public programs for people of all ages. This is to ensure that creativity continues to develop and flourish in Brooklyn. I am a witness!

One of the days of this great event was Thursday, 31st July, 2014. I arrived the

Prospect Park, accompanied by two relatives. The spacious open green land was free to all. But you donate \$3 or more to the cheerful youth at the entrance, who welcome you to the Park. Side attractions abound, to eat, wine or buy local products. But visitors do not bring the following to the park: smoking, alcohol, cans and glass bottles. Also, coolers, pets, tents, pro cameras, video cameras and reading devices. However, some items are allowed: personal water bottle (non-glass), food, lawn chairs, blankets, strollers and umbrellas. The Park welcomes picnics but beer and wine are sold for on-site consumption, and may not be removed from the site.

The bandshell stage was well-decorated, and bore bold inscription, **CELEBRATE BROOKLYN**

First comers like myself would puzzle at the crowd and sitting arrangement – tumultuous and without classification, no VIP stands or State box. I saw people and faces from different cultures, some speaking languages I didn't understand. Haba, is it Pentecost Day? But it was a happy event for happy people at a happy environment.

The performance that night was hyped by the Dance Theatre of Harlem led by Leyla Mc Calla. The theatre was founded in 1969 by Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shock but Leyla is a New York – born cellist and singer with a romantic, mellifluous voice. As she sang and played her instrument sitting down, I noticed that her once attractive shape had succumbed to pregnancy – visible and beautiful!

When we stood up to go after some hours, people were still streaming into the Prospect Park as if the event was yet to start. I noticed two young men and a

girl wearing reggae-coloured headgears and holding hands, in nuptial compromise. It reminded me of another scenario earlier in the day. My brother, Lambert took me to a Jamaican Eatery in New York. It was a buffet, Jamaican cuisine, in Reggae style. People were clad in the fashion of Lucky Dube and Bob Marley, whose music filled the air but not quite stereophonic. The starter soup was a plate of hot variables, notably prawns and okro. I first picked the okro, and ate it. It tasted like the okro grown in my village. But we cook it with our variety of vegetables – ugu (pumpkin), uziza (piper guineese), okazi and utazi (gnetum Africanum). We also add goat meat, stockfish, 'kanda' (cow skin) and good peri winkle. Oh, I forgot crayfish! A good vegetable soup has the peri winkle cooked in their shells, so that as you eat, you suck out the tiny animals which hardly make mouthful but combine with other edibles to make the *fufu* pleasantly enjoyable.

The Jamaican eatery is a real good spot to unwind. Any wonder it's always busy, and the workers are quick to respond to table calls for Jamaican delicacy.

Talking about Jamaica, I love the people and their music, particularly their Reggae idol and ambassador, Jimmy Cliff. He came to Enugu, Nigeria – mid 70s and performed at Nnamdi Azikiwe stadium. I attended the show which featured his popular hits including "no woman no cry", 'many Rivers to cross', and 'my ancestors'. In USA there are 1,091,482 Jamaican Americans representing 0.3% of the US population. Of this number, 305,285 live in New York. Queens borough alone, is home to 93,153. Some popular Jamaican Americans are Colin Powell, Harry Belafonte, Tyson Beckford and Sheryl Lee Raph. According to voices of New York, when Christopher Columbus

discovered Jamaica in 1494, there were indigenous people living in Jamaica called the Arawaks. They migrated from Venezuela in 650 AD and 900 AD. Columbus heard the natives call the land “Xaymaca”, so he called the land “Jamaica”. Their language is the Jamaican patois, earlier known as creole, which emerged from pidgin. This pidgin was the emergent lingua franca, from the plantation owners' English language and the slave workers' African dialects. But how did this number of Jamaicans emerge in America? After the abolition of slavery in the United State of America in 1865, American plantation planters imported temporary workers, mainly Jamaicans, called “swallow migrants”, to harvest crops annually and return to their countries. Between 1881 and beginning of world war 1, the United States of America recruited over 250,000 workers from the Caribbean, 90,000 of whom were Jamaicans to work on the Panama Canal. Again during world war I and II, US recruited Jamaican men for service on various American bases. This explains why the majority of Jamaican Americans are of black Afro – Caribbean descent.

