

## The Library That Followed Me Home

The first thing I packed when I knew I was leaving Nigeria was books. I remember standing in my room in Lagos, staring at shelves crammed with books. My father walked in, saw me wrapping books in old newspapers, and shook his head. "Isaac, they have libraries in America," he said, laughing. But he didn't understand. They were proof. Proof that African scholarship existed, that our stories mattered, that I was not walking into an empty conversation.

When I landed at Philadelphia International Airport in August 2024, I carried two suitcases. One had the essentials. The other was almost entirely books. The customs officer raised an eyebrow when he opened it. "You planning to open a bookstore?" he joked. I smiled and said nothing. How could I explain that those books were my anchor? That in a country where I'd have to constantly explain where I was from, what I studied, why it mattered, those books were my evidence that I belonged in the conversation?

My first week at the University of Delaware was disorienting. Not because of the weather or the food, though I did spend an embarrassing amount of time in the grocery store trying to figure out what "half and half" was. What disoriented me was the silence. In Nigeria, I was used to noise, discussions that spilled into arguments, debates that lasted hours over bottles of malt and plates of pounded yam. We argued in ways that felt urgent and alive.

But here, in those first few seminars, I noticed something strange. People were polite. Too polite. Someone would make a point, and others would nod thoughtfully, maybe offer a measured response. I kept waiting for someone to passionately disagree, to push back, to say, "But wait, have you considered this?" It rarely happened. I started to wonder if maybe I was too intense, too argumentative, if my Nigerian directness was reading as aggression.

Then came the moment that changed everything. It was my second week of classes, and we were discussing the concept of Pan-Africanism. The professor mentioned Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois, the usual names, the usual narratives. I raised my hand. My heart was pounding, but I had to say it.

"I think we're missing something," I started, and I could feel eyes turning toward me. "When we talk about Pan-Africanism, we often center the diaspora experience, the African American and Caribbean intellectuals. And that's important. But what about the African voices? Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Nnamdi Azikiwe? They weren't just responding to diaspora Pan-Africanism but creating their own visions and theories, grounded in African anti-colonial struggles."

The room went quiet. Then the professor leaned forward. "Go on," he said. So I did. I talked about the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester, about how African delegates were architects of post-colonial futures. I talked about African socialism and *ujamaa*. And as I spoke, something shifted. People started taking notes. Someone asked a follow-up question. Then another.

After class, three students came up to me. One was African American, one was from Haiti, and one was white. They all said variations of the same thing: "I never thought about it that way." That's when I realized my role here wasn't to be quiet and absorb. It was to bring the library I'd carried from Nigeria into every conversation.

But speaking up came with a cost I hadn't anticipated. A few weeks later, I was assigned to give a guest lecture on African Peacebuilding Models. I was excited. I prepared extensively, pulling from my undergraduate thesis, from archival research I'd done back home, from oral histories my grandmother had shared about how elders in our town settled land disputes.

The lecture went well. Students engaged, asked thoughtful questions. But then, during office hours, a student came to me with a question that stopped me cold. "That was really interesting," she said, "but is there, like, actual research on this? Like, published studies?"

I stared at her. I'd just cited different scholars. But because the names weren't familiar, because the journals weren't *Western*, she was questioning whether it was "real" research. I didn't get angry. I got determined. I went back to my apartment that night, pulled out one of those books I'd carried from Nigeria, and I made copies of three chapters. The next week, I brought them to class. "For anyone interested," I said, placing them on the desk, "here's some of that 'actual research.'"

Three students took copies. One of them, a political science major, came back two weeks later and told me he'd completely changed his senior thesis topic. He wanted to write about indigenous conflict resolution now. That moment, that small victory, reminded me why I came here.

Around the same time, I applied for the University of Delaware Anti-Racism Initiative Research Grant. My project focused on educational equity among children in households headed by Black women in Delaware. When I got the email saying I'd been awarded the grant, I sat in the library and read it three times. Beyond the funding, it was validation that the work I was doing, the questions I was asking, the bridges I was building, they mattered here.

My father was right. America does have libraries. Beautiful ones, with resources I could never access back home. But what he didn't know, what I'm still learning, is that I brought a library with me too. And the work I'm doing here, the conversations I'm starting, the bridges I'm building, they're all about making sure that library, the one filled with African voices and African knowledge, finds its rightful place on these shelves.

To future international students, pack your books. Bring your knowledge. Don't let anyone make you feel like what you know is less legitimate because it comes from different sources, different traditions, different languages. The library you carry with you? It belongs here. Not in the margins, not as a footnote, but at the center of the conversation.