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NIGERIA, 1950
AGE UNKNOWN
MODE OF TRANSPORTATION TO THE U.S. UNKNOWN

NASH: Today I have the pleasure of visiting with Mr. Michael Babatunde Olatunji, who is the director and founder of the Olatunji Center for African Studies.

OLATUNJI: African Culture.

NASH: Excuse me, African Culture. And Mr. Olatunji came to this country originally in 1953.

OLATUNJI: 1950.

NASH: My facts are wrong, in 1950, and he has been back and forth many times since then, but today we are going to discuss the original reason

of why he came to the United States and something about his adjustment in the United States and the problems that he encountered and the people that he met and the things that he did. First, I would like to begin by asking Mr. Olatunji to tell us something about where he came from.

OLATUNJI: Thank you very much. I came from a beautiful fishing village called Ajido, about forty-five miles from the capitol, Lagos, known in the traditional way as the Ako. It was a blessing that I grew up there in this kind of a place where the tradition was actually taught to young people from the time of birth. It was also a great opportunity for me to be accustomed to city life because even though I was born in Ajido, I was bred and educated in Lagos where I attended the Baptist Academy run by the Southern Baptist Convention, and they have been in Nigeria for over a hundred years now. My childhood days I can remember most vividly with satisfaction that even though I didn't have the modern toys that children today play with, yet I played with all of the things that nature has to produce or that nature has blessed mankind with. I lived near the lagoon, I lived near the ocean, so I learned how to fish and to paddle. I follow my brothers and cousins to the farm so I learn how to plant the seed that formerly and later germinate into beautiful flowers, things to eat. I grew up in a situation whereby I enjoy listening to beautiful singing birds early in the morning where the cock crows at five, where the, what most people might consider the noisy waves of the sea, probably remind me today of the thundering rhythms of the drums. I grew up in a situation whereby

our music and dance really covers all the vicissitudes of life because when a child is born there is singing and dancing. When you become an adolescent and you come of age, there is singing and dancing. When you took the giant step of getting married, there is singing and dancing and rejoicing. And we also learned that when a person dies there is singing and rejoicing, drumming. So it became a way of life from childhood. I also realize that I was fortunate enough to know a little bit about city life because Lagos was a metropolitan city like New York City. So I went to school there and from there, probably now I believe I was prepared for whatever New York or any big city in the United States has to offer, to a degree that is. So my sole reason for coming to United States of America was to whet my appetite for knowledge. In the Colonial days the educational system was really limited to high school level. We did not have any university in Nigeria. Those who really would like to pursue the education to that level would have to go to Cambridge or Oxford, and this is not always possible with the masses of the people. So it was simply few Nigerians who were well-to-do or who really had the contact in those days were able to send their sons and daughters to become doctors, engineers, and lawyers. In 1950, I don't know whethers you can call it a miracle, or it was just fortune or fate, I had the opportunity of coming to this country, through the help of a beautiful southern gentleman, who was elected president of the Rotary Educational Foundation of Atlanta, Georgia, a human being in the real sense of the word, a universal man. He came up with the idea that if America is to be appreciated and known all over the world, and loved, there should be an exchange

of students from all over the world to come and see America, to learn about America, and to be able to take something back, not only to benefit, as he used to say, their own countries, but humanity and mankind in general. So when he became the head of the Rotary Educational Foundation of Atlanta, Georgia, he started a program of bringing students from all over the world, and here again I say I was very lucky that my cousin and I, who is now a professor at one of our universities, were the first two Africans to be brought under this program. We received four years full scholarship to Morehouse College in Atlanta, the alma mater of Dr. Martin Luther King, and so many great, great, Americans. Our whole idea about America was quite different from what we found it to be. We were told that it is a land of opportunity for all, for those who can work very hard, and that you can really take pride in being a self-made person, if you are not lazy. However, we discovered that Africa was very, very, unpopular, that all people know about Africa was what they actually learned from Hollywood movies. So it became a tremendous task and responsibility on our shoulders to really correct this image of Africa. And how can an eighteen-year-old engage in this kind of, what seems to be an impossible task at that time. The immigration laws in those days, probably we didn't realize it because our papers were processed and the responsibility for our being here was assumed by the Rotary Educational Foundation of Atlanta, Georgia. We really didn't understand what it was all about. But, when we came and we discovered that we were not going to be receiving stipends from home because our parents couldn't afford it, we are not going to be able to spend summer at home because there was no money,

so the necessity of securing a job became a great task, a difficult task that was in those days for us. The immigration laws were not flexible, and because the United States in the early 1950s did not have that much contact or much to do with Africa, being most of the African countries were still under colonial rule, we found it very, very difficult to obtain job permits in those days, even to work during the summer. But because of the dynamic personality and leadership of the president of Morehouse College, who is now President Emeritus, Dr. Benjamin Mays, very well known all over the world and also in this country, we were able to get little jobs here and there in Atlanta waiting tables and doing odd jobs, but mostly, most of the time working in the college library, just to be able to have a little change in our pocket to buy just the little basic necessities for our survival. And this is how it all started.

