

Nigerians who rule America

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THROUGH fashion, sports stars, music, movies, and other aspects of popular culture, the United States has become a central focus of the international attention of a large number of Nigerians.

The reciprocal, is not, however, the case, and Nigeria is yet to make a big impression on the consciousness of Americans. The interest in Nigeria has grown in recent years, thanks in part to the success of certain Nigerian artists, musicians, and athletes in gaining the attention of American audiences.

A growing number of Nigerians have found fame in the United States through art, music, and sports. In the art world, there is an ever increasing interest in African art generally, and it is becoming more common to see announcements referring to exhibits by Nigerian artists.

Only one Nigerian artist, however, has become something of a household name, and that was not necessarily for a good reason. Some months ago, there was a huge controversy in New York City as Mayor Rudy Giuliani blocked city funding for an art museum because of a certain painting which looked to him like 'Catholic bashing'.

The artist of the controversial and offensive painting was Nigerian-born Chris Ofili. The response of most Nigerians in the United States to his sudden infamy was that if he had grown up in Nigeria, rather than England, he would never have created such an offensive piece of art.

In terms of music, Seal and Sade are of course the most well known Nigerian artistes, although few Americans realize they are even from there. Dr. Alban also made a few ripples and Babatunde Olatunji, who has lived in the United States since 1950, won a Grammy Award for his Yoruba drumming and has played with John Coltrane and the Grateful Dead at the pinnacle of the American music scene.

Fela enjoys a small cult-like following in the US, and his popularity is on the rise now that he is late. In fact, rumour has it that Denzel



•Basketball star, Hakeem Olajuwon



•Fela, still commands cult-like following

Washington wants to play Fela in a Hollywood movie about his life! In spite of all the potentially fantastic movies that could be made about anyone from Nigeria's wealth of famous figures – from Usman Dan Fodio to Samuel Ajayi Crowther to Abiola to Kanu – such a film would be the first with a Nigerian as the central character.

There have been two Hollywood movies made in Nigeria over the last decade – *Mister Johnson* and *A Good Man in Africa* – but in both cases the central characters were fictional Englishmen played by Pierce Brosnan and Sean Connery respectively.

It is in sports that Nigerians have perhaps made the greatest impact on the American scene. Americans are famous for not paying attention to any sports but their own, and so Nigerian soccer stars in Europe are nearly unknown to them, except for the ones who dazzled the American fans during World Cup USA '94, Atlanta '96, and the Women's World Cup USA '99. Two Nigerians do play in the American professional soccer league, MLS – Francis Okaroh (Chicago Fire) and Uche Okafor (Kansas City Wizards) – but neither are big



•Footballer, Uche Okafor

Surprisingly, two of the stars of the impressive American U17 team which finished fourth in New Zealand were Nigerians – Nelson Ndukwe Akwari, the vice-captain, and Oguchi Onyewu, a defender who scored two of the most im-

portant goals for the American team. Basketball superstar Hakeem Olajuwon of the Houston Rockets is without a doubt the most well known Nigerian in the United States, even if he did win a gold medal in 1996 playing as an American. There are two other Nigerians who are ris-

ing young stars in the NBA, and both play as centres, the same position as Olajuwon. These players are Michael Olowokandi (Los Angeles Clippers) and Obinna Ekezie (Vancouver Grizzlies). It might come as a surprise to many, but the professional sport in which Nigerians are most represented in the USA is in a sport almost no one in Nigeria plays – American football. In the National Football League (NFL), the prestigious and lucrative American professional football league, there are a total of nine Nigerians!

They are: Chidi Ahanotu (Tampa Bay Buccaneers), Obafemi Ayanbadejo (Baltimore Ravens), Israel Ifeanyichukwu (San Diego Chargers), Ndukwe Kalu (Washington Redskins), Chuku Nwokorie (Indianapolis Colts), A. J. Ofodile (Baltimore Ravens), Eric Ogoju (New York Jets), Chike Okefor (San Francisco 49ers), and Iheanyi Uwaezuoke (Detroit Lions). None of these players are stars, but Christian Okoye, who played in the early 90s in Kansas City, was a dominant force in the NFL before an injury cut his career short. He was the first to put Nigeria on the American foot-

ball map and was known as the "Nigerian Nightmare" because of the fear he instilled in the hearts of opposing players.

Finally, and perhaps most astonishing of all, is the fact that there are also Nigerians playing in the premier ice hockey league in the world – the National Hockey League (NHL) – composed of teams in both the United States and Canada. Jarome Iginla is one of the leading players for the Calgary Flames and Rumun Ndur is a newcomer to the New York Rangers. Remember the worldwide surprise when Jamaicans showed up at the 1988 Winter Olympics to compete in the bobsled event and when Kenyans went to the 1998 Winter Olympics to participate in cross country skiing? Perhaps the next shocker will be the Nigerian ice hockey team! How did Iginla and Ndur come to be professional ice hockey players when there is no ice within 1,000 miles of their fatherland? Like the Jamaican Bobsledders, both Iginla and Ndur, although Nigerians, grew up in Canada where ice hockey is highly popular, making their story not quite as interesting as it could be if they had indeed grown up in Nigeria itself.

Through hard work and perseverance these Nigerians have made it to the pinnacles of their respective fields, breaking even into difficult American entertainment markets. Considering the size of the Nigerian population and the abundant talent present there, it is surprising that Nigerians have not made more of an impact.

Besides those listed above, there are countless others struggling against all odds to make a name for themselves and their country. Unfortunately, so far, the Nigerian government has done little to promote the national image internationally through such figures or to even recognize them at home for their achievements.

With a little more effort and support on the part of the relevant Nigerian ministries, the influence of Nigerians on the consciousness of the American public in a positive manner would only improve. This would also certainly not hurt Nigeria's attempts to attract American investment.