

Two in One

Ethnographic Project by
Zainab Adeniran-Obe

I chose to schedule a conversation-styled, ethnographic interview with my sister, “Shola”. To clarify, my sister is not actually my sister; she is my aunt. Shola is my mother’s younger sister, and the youngest of my grandmother’s six children. My mother essentially raised my aunt; because of that, my aunt is referred to as my sister, and she refers to my mother as her own mother. In my heart she is my sister, and we share an incredibly strong bond.

Currently, Shola is a registered nurse, is married, and has two children both under the age of three. She displays multiple characteristics of a culturally blended American and Nigerian person. For example, she still has the Yoruba (tribe from Nigeria that our family descends from) accent that she came to the States with over 15 years ago and eats more Yoruba food than American food, but she uses American colloquialisms, dresses very “American”, and rears her children in a more American fashion than a Nigerian one, which we address lightly in this ethnography. She does not embrace the “elders are above everyone and everything” mentality that traditional Nigerians embrace. Instead, Shola treats me as an equal, despite having an over ten-year age difference over me. This year marks Shola having lived exactly half of her life in Nigeria and living half her life in America. I wanted to understand how her experiences have shaped her perception of her self and identity, especially as a woman who became an immigrant during such a critical time in her life, her teenage years.

I wanted the conversation to be as natural and as revealing as possible. For the interview, I arrived randomly at Shola’s townhome with my iPhone to record, and my laptop to jot down notes. I didn’t have to convince Shola to relax since she has never had any issue with being open with discussing her experiences. We talked for a moment and then dove into the interview. I began with the question,

“What was the Nigeria that you grew up in?”

“The Nigeria that I grew up in was fun. It was safe at the time. There was not too much poverty, and it was not overpopulated like it is now. There were definitely no computers, no internet, none of that. Family was always around to support you, and the neighbors were pretty much your family.”

Shola grew up in Lagos, the most densely populated city in Nigeria. During the school year, she lived in a boarding school in Kwara State, and she attended the school from 7 to 17 years of age. Most of her memories were of her experiences at the boarding school that she attended. She described them as both good and bad. The good was held within her experiences with her peers, from clapping games of “ten-ten”, to gossip and mischief. Her negative memories however, were from her occasional feelings of loneliness, and at times, fear. Adults at the school utilized corporal punishment on anything that they found disapproval in. Although she states that it taught her to stay on her toes, she viewed the teachers’ use of constant physical punishment as excessive.

Her family life was also unique in that my mother raised her during the first years of her life, before my mother left for America. Her parents were not as present during her childhood. Her father, at times, was not willing to fund her schooling when she moved to Kwara State. She states that he didn’t care for her education and he found it to be costly. Her mother would pay her school fees begrudgingly, allowing Shola to be able to receive an education. Shola says that it is known that my mother’s relationship with her parents was more positive than her own relationship with them, but she chooses not to question why the differences existed.

“How was growing up in a boarding school?”

“You basically raised yourself in boarding school. Yes, you were with your peers, but they were trying to figure their own stuff out too. You ended up being independent because of it. The schedule was rigid, and you made sure to take care of yourself and duties, unless you wanted

to get reprimanded. With things like puberty, your parents would prep you, but after that you were on your own in school. You still ended up figuring things out on your own along with your peers”.

I ask her if she had any hard feelings towards her parents and she answered “no.” In fact, her mother lives with her currently and Shola is always out running errands for her and making sure that she is comfortable. The relationship is, at times, tense, but mostly loving. Children in traditional Nigerian culture are expected to care for their parents. Kinship is a powerfully important thing.

“We had a different dynamic, but that doesn’t mean that they loved me any less.”

“Since my mother raised you, what did you think when she left for America?”

“I felt sad. I wasn’t told at all. As a traditional Nigerian child, you aren’t told anything. Children’s feelings aren’t nurtured, unfortunately. You do what you are told, and you live your life. I saw the process of her leaving, but I was very little and didn’t fully understand what was going on. Your mother would still send me gifts and money for tuition so believe me, my life wasn’t as sad as I’m painting it to be. I had some obstacles, but I had fun as a child too.”