JAMAICAN AVENUE

Another popular place of visit in New York was the Jamaican Avenue, notable for shopping. I was told Saturday was a better market day but I was there on a Wednesday. Our car was parked at a space by the road side, \$1 per hour. The prices at the shops I visited were below my expectation, as they did not differ much from what I had seen at some shopping malls in the city, which had better variety, facilities, and environment.

On the day I made my bigger shopping, it was at the New York Mall. As I came out of the Exit gate, a black young man inside a stationary car asked me,

“Need a taxi?”

The car was not painted taxi colour though many are like that in New York. In Nigeria we call such cars “kaboo kaboo”. The guy wore a sleeveless shirt and looked suspicious. Nigeria Police Force have educated us not to be “Mr Simple” any where, anytime. So always, you employ your common and extra sensory perception. The guy could even belong to the group we locally call one chance” in Abuja, Nigeria's capital. They are dupes and if you fall prey they could hypnotize you, as your security is at your own risk.

‘So this group exists in New York?’ I soliloquized, ‘Na wa oh!’

Eight

EAST RIVER TUNNEL

It's the most exciting site I experienced in New York. Here, you're driving on a hard concrete road, under a big ocean. It amazed me to be riding in a car on a road, and a live ocean above. I was tempted to nearly sing,

“Come and see,
America wonder,
Come and see
America wonder...”

It was a rhythm we memorized in childhood when magicians, wearing cowboy hats, performed acts that baffled and amazed us! In my country we have bridges and tunnels where vehicles and trains pass above rivers. But the East River tunnel is the reverse. I said, “what about those mammywater (mermaids) that we were told at infancy reside in water, where did America pursue them to?”

This tunnel is not just a stone throw. It's 1,204 metres (3,949ft) long, and 7 metres (23ft) wide. It was constructed between 1904 and 1909, and was officially opened on September 8, 1910. There are four lines under the river, numbered South to North: Lines 1 and 2 run beneath 32nd street while lines 3 and 4 run beneath 33rd street.

As I cruised on this East River tunnel, seeing the big ocean above our car, I

quickly remembered an adage in my Igbo dialect,
“Bekee wu agbara”, meaning, the white man is an oracle!.

