

Chapter 10: Africa

Chapter 10: Africa takes readers on a transformative journey alongside John Lewis as he embarks on a life-changing trip to Africa in the mid-1960s. This chapter begins with a personal letter from his mother, Willie Mae Lewis, to his brother Robert, which provides updates on family matters, including their father's recovery and the activities of his siblings. She expresses concern about Robert's decision to travel to Africa, citing the distance and the potential risks. However, Robert was determined to understand his heritage and was inspired by the connections he had made with African students during his time in Nashville and Highlander. His interest in exploring Africa's influence on the civil rights movement, combined with the advice from Bayard Rustin, led him to see the trip as a chance to expand his understanding of race, politics, and social justice on a global scale. Rustin encouraged Robert to approach the journey with an open mind and secure patrons to make the trip a success, which led to Harry Belafonte stepping in to provide financial support for the trip to Guinea, where they would meet with key figures in the Guinean independence movement, including President Sékou Touré.

On September 10, Lewis set out from Atlanta, filled with a mix of excitement and trepidation about the journey ahead. However, the excitement was dampened when they encountered difficulties at JFK airport due to overbooking on their flight. Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, undeterred by this obstacle, led the group in a peaceful sit-in on the jetway, ensuring that they would be able to board the plane and begin their journey. It was Lewis's first experience flying, and while it was exhilarating, it was also anxiety-inducing for him. Upon their arrival in Senegal, the group received a warm welcome and was struck by the sight of Black professionals in roles that were rare to see in America at the time. This moment marked a turning point in Lewis's understanding of racial identity, as it offered a glimpse into a society where African Americans could thrive in professional settings that were still largely out of reach back home. The trip continued to Guinea, where they stayed at Villa Sily and enjoyed lavish meals and cultural festivities. However, amid the celebration, Lewis was also deeply engaged in meaningful conversations with local activists, ministers, and political figures, gaining insights into Guinea's one-party political system and the struggles it faced as it sought independence. This experience offered him a new perspective on activism, deepening his commitment to the fight for civil rights.

As Lewis and the group continued their journey, they visited Liberia and Ghana, where the cultural differences between the African nations and the United States became more evident. Lewis began to reflect on the shared aspirations for freedom and equality that united African Americans with African nations, while also grappling with the complexities of his identity as an African American in a land that was both familiar and foreign. The trip culminated in Zambia, where the group witnessed the jubilant celebrations of Zambia's independence, which filled them with hope and inspiration. However, despite the festive atmosphere, Lewis felt disconnected from the local culture, a sense of displacement that reinforced the challenges of navigating one's identity as an African American in a global context. Upon his return to the United States, Lewis felt a renewed sense of purpose, determined to foster international solidarity within the civil rights movement. His time in Africa inspired him to continue his work not only within the confines of the American civil rights struggle but also with an awareness of the global dimensions of race and injustice. However, his return to the U.S. was marred by the realization that SNCC, the organization he had once worked so tirelessly for, was facing internal divisions and challenges in its direction. The growing ideological rifts and leadership struggles within the organization led Lewis to reconsider his place within it, ultimately challenging him to define his role in the ongoing fight for racial justice. This chapter underscores the importance of global perspectives in shaping the civil rights movement and highlights Lewis's evolving understanding of activism, identity, and solidarity in the pursuit of justice.