I was impressed by the level of acceptance Shola had with getting separated from her sister and her distant parents. I wondered if the tradition of adults expecting their youth to simply accept decisions and changes without question had anything to do with her mentality.

“You were the youngest of 6 children. How did you end up going to America before the rest of your sibling?”

“I was invited by mom [her sister]. Well, I was told that I was going to America, and that was it. I remember the process, back in 1996, of getting my photo taken for my passport, sending my transcripts from school, and going to the embassy for an interview.”

“Did you have any fears about America?”

“No! I was excited and my friends from school were also so happy for me. They would tell me, ‘O, don’t forget us! Invite us to come visit you in America!’ America was going to be

paradise as far as I was concerned. I wouldn't have to do anything like work or school. I would no longer have to wash my clothes. I would live like a queen."

We both laughed at the absurdity of her past perceptions of America.

"Where did you get those concepts from?"

"That's what I heard from other people! We had television, but with unreliable electricity, it was basically decoration in the corner."

"How was the night before going off to America?"

She laughs again, "There was no send off. It was treated as nothing special at all. I didn't have anything packed or myself, and didn't think of getting contacts from my friends. Luckily, I knew the address of the boarding school, and I was able to write to them anyway. My suitcase was full of egusi and food and things that my mom [her sister] requested for, but not many personal items."

"What were some memories that stood out to you upon arrival to the United States?"

Shola's eyes lit up, as she appeared to relive her memories that she began to describe to me.

"I remember feeling like I arrived in a new world. It was very odd seeing mom [her sister] after so many years, because our relationship was not the same as it had been when she was in Nigeria with me. I felt like I was on a different planet. Nigeria was so chaotic and loud and rough. America, on the other hand, was neat. Women were driving; I was so amazed by the fact that mom was not only driving, but she was driving her own nice and privately owned car! Her outfit was different in comparison to what I was used to, but she looked beautiful. Everything was beautiful and nice compared to Nigeria, which was so shabby and broken down and not kept up."

Her arrival to the United States matched her expectations in the beginning, she said. Everything seemed perfect. The roads were smooth, people were obeying traffic laws, which highlighted a sense of order, and there was quiet.

“The town home was beautiful. I found that garbage area outside to be so fascinating, and I could not get over the neatness and organization. There were also a lot of rooms and the TVs actually worked! I could watch whatever I wanted. The refrigerator worked which meant that I could eat whenever I wanted too! The phone worked and I could make phone calls whenever. What blew my mind the most was the microwave.” She laughs and explains that the idea of it was amazing. It was like magic the first time she used it. “Another thing that was small, but found to be so beautiful, was this lamp in the shape of an egg that was in my room. To this day, I’m still upset that I broke it!”

It was interesting to listen to what we would consider subtle details that Shola noticed immediately. Her first steps out of the airport, unto the roadways, and into my mother’s townhome, was the first time that she was exposed to unlimited resources. Her excitement of the TV working continuously, and being able to eat whatever she wanted, was Shola absorbing the indication that she was leaving some of the limitations of Nigeria behind her.

“So, when did reality set in?”

“Reality didn’t set until school started.” Shola arrived in April of 1997 and entered High school as a junior that fall. “The kids at school were not as welcoming as the kids in Nigeria at all. They were all into doing their own thing. I found it so strange that the students would stop and kiss in the hallways, or put on make-up, or eat in class without getting in trouble. My peers back home would never have considered these actions unless they wanted to get a good beating. I just found the student and teacher relationship to be so odd. No one called the teachers ‘sir’ or ‘ma’, and no one looked the teachers in the eye when they spoke to them. I was so used to acknowledgement of authority and being quiet and focusing on my books. My computer teacher was so cruel to me. She would have students talk for her when she wanted to give me instructions. She ignored questions that I had, and avoided me as much as possible. I didn’t know how to work a computer! I was still impressed by the fact that my T.V. worked! America at first was stranger and not as friendly as I expected it to be.”