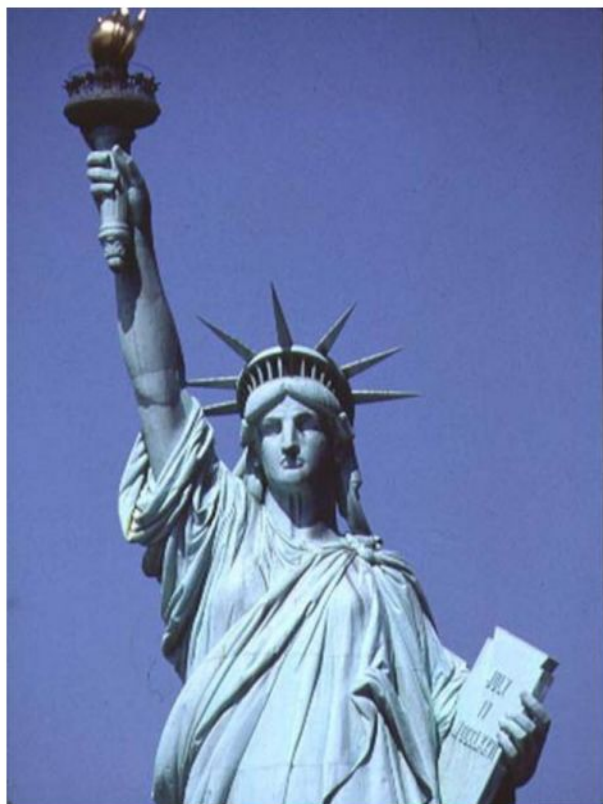
PARKS IN NEW YORK

Recreation and pleasure are prominent in the life and environment of New Yorkers. A lot of green places confirm the city is eco-friendly. Driving around the city or walking along the streets, you find parks neatly kept with flowers and trees that salute nature and uphold the beauty of creation. Infact it is said that 14% of New York City is covered by green spaces. Some of the public parks in the city are: Fort Greene Park located in Brooklyn, the High line park, opened in 2009 in Manhattan, the Brooklyn Bridge Park, Central park and the Flushing Meadows – Corona Park, which is New York's second biggest recreation park. Other parks are, the Hudson River Park, which is a strip of water front park stretching from Battery Park to 59th street. While there, you could walk, bike or skate while looking at the Hudson River and New Jersey. It has lots of flowers and well-laid out benches for picnics and visitors, for many programmes it hosts. As I sat there, I enjoyed the green and flowery environment and the beauty of the Hudson River and bridge. Another park in Manhattan is the Inwood Hill Park, which has a lot of trees due to its remote forest location. New York city's largest park is the Pelham Bay Park, which occupies a land space of 2,766 acres – three times the size of Central Park. It takes hours to explore, and some of its attractions are Orchard Beach, the Bartow – Pell Mansion Museum and the modern Pelham Bay Golf course. Another beautiful and busy park located in Brooklyn is known as the Highland Park. It has tennis courts, football pitch, lots of trees and a small lake. Also there are the Riverside Park in Manhattan, and the spacious Prospect Park in Brooklyn. Like the Central Park, Prospect Park was designed by Frederick

Law Olmsfed and Calvert Vank while Robert Moses is remembered for the parks amenities like the zoo and wollman Rink.

Many other parks abound in New York, that are well-maintained but it seems people are too busy to make good use of them as recreation outlets.

STATUE OF LIBERTY



I saw the statue of liberty in New York at Liberty Avenue. It's a big tourist centre dedicated on October 28, 1886. It is said to be a gift of friendship from the people of France to the United States of America. The artist and main architect was a French man, Frederic Auguste Bartholdi, whose media was

copper, gold, steel and cast iron for the height of 93 metres.

However, research have revealed that the “gift” project was a shared responsibility between France and USA. Infact Americans taxed themselves to have the project completed, and installed in New York despite difficulties, lack of funds and contesting host cities. It is also known that the French Engineer who designed Tour Eiffel in Paris, was the wizard who built the metal stand of this statue, whose total weight is 225 tons or 450,000 pounds.

Nine

REFLECTIONS

(i) **No Dollar on the streets of America!**

Many immigrants who dream to travel to the United States of America for greener pasture are full of expectation, weird and unreasonable. Most of these people are youths who are probably deceived by the conduct, life style and 'buoyancy' of returnee friends or relations who live in US. Because these people remit money home through Money-Gram, Western Union and other options for upkeep of their parents and siblings, purchase of land, houses or other properties or even ship container – loads of good home, they create a false impression that America is all Dollar everywhere! When some of them return even for burial ceremonies, they create scenes of expenditure galore and turn their undeveloped small villages into a make-shift limelight and plaza 'extraordinaire'. They thus create false impression about their foreign home, status and value, and make themselves targets for kidnappers and criminals. Yet some of them borrow money to return from where they came – US, Europe or Asia.

As I arrived and stayed in the United States, I did not find dollars on the streets of New York or any where else, but I met a clean, disciplined environment, peopled by folks who treasure freedom, democracy and hardwork. In America I found that 'there's no food for lazy man', and that you have to fight your way in through the narrow door. Everybody – man and woman – upholds

his business and finds job satisfaction in whatever he's doing, even selling cold bottled water on the street at \$1 each. Nobody jokes with his job, because it's the source of daily bread. You've got to do it, and get it right. If you can't produce or deliver, you're fired! And mind you, there's unemployment problem in the US also, so it's not easy getting another job. Yet guys who are productive keep and manage two jobs, even three, to make ends meet. They work more and sleep less, which may be why some age faster than their age mates at home.

(ii) **Lost Opportunity**

There's an adage, "opportunity comes but once", compelling you to make best use of any opportunity at first chance. Unfortunately this old saying has been cast into the lost land of *Atlantis* by some folks. Hence people have failed to utilize opportunities to improve themselves even in America which is the land of opportunities. These come in many forms, divine or human, consciously or unwittingly, most often unexpected, impromptu or salient. Here's a scenario of opportunity that came to three different folks, as a penalty kick, with the ball shifted closer to the goal post.

The first, active and alert, took a clean, sharp shot, and it was a goal! The second, sluggish and lackadaisical, fired a weak undirectional shot, it went over the bar. The third, always prayerful like many Nigerians, quietly walked to the point of the penalty kick without anxiety and zeal, and making people believe he was going to score a quiet goal, made sign of the cross on his chest and moved back and out, saying he was going to pray first before coming back to kick the penalty shot. But his time elapsed.

