

A Nigerian Looks at America

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As a superannuated foreign student about to return to Nigeria after more than twenty years in the United States, I feel ready to venture some answers to the question Americans have asked me hundreds of times, namely: What do I think of their country?

To start, I must observe that both the country and I have changed considerably in the time I have been here. When I first arrived as a young man who grew up in rural eastern Nigeria, I found America an enchanted garden and a magic shop. Over the years, as I became used to the glitter, I found much that repulsed me and much to disagree with. Then again, as I stayed longer, I matured to realize that America, like every country, is a mixture of good and bad, with no monopoly on virtue and wisdom as some Americans believe, or on vice and folly as some detractors suggest.

America is prismatic and elusive. The picture that comes to my mind when I reflect on it is not singular, uniform or coherent; it is not a postcard landscape but a series of colorful splashes, a blinding psychedelic light show.

As a song, America is a loud, discordant chant, a thousand disco bands in an echo chamber, a series of outbursts—Pow! Whee! Kazook!--like the text of a Batman or Superman cartoon.

Life in this country is crowded, frenetic, and breathless. Americans loathe physical idleness the way nature is supposed to loathe a vacuum; silence makes them equally uncomfortable.

Discipline

In temperament, America is young and hyperactive, unwilling and unable to ponder deeply or at length. Americans apprehend rather than comprehend ideas. They do not have the discipline or the endurance to wrap their minds around a thought. Instead they prefer to grab, snatch, or make a stab at it. Their mental energies are usually exerted as pulses rather than as continuously flowing force. Americans tend to be direct and literal rather than allusive and figurative, stark rather than subtle. They are happier dealing with statistics than with nuances.

If America were a building it would be an office block or a skyscraper—a structure of steel, concrete, and glass, massive but without curves or complication.

Detesting the ponderous, the complex, and the inconclusive, Americans simplify and abbreviate everything they come across. Even "Hello" and "Goodbye" are shortened to "Hi" and "Bye." Some analysts have suggested that America abandoned the Vietnam War effort simply because it became bored with its inconclusiveness.

In lieu of philosophers, modern America produces copywriters and social scientists. American folk wisdom excludes anything that cannot be placed on a poster or bumper sticker and read at a glance. Americans like an epigram or a catchy and alliterative jingle, with, if at all possible, a sexually suggestive double-entendre.

American social and intellectual life is so bathed in clichés that it is nearly impossible to think a fresh or original thought. Try to think in America and your head swarms with ready-made phrases, stock expressions, and instant, prepackaged ideas. These are continually belched into the atmosphere like verbal exhaust and inhaled like smog by everyone who lives within the country's borders.

Then the fumes are repackaged, relabeled, and recirculated by armies of new-idea hucksters--professional or self-anointed experts on human behavior. To turn a quick profit, they market half-baked ideas, grandiloquent pap, and pedestrian observations masquerading as science.

Americans are an inquisitive people, not inclined to leave anything alone. If you give an American child a package, he will quickly tear off the wrappings. If he finds a toy inside, he will start to play with it immediately. He will play feverishly for a while and then discard the toy out of boredom. Later, he might take it apart to see what makes it go. By contrast, a traditionally reared African child is inclined to savor the mystery of what is inside the package for some while. When he eventually uncovers the toy, he will play with it only a little at a time, so as not to use it up.

"That is why you Africans never made any progress," an American friend said to me once when I made the above comparison. "You never bothered to investigate the mysteries around you." Maybe. It is true that one has to break an egg to make an omelet, but an egg is much more than just an ingredient for an omelet. A fundamental danger that America poses to itself--and to a world it now dominates--is its tendency to relegate every available egg to the making of omelets.

Extremes

In the final analysis, Americans are merely human, though some of my American friends bristle when lumped together with the rest of mere humanity. What distinguishes America as a culture is the peculiar blend of human characteristics that are emphasized. Those traits usually touted in Fourth of July speeches individualism, unrestrained freedom, competition--have served the country well up to a point. They are sometimes pursued to such extremes, however, that they end up vulgarizing human life and spirit.

Living successfully in modern America, no matter how or where one chooses to live, can be like trying to hail a cab in Times Square after the theater on a rainy Saturday night: it demands more than a little Philistinism. The "American way of life" is not founded on the interplay of human virtues supporting and encouraging one another, but rather on competing human appetites keeping one another in check. America blunts one's finer sensibilities by insisting that life is a grabfest, a jungle, a dog-eat-dog fight.

All of the above notwithstanding, I have quite enjoyed my stay here and obtained a good education. My criticisms apply mainly to American institutions rather than American people. As individuals Americans are kind, gracious, and very generous. To put it in cliché-ese, some of my best friends are Americans.

ESSAY TOPIC

Echewa calls America "prismatic and elusive," suggesting the inherent difficulty in meaningfully describing something so vast as a modern, complex nation. Still he attempts to describe America and in a brief space. How complete and accurate do you find his description? Develop your response by discussing specific claims made (or unmade) by Echewa. Your discussion, of course, should be grounded upon a central idea.