Despite the struggles, Shola chose to embrace the culture.

“ I wanted to be more like them [the American high school students]. I followed what they were doing. It was fun. In Nigeria, at least when I lived there, there was no idea of ‘the typical teenager’. It was great to have freedom of choice and drive and wear make up and dress up for the first time.”

“How is your mindset now and how was it when you were in Nigeria?”

“Back in Nigeria, I had the ‘Nigerian mentality’. ‘You can’t do that!’ ‘Ori e baje’ [Yoruba for ‘your head is spoiled’]. I was very judgmental of when people did things out of what I perceived to be normal. If you had no money, you most likely didn’t go to school or were reduced to begging. There were no loans or credits to take out. Even if you worked, your boss may have not paid you. There was a lot of stagnancy, and I think that stagnancy manifested itself in the way I viewed things. You didn’t really expect to move up any ladders, and in a way, I was complacent in the idea of joining the family business like everyone else did in their own families.

In America, I feel like my mind expanded out of the boundaries that they were contained in from living in Lagos. America made me more liberal and a go-getter, for sure. I am more independent. I am not reliant on someone helping me or waiting for my family to assist me. I am my own person here. I definitely have had more opportunities here, and because of it, I am smarter, wiser, and more experienced in life. I don’t have to worry about not being paid at my job. To receive an education, I was able to take out loans if I couldn’t afford it completely. Things that would have tied me down in Nigeria didn’t really exist in the States, and I was able to become the person that I wanted to be. I was able to experience life beyond what I was born into and develop real confidence and my own identity outside of my family.”

“How would you summarize what you’ve absorbed from living in America?”

“I’ll admit, it was fun becoming what I thought was the new me during my high school years, but after graduating I felt extremely lost and confused and unprepared. I think I was experiencing internal conflict. In Nigeria, I felt like there was no movement; you just went to

school, if you could afford to, and then you joined your family's business, or you left it to God to help you. In America, you can actually build and mold yourself into whatever without extreme judgment, for the most part. I was afraid, I guess of the idea of being whatever I wanted since I was so used to not having a real dream. I was searching for my true self and trying to break that old mentality of the expected stagnancy. It took me a while to really get the concept that I can be that person who goes to school, and owns her own house and car. When I internalized that idea, I definitely developed a true sense of self in America. That's what I gained from being here. The opportunities here allowed me to actually live.

"Do you feel more Americanized then?"

"I thought about it the other day and I came to the conclusion that I really don't. I don't feel like a Nigerian either. I feel like me.

"How do you define yourself then?"

"That's a hard one. I don't know if I can answer that. I'll get back to you if I ever figure that out."

How do you plan on raising your children?

"In God's way. I don't believe in beating my kids like Nigerians traditionally do. I want to explain things to my children so that they can understand why things are bad or good. They will remember that they are Nigerian in blood. They will know the language and eat the food, but they're allowed to embrace American culture like I did."

We continued to talk about her struggles in regards to fitting in with her peers by attempting to dress and speak like an American. We also discussed the internal conflict that she experienced when she began to go against her Nigerian beliefs, in order to move towards embracing the lifestyle of an American. Her clashing with Nigerian culture was hard to accept and in many ways made her an "other" to members of our family. Our aunts and uncles began to refer to her as an 'Americana' as she began dating, eating American foods, working, and moving towards embracing what she perceived to be America. Eventually, it became the natural process

of cultural change. She began to find her true self, and in fact appears to continue to do so, 17 years after her immigration experience. Shola may have issues defining her true self because her blend of being American and Nigerian is a unique characteristic. Like many immigrants, she had the opportunity to select from parts of both cultures that she wanted to retain. Relocating to America during her teenage years may have allowed her to retain a more balanced acceptance of both her cultures, in comparison to others who immigrated earlier in years or much later, when they have already established their own identity. Identity is complex and at times difficult to characterize. Being an immigrant adds to the complexity as belonging to two different cultures does not necessarily equate to identifying to with those two cultures.