

Chapter Ten: Africa

In September, Willie Mae Lewis penned a letter to her son Robert, sharing family updates, including his father's recovery from illness and the siblings' activities. She expressed concern over Robert's anticipated trip to Africa, questioning his decision to travel so far. Robert's eagerness stemmed from his newfound interest in his family's roots and connections with African students, which had deepened during his time in Nashville and Highlander. He reached out to Bayard Rustin, expressing a desire to visit Africa to benefit both SNCC and himself, seeking suggestions for patrons.

Harry Belafonte emerged as a key supporter, offering funds for a group excursion to Guinea, where they would engage with senior members of the Guinean independence movement led by President Sékou Touré. On September 10, Lewis departed from Atlanta to New York, brimming with anticipation for his trip. However, complications arose at JFK airport when the flight was overbooked, prompting Ruby Doris Smith Robinson to stage a sit-in on the jetway, allowing the group to board the plane.

The journey to Africa was a first for Lewis, exhilarating yet nerve-wracking, as he was petrified of flying. Upon arrival in Senegal, the reception was warm; Hamer kissed the ground in gratitude, and the group enjoyed the sight of Black professionals in roles seldom seen back in the U.S. They headed to Guinea to stay at Villa Sily, receiving grand hospitality that included sumptuous meals and nightly entertainment during the cultural festival.

Lewis enjoyed the vibrant events but also engaged in discussions about the political landscape with local ministers and activists, discovering the nuances of Guinea's one-party system. The vibrant atmosphere offered a contrast to the harsh realities they fought against back in America. Mechanisms of SNCC were put to the test as internal conflicts arose over leadership and direction. While in Africa, Lewis remained conscious of the urgency back home, choosing to immerse himself in learning rather than political strife.

In Liberia and Ghana, the cultural differences became apparent, with Lewis reflecting on similarities and aspirations that defined their respective struggles. Their experiences culminated in Zambia, where they witnessed the jubilant independence celebrations and drew inspiration from the unity and freedom expressed by Zambian citizens. Despite the joy, Lewis grappled with feelings of being out of sync with the local culture.

Upon returning to the U.S., Lewis's time in Africa sparked a commitment to fostering international collaboration within the civil rights movement. However, his return also brought confrontation with the chaotic state of SNCC, where internal divisions and disagreements over leadership were emerging. This chapter of his life significantly shaped his understanding of the complexities of race, identity, and global solidarity in the fight for civil rights .