

Olu Olaseinde's Story – Olu and his father Ebenezer were passengers on Elder Dempster ships.

In the 1950s and 1960s, during the transition from colonial rule to independence in West Africa, many of the passengers on Elder Dempster ships were West African students (often with their young families). They were either going out to commence their studies in the UK or returning home after completing their courses. One of those arriving at Apapa, the port of Lagos, in March 1956 was Ebenezer Olajide Olaseinde who had left Nigeria in 1950 and was returning as a fully qualified automobile engineer. Ebenezer Olaseinde is the father of Olu Olaseinde, a musician and the project manager of River Niger Arts Ltd. (www.rivernigerarts.com). Olu has been resident in Liverpool since 1993. Olu and his colleagues provided the live music at the launch of the Homeward Bound website in November 2016. They appropriately played some of the Highlife hits of the era of decolonisation in West Africa – in other words, the tunes experienced by both expatriate Europeans and West Africans in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.

In the Nigeria of the 1950s, the arrival of the 'mailboats' from Liverpool – Accra, Apapa and Aureol - was a major event. Journalists from the local press would rush down to Apapa Wharf to interview and photograph the would-be movers and shakers of Nigerian society as they embarked. Indeed, the people who most caught the eye of Olofofo from the *Evening Times* on 7 March 1956 were "mostly students back in their homeland after many years abroad". One such returnee was Olu's father who was photographed with his cousin, Captain S. A. Ademulegun, the latter according to Olofofo "looking so immaculate and smart in his army uniform".



Olu proudly keeps a copy of the extract from the newspaper to this day. Amongst the other passengers highlighted by Olofofo were A. Ojehomen, who had been studying Political Science, History and Journalism; F. O. Oludemi, who like Olu's father had been studying automobile engineering; Dr. Jeffrey, the Director of the Institute of Education in London, attending a meeting of the West African Examination Council which he'd helped to found; and, a "richly robed" Federal Minister Kola Balogun.

At the end of October 1956, Ebenezer Olaseinde was joined by four-year old Olu, Olu's six-week old baby brother, Ayo, and Olu's mother, Edith, a German dressmaker who Ebenezer had met and married while studying and working in London. A big welcoming party met them at the Apapa docks, as shown in the photograph reproduced here and which is in Olu's possession.



Amongst the greeters were Captain Ademulegun (far right); Lieutenant Colonel Aguiyi Ironsi (in the middle at the back next to Olu's father), the senior Nigerian military officer at the time in 1956 and who briefly became Nigeria's Head of State before his assassination in the Gowon counter-coup in 1966; Dr Ayodeji (by Olu's mother's shoulder), a family friend; and, Chief Fasehun (directly behind Olu's father), another relative.

In the early-1960s, Olu's uncle, Rufus Olaseinde, also left to study in the UK. Another photograph reproduced from the Olaseinde family album shows his send off at Apapa Docks with many family members.



In Olu's words, the photograph "shows the importance of travelling to secure an education in England". With the earlier photograph of Olu's arrival in 1956 "we have the complete cycle of Elder Dempster to and from West Africa".

The European-owned firms which dominated the Nigerian economy were increasingly Africanising their management in the 1950s and the 1960s in step with the process of political decolonisation. Many of the Nigerian student passengers with Elder Dempster would get jobs with these firms on their return home. Olu's father became the manager of the motor vehicle workshop in Lagos for the United Africa Company (itself a key customer of Elder Dempster but also a rival through its ownership of the Palm Line). He had gained vital experience for this role while in the UK through working at Rootes in London, the makers of Hillman, Sunbeam and Humber cars. Even in the early-1960s, however, Olu recalls a racially stratified society in Nigeria. Olu's father owned a speed boat but was often "the only black guy" when the family went to the beach at the weekend.

Being only four, Olu can't recall much about his own voyage with Elder Dempster, aside from the novelty of sleeping on a big ship. But Ebenezer – interviewed in Nigeria from the UK by telephone in November 2016 – remembered much about his journey and the conditions on board. "I had to go to Paddington Station to take a train to Liverpool to board the MV Apapa". The ticket cost "about £20" – as an indication of the relative cost of this, Ebenezer recalled that his manager's salary at UAC in 1957 was "around £50 a month". Typical for the mailboats in the 1950s, the journey took two weeks to Lagos and "we stopped at only the British colonies. Gambia, Sierra Leone, Gold Coast (Ghana) and Nigeria".

Sadly, the journey itself “was not comfortable at all. We had 6 beds, three on either side on top of each other. I was sea sick as were other passengers. The cabin was not large and we had to strap ourselves down at night in case we fell out of the bed during a rough sea period. It was like a hostel”. “There was a general bath for everyone” and “no ensuite”.

The food, served in the dormitory, was “good” though. “Tea and bread in the morning and jollof rice [a one-pot dish with meat or fish popular in West Africa] and yam and stew for lunch and dinner”. Moreover, the passengers were treated “very well” by the Elder Dempster staff.

“To pass the time we played Ludo and Draughts” or “listened to the radio/rediffusion”, and the passengers were allowed on deck when the sea wasn’t too rough. Most of the passengers were fellow Nigerians but Ebenezer recalled “few African staff”.

When Olu himself came to study in the UK (in Huddersfield) in the 1970s, the Elder Dempster passenger services had been superseded by cheaper and much quicker air transport. But, as Olu recognises, the Elder Dempster ships had previously served as vital passage-makers in the education and training of West Africa’s independence generation. At the launch of the Homeward Bound website in November 2016, as tradition required, Olu and his band included some praise singing of Elder Dempster and “the ships that brought back our graduates to start the development of West African nations”.

Nick White, 10 November 2016

Sources:

Interviews with Olu Olaseinde, 26 October 2016 and E. O. Olaseinde (by telephone), 2 November 2016

Photographs reproduced courtesy of Olu Olaseinde

Extract from *Evening Times* (Nigeria), 8 March 1956, p. 3, ‘Olofofo Goes to Apapa to Welcome New Arrivals’.