These three 'players' were in helpless, pitiable conditions, and had prayed God to save them from frustration, despair and destitution and restore viability, hope and improved living condition. God answered their prayers and offered the penalty kick opportunity.

The first player who was active and alert, and had scored a goal, rejoiced home to find abundance and fulfillment of God's mercy. He got a new job, moved into a new estate, bought a new car, and joined the class of stable income earners. The second, who was lazy and sluggish, and had fired an undirectional goalless shot, went away disappointed, disillusioned and desperate. He returned to his indigency and continued his life of hopelessness. Whenever he blinked his eyes, a bold inscription flowed on his face, NO FOOD FOR LAZY MAN. The third 'prayerful' player, whose ignorance denied him the fact that God does not spoonfeed anybody, went back to still pray for God to tell him when and how to fire the penalty kick. He failed to realize also that it's not every prayer that God answers. God had offered him opportunity through a bonus penalty kick, to lead him away from desperation and poverty. But he was a weakling, who prayed for prayer sake, and did not know the limitations of an answered prayer. So his miserable life continued, while he still prayed!

Some people wondered why this prayerful man should continue suffering. But they knew not that God had offered him food, which he expected to be placed on his dinning table, right inside his room!

(iii) **Fast and False Life**

Some people who dream to go to the United States of America begin 'American life' in their homes, neighbourhood, schools and anywhere. They

have wrong and false impression about the country discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492, and which is today the centre of independence, of technology, of education, of business and agriculture. They get passport and begin the search for visa by all means after repeated failure to get appointment from the US Embassy, or unsuccessful visa interview attempts. Some abandon their lectures and become drop outs hoping to read with scholarship in US. For them America is land of milk and honey, free job, free food, free education and enjoyment galore! They begin to live like “been-tos” and acquire big smart phones, whose ringtones can wake a deaf man from sleep! Some of them are prodigal in life style, compelling their poor parents to sell off landed property and other valuable possessions with hope that the journey to America would yield double compensation and reward. Some fellows who are sick of mere mild cough would not seek for medication with the conviction that in US the expectorant is served free, just for asking. When such people eventually arrive the United States, their challenges are many and their opportunities are few. What they expected is not what they see, what they see is not another planet, not a land of angels, not a paradise without tickets and gatekeepers. They become confused and confined to solitary life. Once they exhaust the dollar in their possession and without any tangible source of income, they depreciate and become depressed, making them very good candidates for deportation, that is, back to sender!

(iv) **DVC Lottery Scam**

In the years the American visa lottery flourished in Nigeria, many people fell victim to dupes. They sent fake letters and documents to many people with e-mail addresses notifying them of their luck and success and putting forward unsuspecting demands, which lured the 'lottery winner' to eventual payment.

Many students used their school fees for this gamble, as the fake documents told them that free apartments were provided for new immigrants, who're also paid social security dollars on arrival before their green cards secure them waiting jobs. But how can a reasonable fellow accept to win a lottery which he did not stake? Unfortunately most of these victims did not contact the American Embassy for verification or confirmation of their purported lottery win. By the time they remembered the Embassy's relevance their money had gone and their stupidity accumulated in their aorta while depression and frustration circulated in their arteries and veins like de-oxygenated blood! All these in the bid to go to America. But Nigeria was removed from the list in 2015 and Ashley Garrigus, spokesperson for the US citizenship and immigration services explained: "The Congressional – Mandated Diversity Immigration Visa Programme (DV) makes available up to 55,000 diversity visa each year, drawn from random selection among all entries to persons who meet strict eligibility requirements from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States. The section of the law establishing The Diversity programme limits the list of "eligible countries" to those countries from which fewer than 50,000 persons in various visa categories immigrated to the United States during the previous five years. Those born in any territory that has sent more than 50,000 immigrants to the United State in the previous five years are not eligible to receive a diversity visa".

