

Hannah

1/9/17

Humanities

Interview With Grace Chionuma

Hannah: What happened in the history of Nigeria that drew your father to America?

Grace: The main cause of my father's immigration was the Biafran War. The essential question of that war was "Why are all of these people living in one country who were of different ethnicities, religions, and ways of life?" This question came about because the borders of the country in West Africa were artificially made by the Europeans. So, once those borders were set, inside of those borders there were people who lived there before the borders were drawn who shared different religions, customs, and traditions.

When the country was no longer under British rule and turned into self-government, the people of the country had to work out the share of resources between themselves. Nigeria is a very rural-rich country, and the oil in the country was sitting under the feet of the Ibo people, the group of Nigerian people from which I descended. The Ibo people didn't see the return of resources and sharing of resources that were coming from the place where they lived. They didn't see that there was investment in the education system, in healthcare systems, in infrastructure, and in all of the things that they saw in other places in the country.

There was also social unrest: people were being killed on the basis of their being a different religion when they were outside of their "respective" land. Ultimately, that group, the Ibo people, tried to politically secede from Nigeria. The federal government of Nigeria wanted to keep the country whole, and that started a military conflict.

Millions of people died, and my father fought in, and was lucky to live through, that war. Though my father led a very happy and well-off life, and though he had a great education before the war, the part of Nigeria that tried to secede was left devastated at the end of the war. He immigrated to America, where he could live in peace, be safe, have food on the table, and continue his education.

Hannah: What was your father's definition of the American Dream in Nigeria, and while living his new life in America? How did his ethnicity influence the way in which he lived his American Dream? Was he able to achieve it?

Grace: I think that my dad did achieve his vision of the American Dream. He immigrated to America because he longed for the ability to thrive, and to reestablish the stable lifestyle that he once enjoyed in Nigeria. The American Dream was the idea that you could come to the U.S., obtain or continue an education, apply yourself, and become a professional at your craft. My father attacked that by immigrating to America, attending college, going to medical school, and becoming a doctor. He couldn't have all that in the decimated part of the country that our family was from.

I do think that the attainability of the American Dream heavily depends on where you start from. Despite my father coming to the country without any economic wealth, he had the experience of having an abundance of social capital in Nigeria, and experienced having achievement and security. He knew what he was trying to recreate. Even when he came to the country, and met people who were "less willing to have equal footing as him" because of his ancestry, he dismissed them. He thought the American idea of associating the achievability of the

American Dream with race was absurd. My father never saw any of the restrictions that many Americans were faced with, and that was because of the place he started from.

Hannah: What is your definition of the American Dream?

Grace: I think that my American Dream is very similar to what my father was trying to find in America. You have the opportunity to work hard and to invest in your family, education, and craft. You can progress, and acquire comforts that human beings naturally want to have. Some aspirations of the American Dream are owning a home, becoming wealthy, withstanding economic cycles, and preserving resources for family and future generations. That is what I think my American Dream is. The American Dream says to me, “You can do anything, be hard-working, diligent, and can ascend the social and economic ladder, and have some permanence there.”

Hannah: Do you feel that you are achieving it or that your reality in America is more in touch with your hopes?

Grace: I think the Dream is highly aspirational, because I certainly do not think it is a reality for everyone yet. I do think I have achieved the American Dream. I feel incredibly blessed with the opportunities I have in this country right now, and I don't take any of them for granted.

Hannah Dagen

1/9/17

Shirin Bina

Humanities

Interview Analysis

The excerpt from my interview with Grace Chionuma helped me see in a new perspective her father's comfortable lifestyle before the Biafran War, the struggles that her father experienced during and after the War, and how that drastic shift in lifestyle in Nigeria affected his American Dream. I learned about Grace's father's perspective on the achievability of the American Dream for people in America at the time of his immigration, and how he successfully pursued aspirations that were very clear in his mind. I heard the many similarities between Grace's father's American Dream and hers, and the way in which Grace admired her father for his diligence, hard-work, and significant progress that he made in his lifetime.

Grace's answers to my questions in this excerpt of the interview emphasized the importance of a distinct goal when achieving the American Dream, and that aspirations, in order to attain them, require absolute tenacity and devotion. In America, as Grace told me, her father built his American Dream on opportunities he had enjoyed before the Biafran War and on those he was denied following the War in Nigeria. He created a well-defined vision of the American Dream, and that focus made him work extremely hard at the American life he wanted for himself, which included continuing an education, becoming a professional, gaining economic wealth, and having health care. The intensity and passion with which Grace's father's attacked his dream enabled him to have the stable and peaceful life that he longed for after the Biafran War.

Grace's father's specific definition of and ability to achieve the American Dream were significantly affected by his economic and social situation in Nigeria, and the place on the social and economic ladder in which he grew up. Grace noted that without her father's past education, amount of social capital when immigrating to America, and comfortable lifestyle in Nigeria, he would not have had such a successful journey achieving his American Dream. Many of America's opportunities were relatively easily available to Grace's father, when compared to many other immigrants and American citizens struggling to lead a stable life. Grace, the daughter of a successful African immigrant, thought she also achieved the American Dream as defined by both her father and herself. This acknowledgement strengthens my view that the American Reality is heavily dependent on class, and that the attainability of the American Dream is usually determined by the place on the economic ladder in which one was born or grew up.