NASH: You mentioned before that after you graduated and you obtained your B.A., that you found that this was not enough to really obtain a good job in Nigeria, and probably in the United States as well, and that you wanted to go on to graduate school, but at that point you encountered some other difficulties? Could you go into that?

OLATUNJI: Yes. Well, we have to understand, I remember very well that Nigeria, like Ghana and quite a few other countries, were still under the English colonial rule in the 1950s when we came here. Not until recently, before most of these countries, you know, started to recognize American degrees, so

getting an ordinary B.A. is not anything to be proud of. So you really want to continue, but how do you do that? Very few universities in this country in 1950, '51 through '54, '55, maybe '56, even up to '57, were really interested in doing anything for African students, with the exception of those who came under southern missionary programs. So it became very, very difficult for us to get the immigration to understand that if we are going to go to graduate school we will have to work, and in order to be able to fit it into the kind of program that most of the universities, you know, in the country really provide for students who like to, who work and go to school, it would mean that we will have to have permanent residence. So the whole question, the whole situation developed that we seemed not to be able to qualify to obtain this.

NASH: There is something that I don't understand. Were the laws regarding work different in regard to graduate school than in regard to undergraduate school?

OLATUNJI: The laws were not different, but when you are going for your graduate studies you probably will not have the, be in the situation where you still live on the campus as you did, you know, on the graduate days or years. So it becomes paramount and important that you will have to rent an apartment or just a room somewhere or how will you take care of this. At least most schools,and I will say

Morehouse, the administration there was very kind in that they did not bother us when we didn't have money to pay for our meals, so we were able to eat. They did not bother us when we didn't have money to pay for some of the things that students are required to pay for, like student activity fees, but when you go to graduate school you must be on a grant or fellowship. I am saying that most universities were not awarding fellowships, even study fellowships, giving you a part-time job in your department to be able augment, you know, against the tuition fees. For instance, in my case, by the time I finished at Morehouse in 1954, I decided that I really would like to come to New York because New York reminded me of Lagos where I grew up as a metropolitan city, the melting pot, you know, New York is of the world, and Lagos was like that because people came from all parts of Nigeria, all parts of Africa, at least West Africa in Lagos, and from overseas as well. So New York and Harlem, you know, really put the whole thing, you know, into that kind of perspective for me. When I registered at NYU, it was very difficult for me to maintain an A average or a B plus average, so I would have to manage with a B or a C plus, well, I managed not to get a D or F because...

NASH: Why was it so difficult?

OLATUNJI: Difficult because I have to work from seven to three in the afternoon. And most time I don't get any job so it become very difficult for me to concentrate on my studies because I have all the personal problems. The personal problems being that, you know, the way to maintain myself so that I can be the kind of good student that I would like to be. The schools were not really oriented because it's not really, you know, in their program to give foreign students scholarship.

NASH: Did you ever actually encounter any difficulties with immigration? Did they ever know that you were working and give you any kind of problems?

OLATUNJI: Oh, let me see. With the Immigration Department, I think it took me almost, oh, about three years before I could really get my permanent residence. And I think my marriage to an American citizen, you know, really helped in a great deal, even though that wasn't the basic reason why I married. I just fell in love with this beautiful human being who really attracted my attention in many ways because she is dynamic, she's still dynamic as she was in those days, she is provocative, she's very, very, well, vast, you know, she has an understanding of what is going on in the world. She has traveled herself,

coming from the South, she has left the South to do her graduate studies in the North. So we had quite a few things in common. But, I think for a couple of years, for two years I would say, the question was being thrown back and forward I should have permanent residence. And I don't think because Nigeria did not become independent until 1960, you know, there was no quota system at that time for Nigeria, that's another reason for how many actually could be put into or get in that status. I think that's the way it works. Because Nigeria was under colonial rule the quota was very, very small. In comparison with the number of students here, it didn't go around, with the result that the immigration was actually making sure that the quota is not increased, but they were not encouraging students, you know, to really have their permanent residence. But, I am quite sure, as I can remember, being a student leader myself, a President of the African Students Union Association, which was one of the reasons why we formed the organization so that we can discuss mutual problems and see how we can, as one people, solve these as a force, you know, be able to get to the root of the problem and help ourselves. Those were the reasons why I believe that the immigration law was so, what do you call it?

NASH: Discriminatory?

OLATUNJI: So strict, not discriminatory, and to use the word discriminatory, it's just that there were no provisions for people from Africa, especially people from countries that were still under colonial rule. We have

to remember that not until 1957, when Ghana became independent, that the policy of the United States of America towards Africa became a positive one, if there was ever one. If there was one before, it was just done in conjunction with the ally which is Great Britain. So we were caught in the middle. Those of us who came here to whet our appetite for knowledge didn't want to get involved in the relationship between Great Britain and the United States or our colonial past. We were just here, you know, hungry for education and we wanted to go as far as we can go. We want to make sure that when we go back we will have gotten the best out of here.