(v) **Love Connection**

In my novel, "The Chains Are Broken", there was a scenario where a man who was sponsored to USA by a woman lover was later shot dead in the air craft conveying him home. The lady committed the crime because the "lover boy" reneged his promise to marry her after she had sponsored him out of poverty

into US, and helped him develop educationally, socially and financially. Many people today still make the mistake of promising and failing their loved ones, after they have achieved their objectives in foreign land. Conversely some men are also victims of failed love. They have hurriedly married a lady and backed her across the shores of Lagos into the United States or Britain. The lady later found another sex mate, turned into another partner, and nurtured into a new relationship. The consequence was a new marriage, compelling the man to rush home to narrate his nuptial misfortune to his kinsmen. At times young men in US, Europe or Asia, lure home girls into marriage whereas they have concubines living with them. Once they return home and spread the Dollar, Pound or Euro, parents and relations encourage the innocent lady to “follow, follow”.

Many ladies are also eager to travel to the United States, and they look out for guys who can take them over there at all costs, kind and cash! There are instances where some residents abroad return home, spraying foreign currency and powered by infatuation, gets into a relationship and impregnates a lady, promising to marry her. He then returns to his base, living the pregnant lover with her parents, and sending her peanut remittance. The lady continues telling enquirers, “my husband is abroad”, until she completes gestation period, and delivers in a home maternity amidst poverty, depression, frustration and regret.

(vi) **No Scholarship, No Job, No VIP!**

Many young people who are eager to go to the United States of America believe that scholarships and jobs abound, waiting for them on arrival. It may have been so in the past, when there was no influx, when the policy was not

strict. Today things have changed and because people abused the scholarship privileges, non-nationals do not easily get scholarship again to study in US. Also indigenes of poor and developing countries whose citizens seek US scholarships, are owners of expensive and luxury mansions and estates in choice locations in US cities and other foreign countries. Oil, tourism, and natural mineral have largely and recently developed the economies of many African countries. This boom is expected to pull foreign students and other indigenes out of indigency and stop them from scampering for foreign aids and scholarships. These days, education in US is expensive and job opportunities for foreigners have been drastically reduced. Today America is concerned more with the welfare of her citizens, and the fight against terrorism, especially since 9th September, 2011. It's equally not easy again for foreigners to get jobs to pay for their education. Many students in US have their school fees remitted from home. Some are still doing odd – man jobs to make ends meet.

My advice for anybody planning or wishing to go to the United States of America, is to develop an independent mind, and drop self ego. If you want a VIP treatment , not in God's own country! If you cannot serve, nobody would serve you, and if you are lazy, you may die of hunger.

(vii) **America has Changed!**

During my stay in New York, a fellow Nigerian told me solemnly,

“I am just fed up here, America has changed. Infact I want to return. Please James, start looking for job for me there in Nigeria....”

I hissed, “What are you talking about? You want to jump from frying pan to fire? Any way come home and see whether change is not constant and

universal. The rains are already in their season, and you would farm manually with us in the village, eating roasted corn with pears, and drinking garri with groundnuts". Look let me tell you", I continued, "there's no job anywhere in Nigeria. Graduates who came out of school six years ago, are today driving commercial keke na pep (tricycle) and selling GSM recharge cards on the streets of Lagos, Abuja and Port Harcourt. Some have become emergency pastors of their own churches, claiming to perform miracles. The few job vacancies are even for sale, ranging between two hundred thousand and five hundred thousand Naira, depending on the position and your qualification".

When we parted, I realize that some people who're living in the United States have passed through America but America has not passed through them. So they are still 'primitive', undeveloped, unexposed, unassociating, infact unchangeable!. Those who have changed, developed themselves, and are living comfortably in the United States of America, have unwittingly become victims of the 'lost generation'. They're not likely to return to their native homeland to live, to work or to engage in permanent endeavours. They could visit home, say 'Hi' to kinsmen, spread some dollars,, and fly back within two weeks. Even if they're buying property, building houses and enquiring about events, it's all of the flesh, their heart is in the foreign land. Some die and are cremated against the culture and religion for which they're known. Their children who're schooling and working there don't know about their root, their tradition, and their language. Back home, their native society does not provide them the conducive and enabling environment to return. The government pays lip service to citizen's rights and social amenities, creating a factual picture of poverty, insecurity, unemployment and unequal opportunities. Some returnees have lost their lives to bandits and kidnappers

in questionable circumstances. I met a friend in New York who told me,
“I can manage poverty in US, but not in Nigeria”.

(viii) **Kinsmen, their tricks, their Hazard!**

Kinsmen are another obstacle to some people living in us and other foreign countries. They really do not wish them to return home, to begin again to discuss and struggle about inheritance and land issues. Some immigrants were even encouraged by these kinsmen to travel to the whiteman's land, to give them space, opportunity and freedom to occupy, take over and manage collective responsibility, assets and liability. Thus they are at the receiving end of Western Union, money gram, phone calls and other messages from their brother travelees, who might be permanent residents or illegal immigrants in the United States of America or else where. They assure them that they are able and ever ready to protect their interests at home, even looking after aged parents, who seek for the presence of their sons not just dollar or courier packages! These old parents at times die out of neglect, frustration, desolation, and poor medical attention. Their sons and daughters forget that everything is not money. Physical presence habitation and companionship can heal, provide succor and extend the lifespan of that diabetic, arthritic, or prostrate stricken octogenarian. Occasionally he's helped to the bank, to answer 'test questions' like, mother's maiden name or date and venue of honey moon, in order to secure remittance of money gram or Western Union. It's another seemingly tax-free industry, often causing frustration rather than consolation and contentment. That section of the bank is an outlet for foreign currency. Fraudsters within and outside the sector have also cashed in to try their luck, and cat away money belonging to the bank or some one else. It's as if the Dollar, Euro or Pound sterling is on a pedestal in a

market place beckoning on courageous buyers to try their luck! Indeed it's for reasons of regular remittance that parents and relations readily accede to demands of intending US travellers. Their prayer is that the local currency continues to depreciate against the dollar and other foreign currencies, so that the exchange rate remains high at the detriment of the national legal tender. This causes inflation, high cost of living, trade imbalance and even currency devaluation. This remittance issue is no doubt a private sector – affair, and seemingly out of control by the governments. Yet it is a fundamental factor on the diaspora tabloid. According to BBC, “analysis of cash flow by Hongkong based Ghanaian academic, Adams Bodomo, shows that Africans living outside the continent send more money home to their families than is sent by traditional Western aid donors in what is called Official Development Assistance (ODA). According to Bodomo, in 2010, African diaspora remitted \$51.8 bn (£34 bn) to the continent. In the same year, according to World Bank figures, ODA to Africa was \$43 bn (£28 bn).

“World wide remittances from people who hail from developing countries totaled \$350 bn, far exceeding ODA at \$130 bn”. The same study by Professor Adams Bodomo of University of Hong Kong also discovered that in Africa, 75% remittances are sent informally such as through a friend who's travelling home on holidays. He also revealed that 12% of diaspora money sent home through formal financial channels is swallowed up by bank fees.

A question therefore goes to immigrants living in US and other parts of the world: *These huge sum of Dollars going to Africa annually, as remittances, is your own counted?* Have you invested wisely at your home, have you touched lives? What would you be remembered for? That you're living in US, Europe or Asia, earning good foreign currency and your people and village

community still struggle in squalor and abject poverty?

Gifts from Returnees

Some people when they're coming back from US and other foreign countries they consider their relations at home as lower, poor and wretched homo-sapiens, who would smile at any gifts at all. So they go for cheap collectibles, remnants, throw-aways and left-overs. Some others buy perfumes, toilet soaps, disposable electronics and gadgets which themselves cannot use. Some even save their Dollar, and buy materials when they arrive Lagos. On the contrary, some immigrants generously procure valuable materials for their people at home. An Engineer who has lived in the United States for many years told his staff and colleagues in the office, to deposit their used clothings with his secretary. He told them he would take the articles home for his relations. A canteen attendant who brought some worn-out sweaters met him arranging the 'donations', then asked him, "These your relations, are they refugees?"

When he returns home, he distributes the materials joyously, dashing few local currency also to some people. Many of his benefactors receive oversized and rough clothings which he could not launder before distribution. Unknown to him, some recipients went away and discarded the materials especially if they were older than what they wore to visit him. One of his kinsmen swore never to visit him again. When he returned to his house, he summoned his wife and children, fuming and lamenting, "See what my brother returnee gave me, just because I visited him, to say welcome. Does he think that we at home are naked like apes, and starving?"

He directed his undergraduate son to take the material outside, pour kerosene on it, and burn it to ashes because he suspected the sickly dress carried aids.

“No dad” his son replied him, “aids is transmitted through blood”.

“Yes”, he retorted, 'I saw patches of blood on it, as well as dried perspiration”.