NASH: To what extent do you think the situation has changed in relation to African immigration to this country?

OLATUNJI: Well, I'm quite sure that the situation has, you know, the laws have been, you know, relaxed a little bit. I am quite sure, I don't know, I cannot give you any figures, the quotas for Nigeria is probably 100 percent if not 200 percent more than what it was in 1957, 1960. I am quite sure now that probably if there is any student who have any problem would probably be those who came here and failed to pursue, you know, the academic life or those who do not really try to fulfill the reasons why they came here for where there is the justification. I think the immigration, you know, there is the law, you know, if you come here as a student then that's what you should be, but at the same time, I don't think that the immigration laws today has changed

that much in that there are many students here who come from very poor families who are not government students, the Nigerian government students, but who nevertheless believe that the kind of education that they would like to receive can be gotten here. I think some of those students are facing difficult times in that, in finding sponsors, people who will sign for them, and also probably in obtaining their permanent residence. Of course, I can see the other side and the possibility of probably an influx of people, too many people coming from that part of the world, you know, to make it hard for citizens.

NASH: In past immigrations in the last, let's say, eighty years even, people have come and have had to teach their children about their traditions and in many cases the children have forgotten these traditions, but perhaps in the African situation it is changing where, let's say, black people had not known about their past, you and other Africans have come and have brought to them the story of their culture. Would you say that was an accurate...

OLATUNJI: Yes, it is. I am very glad you brought that point up. It is very important that we have it recorded for posterity that the awakening, the awareness, you know, of who are our brothers and sister in this part of the world is now showing and telling people and demonstrating in their way of life, was not so in 1950 when I first came. And it was just through God's grace that I was able to read between the lines because when you consider the kind of questions that people asked me in 1950, I mean, both black and white, it

was enough for anybody to be annoyed, to exchange blows or even for anybody who is not emotionally stable to say, "I want to go back home and leave the shores of this country," but I was able to read between the lines and I became very sympathetic. And I was able to discover that it was the kind of image which was not a positive image of Africa that has been presented to all people, not only black people now, white people as well, through Hollywood movies, through books that were not written, by Africans about Africans, and through the general attitude of the world towards Africa and Africans or things Africa, African. So it was a challenge to me, you know, in a way, and also the means of actually maintaining my sanity, knowing who I am, where I came from, even though I am not used to the way of life of people here, how could I adjust myself, how could I have changed the thinking of people about Africa. How could I change the image of Africa and Africans, you know, in the minds of people. I cannot do it by standing on the podium and making political speeches and I decided in my mind that the best thing to do is to use the universal language of music and dance. So we go back to my childhood days where I grew up to have been trained and have had the opportunity of knowing something about my culture and so I was able to impart that little that I know, just an inkling of what I know to many people. And this has really mushroomed into what you see today because in 1950 if you talk about being African, people would actually run away from you. If you walk the streets and put on your African robe and hat, people would come out of restaurants or barber shop and probably follow you and thinking that you are just dropping down from heaven. But it is now a different story

altogether. People are having their hairdos in so many different African styles, people are wearing the dashiki, so it is good to be alive to see that a positive change, that people are thinking differently.

NASH: I think even other people beside Black people have changed their hair styles and changed their clothing and their jewelry as a result. Let's go the other way. Do you think there are any ways in which you have become Americanized, if I may use that word?

OLATUNJI: I have been here now for twenty-three years in and out of United States. I have been home so many times, and there is no reason why I can just say point blank that I have not been as affected by being here for that long period. They have some basic themes, principles that I grew up with that I am still upholding, but definitely, as you can probably see or hear, I have lost a little bit of my accent and a few other things. But the basic themes, my principles, the way I was brought up to respect the others, that has not changed. My moral principles have not changed. I am still considered old-fashioned by even the younger generation African studies, but I have gone through the whole process of acculturation, so being Americanized, you know, is not a thing that I say I am. I am not Americanized, but I live here as if this is my home. I am a universal person, realizing, of course, that I have certain basic principles that I will not yield under any circumstances.

NASH: If you had to pick one or two qualities or attributes of your culture which are completely different from the culture, if there is one, of the United States, what do you think they would be?

OLATUNJI: Oh, well, this will require, this is a subject for another lecture, basically I would say from what I have noticed since I came here, is the gradual disintegration of certain moral principles, respect for elders, respect for yourself. These is the basic thing, the whole question of individualism, which has been stretched too far, as far as I am concerned, because whatever I do I believe will affect the other person because in our language, they say what affects the eye affects the nose. There is nothing like absolute freedom with the result that I must take other people into consideration in whatever I do.

NASH: Thank you very much Mr. Olatunji.

OLATUNJI: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW