

Letter from
America



Letter from America

Memoir of an Adopted Child

Gil Ndi-Shang



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To all those for whom the face of the other is a passion

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Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the You?

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952.

Prologue

Letter from America In memory of Sir Alistair Cooke

Upon arriving in Peru, I wrote to a friend of mine residing in the UK on Facebook telling him that I was in America. He asked me in which State I was. I told him I did not mean “USA” but rather “America”. Once I made plain to him that I was actually in Peru, I could sense the prestige I earlier aroused in him turn into disappointment and even a slight sense of mockery. After dabbling with the location of Peru on the world map, he said: “If you meant the other America, you should have specified “South America” and not just say “America”. Now, like my friend you may blame me for being imprecise; the truth, however, is that our exchange revealed a deeply entrenched tendency (not to say fallacy) in almost all of us. I am always intrigued each time I read news reports in the Spanish daily *El País* concerning the United States of America. They have the habit of using the Spanish “norte americano” for the attribute “American”, whereas the Spanish version rather means “North American” in English. To me, this seemed slightly odd. Why couldn’t they just say “Americano”, the direct Spanish rendition of “American”?

This took me back to one of the greatest contemporary icons in the field of radio broadcasting: Sir Alistair Cooke (1908–2004) who presented the BBC World Service Radio programme “Letter from America” for more than half a century. A Briton by birth but naturalised American, Cooke presented various faces, phases, events and processes of US (American) history to a Great British (i.e. global) audience. In his usually playful but insightful style, Sir Cooke asks in one of his letters: “Who was the First Whiteman to discover America?” He goes further to state that America “was accidentally named after the Florentine businessman and promoter, Amerigo Vespucci, who promoted himself so well that he got his name attached first to South America, and then to the

whole continent, though he took no part in the early voyages. But the first? We simply do not know." Amerigo was a good promoter, the first American, a perfect one for that matter whose disputable letters from America almost sought to displace the legacy of Christopher Columbus. Columbus discovered America, Vespucci sold it.

Secondly, it would come as a surprise to many today that Vespucci's "America" initially referred to "South America". However, by a gradual process of history, a complex interplay of soft and hard power, the entitling dimension of the name "America" has come to represent the United States of America. From the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 through Andrew Jackson's Manifest Destiny of 1845, to the Cold War interventions, contemporary gold rush and neoliberal "coca-colonisation", the South has had to struggle with its rather bossy Northern neighbour. (If European housewives' obsession for Indian spices led their husbands to war in India in the 17th century, the hunt for South American natural resources in the current century still reaps strips of land bear, creating new Potosis and triggering immense social tensions in a town like Cajamarca, Peru, where the Peruvian jamboree all started in the 16th century. The Monroe Doctrine, in particular, is "commemorated" in these parts as the official transition from Spanish and Portuguese hegemony to the avuncular influence of Uncle Sam. The supremacist tendencies in the North were so rife that even a foolhardy mercenary like William Walker could organise private military expeditions to establish colonies in Mexico and Central America. Of course, Walker met his death in Honduras, defeated and executed in 1860 by the government of that country, after having usurped Nicaraguan presidential powers from 1856-57. There was no doubt that his filibustering could have continued further South. Following the footsteps of his ancestors, Walker wanted to "do America", not from Europe this time around, rather from America. Considered by some of his compatriots as a patriot and by others as a pirate, General Walker's dreams were far-reaching, even more than those of that true son of British Empire, Cecil Rhodes, whose aim was to offer Queen Victoria the African territory that stretched from Cape to Cairo as a gift.

What happened that modernity's first son had to constantly grapple with its overruling sibling from the north? Let us turn to history. The historical destinies of the two American poles are like ships that crossed at night. While the New England colonies found a formula to yoke together into a confederation after defeating the English King George III's forces, New Spain, however, knew a different fate. In spite of the

fervent attempts at unification by the continent's most illustrious son Simon Bolivar (claimed by some historians to be partially of African descent¹) and his lieutenant San Martin, the continent ended up being balkanised by particularistic nationalisms. The cracks were already evident during the central authority of viceregal Lima, "the City of Kings" and the eventual decentralisation of power through the creation of the viceroyalties of Nueva Grenada (1717) and Rio de la Plata (1776). At the time of independence, the continent got parcelled out almost strictly along the lines of its influential trading ports controlled by both peninsular Spanish and Creole merchants, battling for commercial supremacy. But what if Bolivar's union plan had succeeded? What would have been the consequence on the balance of power in world history? Well, the great wizard of the Second World War History, A J P Taylor once wondered: "How can we decide about something that did not happen? Heaven knows, we have difficulty enough in deciding what did happen." But it is in the very nature of man to figure out the possibilities of history beyond what actually happened. In spite of his prior admiration for the United States of America, some may consider premonitory his statement that that nation's "tale of liberty will end in a plague for us all...the United States, which seems destined by Providence to plague America with miseries in the name of liberty."

Bolivar had much in common with the American Fabius, George Washington. Both were key masonic members, even Masters. Washington was Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of the American Free Masons. Bolivar was a Master Mason, who was initiated in Cadiz but frequented many Masonic Lodges in European capitals during his time in Europe in the first quarter of the 19th century. Both were valiant soldiers and seasoned strategists. Last but not least, both men owned slaves in spite of their libertarian creeds. In some sense, they were men of their time. But the Grand Architect of guerra a muerte (war to death) did not share the strong republican values and the anecdotic humility of Washington, who despite his immense popularity, denied calls for a third term of office and purported proposals to be crowned George I of America in replacement of George III of England. Bolivar's dictatorial tendencies in Gran Colombia (present-day Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Panama,

1 According to Gene H. Bell-Villada, "in his vein there coursed some African blood, result of an illicit liaison between a remote peninsular ancestor and a black slave" in *Garcia Marquez: The Man and his Work* (2010).

a small part of Peru, northwest Brazil and a small portion of Guyana) were soon manifest in his parliamentary arm-twisting to enable him to concentrate power on the executive, i.e., on himself. One of the casualties of Bolivar's inclinations for absolute loyalty would be his hitherto henchman, the black General Jose Prudencio Padilla, nicknamed "the Black Nelson" thanks to his valour in the Spanish Army in the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) against Lord Nelson's forces and his tremendous sacrifice for the Bolivarian battles for independence. In a spurious court case, he was hanged on 26 May 1828 for planning a black revolt against Simon Bolivar. Colombian blacks, including Padilla, had insisted that Bolivar comply with the treaty signed with Haitian President Alexandre Pétion who virtually sponsored Bolivar's wars in men, ammunition and money. In fact, Pétion psychologically resuscitated the deeply depressed Bolivar, almost on the brink of suicide after a disastrous first round of independence battles. Paradoxically, as almost everything American, Haiti was not invited (even as an observer) to the Panama Congress of 1826, aimed at charting a unifying ground future for the continent. The sidelining of Haiti coincided with the relegation of Blacks in Bolivar's continent in spite of their being used as cannon fodder in the independence battles, first by royalists, but later on mostly by patriotic forces. From Cartagena to Titicaca, from Chacabuco to Ayacucho, the story was the same. The story in Washington's land was no better. Anyway, that is another story.

Bolivar's attempt to bring Peru and Bolivia into a union in order to eventually include them in a grand confederation with Grand Colombia was short-lived. Bolivia and Peru preferred good neighbourliness, though not always as good, to building political capital out of their shared Inca lineage. Anyway, though not ready for the deal, the Bolivian Congress compensated Bolivar by naming their new country after him: Bolivar. But as he turned his back to La Paz, the "Bolivarian" Congress inserted an "i" between the "v" and "a" and did away with the "r". When Bolivar reached Bogota, he had to cope with the subtle rejection. The story ended. In his core constituencies of Colombia, Venezuela, Panama and Ecuador, Bolivar's project also shattered. As I am writing this section, today 7 December 2015, Bolivar's compatriot Nicolás Maduro is making a speech (full of superlatives) after losing elections in yesterday's historic parliamentary elections. Not only is his stature overshadowed by the watchful eyes of El Libertador Bolivar and El Comandante Chavez on the wall behind him, he can't afford to make a statement without quoting

these two figures. Bolivar is in the room, Chavez is watching. We may lose a battle, but like Bolivar, we will win the war.

When I visited the stand of the Venezuelan Embassy during the Lima Book Fair in July 2015, the lady in charge subjected me to a long historical treatise on her country, and by some implication, that of the continent. After a profuse use of the word *El Comandante* in a way that I previously thought was more typical of Che Guevara whereas she meant Chavez, she handed me three things: the Venezuelan Constitution, brief biographies of Simon Bolivar and Hugo Chavez and a handbook of “gift” projects that Venezuela has sponsored in almost the whole continent, including Haiti and Peru. I felt like Barack Obama, receiving a gift from *El Comandante Chavez*: Eduardo Galeano’s *The Open Wounds of Latin America*². I do not know how exactly Obama felt, but in my case, the booklets were quite heavy in my hands, but more so in my mind. Coincidentally, Galeano’s book was the first-ever gift I received from a South American, a Peruvian Professor based in Hamburg, Germany in 2012. It was the first book I ever read from cover to cover from that continent. After a roundtable presentation organised by the Uruguayan Embassy in Peru during the aforementioned Book Fair, I went up to congratulate the ambassador for his wonderful endeavour. After confessing to him that Galeano is one of my favourite authors for his ability to look at history from contrapuntal perspectives, with much insightful reference to African history, I won’t forget the embrace I received from him, far beyond the diplomatic code of conduct most often based on reservation and restraint.

Let us turn to the North again, not to meet Obama, but rather to listen to vintage Sir Alistair Cooke. In one of his letters on the continuous subtle disregard for Americans by the British, he states that: “A small but telling sign has been that many Englishmen, beneath the surface admission that Americans have developed their own civilization, still think of Americans as Englishmen gone wrong.” I guess he means the United States here but it would be interesting to then know what Englishmen think of South Americans, though it won’t matter as much. Anyway, no people are better placed to pass such a judgment than Englishmen, the only people, and I say this without any fear of contradiction, who

2 First published in 1971, it details the colonial empire in Latin America from an economic perspective. In theme and tone, it is somewhat the Latin American version of Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972)

throughout history have always done the right thing at the right time. As Bernard Shaw once said, one thing admirable about Englishmen is that they do everything out of principles. They crown a King out of principle and later on kill him on principles. They know when to start but perhaps, more importantly, when to end something. And when the time for ending comes, they summon their friends and even coerce them to do same. Trade in spices. You name the rest. Had Bernard Shaw lived longer, perhaps he would have admired to some extent, the same quality in the Englishmen gone wrong, the Americans. Anyway, the Nobel laureate passed away in 1950 when America began applying principles more strictly.

Coming back to the South, I wish to present my diary on Peru. In a postcolonial age where our colonialist epistemologies have taken refuge in lexicons baked in political correctness, I know it is a dangerous endeavour to write about a country/continent without being blamed for stereotypical othering. I agree. But I bet you we might also agree that Sir Alistair Cooke, one of the many Englishmen in “foreign service” who truly deserve their knighthood, did this with a masterly hand. It is this great man whose footsteps I wish to follow, for are we not in some sense aspirants of the Anglo-American tradition? Being adopted in Peru just within a very short time upon my arrival, I felt I should report to my friends “back home” in response to their curiosities about life in Peru, America. Therefore, I chose the memoir form, in pursuit of Alistair Cooke’s style but even more so of the conquistadors who reported back home to friends and relatives on their experiences in and impressions of the New World through letters and memoir entries. Five hundred years after, popular opinions about the continent are still to some extent shaped by these diaries. The trip to America was a journey into myself, my memories, those of my race, my continent. The people I met, the places I visited, the mutual gazes, my hopes and fears, the happy moments as well as dour occasions make up my travel memoir. I write to represent the tracks and traces of my memory, perhaps also part of your memory, deeply convinced that there is America in you and me, and lastly, that America is human. I feel the impulse to write because no one visits America without having a slight and almost illusory sense of having made a discovery.

Gil Ndi-Shang

7 December 2015, Bayreuth, Germany

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Beginnings

From my German hometown Bayreuth, I arrived in Frankfurt on the eve of my flight to Lima through Atlanta, USA. However, I had to cancel the flight to Atlanta because I could not obtain a United States transit visa at the Frankfurt airport as I hoped. I had called the American Airlines agent to inquire before and she assured me it was possible. She thought I was German. Only citizens of specific countries like Germany could do that. As a Cameroonian, I needed to go through a complete visa application process. That would take more than a month. Just to get an embassy appointment was not possible within three weeks. It was a lost battle. Luckily enough, I had a rather narrow escape - I cancelled my ticket just in time to get a full reimbursement and be able to search for an alternative flight from Frankfurt to Lima without transiting through a US airport. With the help of a very kind American Airlines travel agent, I got an Air France flight that would take me to Lima through Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport. That flight was at 4 A.M. the next morning after my scheduled flight! I could not even think of spending the night in a hotel or hostel.

The other inconvenient detail about the new flight: I was only allowed one full luggage and one hand luggage. I had brought two half-full bags along. From the very start, arranging my bags for this trip was a puzzle. What should I take along? Apart from my host whom I knew through Facebook, I could not imagine the kind of friends I would make in Peru. What would be their tastes? What would they expect from a friend travelling from Germany? Another reason for the two bags was in expectation of what I might bring home from Peru. Perhaps some foodstuffs like those in Cameroon, perhaps something different but beautiful. Now I had to prioritize and possibly leave certain things at the airport. Therefore, I squeezed my luggage, leaving out some of the few clothes that I could dispose of if necessary. I also left out three bottles of Dornfelder wine which I had bought for my yet-unknown-friends in Lima. I then

took the bag to the check-in desk to be weighed. This was just so that the following day (the day of my flight) I should not have anything to worry about. The lady told me the weight had an excess of 1 kilogramme. 'That is ok, don't bother, it is not much', she told me. I tried to inquire how much it would cost me to keep the bag at the reserve luggage store for the one month I would be in Peru. For the empty bag, it would be €5 a day. Multiply it by the number of days you would be away. I just didn't want to get the result of the arithmetics. I had bought that bag for €20. I carefully took the empty bag to the information desk to inquire where I could dispose of it. The lady directed me to the corner where I could leave it, near other bags and objects of a similar fate. It was painful throwing away the bag but I had no choice; I had no acquaintance in Frankfurt whom I could call to pick it up.

As for the bottles of wine, I had to find a way of consuming them at the airport! I took a seat in front of a restaurant, three bottles of wine in my hand luggage. I tried to talk to a young guy sitting close by. He was quite friendly. I told him I had some wine and I needed some company for a drink. I explained the situation to him. He told me he just freshly arrived from Australia and was waiting for his grandparents to pick him up to Munich. He was quite enthusiastic about sharing some wine with me and dashed into the nearby shop to get some plastic cups. He told me he was of Russian origin but was living in Germany, with a German passport, which he accidentally washed in his trouser pockets. He showed me the quasi-passport, totally battered. He had had to get a supporting document from the German Embassy in Australia to be able to get back home. Fortunately, he got no problems on the way. He had been doing what is known as travel-and-work programme whereby he could visit several South-East Asian countries while earning money through short-term employment contracts. It was a form of tourism, he told me. "I just enjoy travelling", he confessed. "Me too," I told him.

He was an incredibly easy-going guy, with great ability to develop familiarity with a stranger at a very short interval. He later introduced me to some Russian friends, a man and lady, whom I quickly guessed were a couple. Yes, they were. I was surprised by the air of familiarity between them and my newly begotten friend. I thought they had been travelling together. No, they had just met at the airport some few minutes before, my friend explained to me. The lady had to visit the toilet and could not find her way. She had come up to him to inquire and he immediately noticed that she spoke English with difficulty. From her

accent, he had guessed she could be Russian and had responded immediately in Russian. She was pleasantly surprised at that. So the bond was created. When she had come back from the toilet, she had thanked him and had gone ahead to introduce him to her husband who was standing near the restaurant with their luggage.

The lady was very communicative. Her husband, on the contrary, was rather a man of few words. Whenever she had difficulties expressing herself in English, my friend and I helped her along by filling in the gaps. We talked about life in Germany, Russia, Cameroon and the Asian countries my traveller-friend had visited. It was such a nice meeting of people brought together by circumstances. After drinking about two glasses of wine each, the Russian couple thanked us and left.

My friend told me his battery was low and risked getting flat before his grandparents arrived. I located a socket at the corner behind where we were sitting. I also needed to recharge my laptop. We decided to relocate our bottle of wine and our entire luggage to a small corner, beside a glittering jaguar car on exhibition. We just sat there on the floor, sipping our wine and chatting as a stream of passengers passed by, arriving in their numbers as the flight agents announced arrivals from Minneapolis, Athens, Barcelona, Bogota, New Delhi, Cairo, etc. The airport is a space of absolute freedom under the auspices of the camera. The gaze of the passing police officer is both incisive and relaxed, disinterestedly interested. One of them passed by us, grinned very snappily, a rather legal smile. Later, he passed by again, this time with his colleague. He came closer and greeted us while his friend stood, watching.

“Is everything ok?”

“Yes, we are fine”, we answered, almost in a chorus. He tried to be as friendly as a security officer can be. I felt as if that question ought to be kindly thrown back at him. We had just no problem. He went back to his friend and they continued without exchanging a single word. Well, for the airport police officer, words do not count for much. Looks alone contain many pages. But from the *look* of things, he was convinced we were just having a nice time with wine. Nothing to bother about. The port security officer is law and order incarnated. Even his body movements, his steps and facial expressions respond to the edicts of the rules. The geometry of their movement is usually quite curious. They walk by the book.

Later on, my friend's grandparents came to pick him up. He noticed them from far; one could say he scented their presence.

“Hey my friend, see you again.” He said as he hugged me.

“Ok. Thank you so much for your company, see you next time.” I replied.

I exchanged only eye contacts with his grandparents who stood by while he packed his accessories into his backpack. I was left alone and there was still half a bottle to finish. It was getting to 10 P.M. This means I still had twelve hours to go. I moved close to the bare bench where I had to spend the night. Then I discovered I had not even exchanged contacts with my friend that just left. Not even Facebook. We did not even ask for each other's names!

The airport was getting a bit dry but flight arrivals were announced: Madrid and Munich. A smartly dressed guy was sitting on the edge of the bench. He came closer to me and introduced himself in very exquisite German. He was Ahmet, from Morocco. He had lived in Germany for the past 12 years and had the habit of going home every year for Ramadan. Ramadan was in less than a week. Ahmet was such a chatty guy and we literally killed the night by just talking. We talked about life in Germany, our professions and terrorism. I will never forget the energy with which Ahmet condemned those who commit suicide bombing in the name of Islam. “They are just bastards, these guys.” He told me. I almost asked him to reduce his pitch so we do not attract any kind of attention.

We both spent the night on the bench. At 5 A.M. Ahmet woke me up to bid me farewell. He hugged me and said: “You will travel safe, Inshallah.” After that, I continued on the bench but I doubt if I slept again. The airport was already like a beehive. I was in-between day-dreaming, wakefulness and sleep. I finally stood up at some few minutes past 6 A.M. I lingered around and went to the washroom to clean up. I checked in at almost 8:30 A.M. for the flight to Paris. At the check-in point, I was distracted by a family; seemingly American from the accent, laughing out their lungs, casting out veiled glances at a group of Chinese gathered around the corner. Their pitch was quite high and almost everyone's attention was drawn towards them. It became even more interesting when the Chinese group leader started reading out the names from the attendance list. The two boys were shivering with laughter, resting their chin on their mother's laps. She tried to hush them down to no avail. Their dad just kept a tight face as if the kids were not his. After restraining the giggling kids in vain, the lady helplessly joined in the fray, basically choking.

We passed through the security checks and proceeded to the boarding.

It was a hitch-free flight from Frankfurt to Paris. Roughly fifty-five minutes. I had close to two hours of transit time in Paris. Boarded the flight to Lima at 1.30 P.M. but the airliner effectively took off at 2.40 P.M., with nearly 30 minutes delay. Duration - 11 hours 50 minutes, says the screen. Excited but uncertain about what awaited me in Peru.

I was set for the journey to the New World, to discover South America. I felt like a new Columbus, a black Pizarro, with all the ambition and uncertainty that go with it. Perhaps, armed with the Bible, these five-hundred-year-old precursors had a more promising and self-assuring mission. What awaited me in my adventure? What kind of people was I going to meet there? How would they relate to me? All kinds of projections flooded my mind. History connected me to South America. Certainly, one of my forefathers crossed to this continent under very different conditions, centuries ago. Connection through chains, of human goods, connection by separation. The two continents have remained somewhat strange to one another since then, both looking to the northern rays for salvation. The North wounds, the North heals, perhaps.

*Bienvenido a Lima*

15 July 2015

I arrived in Lima at 7:36 P.M., almost thirty minutes later than the estimated time. Of course, with the delay in Paris, this was foreseeable. After luggage claim, I moved on to the currency exchange kiosk to convert the euros I had on me into Peruvian *nuevos soles*. Since some money exchange booth operators all over the world are short-change artists, I made sure I counted my banknotes meticulously, weighing them carefully against the exchange rates. I then proceeded like all other passengers to the customs. My luggage passed through the security machine and I collected it at the other end. The lady behind the control machine was quite friendly, nothing of the stern and rather astute countenance of a standard airport security officer. *Bienvenido a Lima*, came the sound of her voice, accompanied by an enchanting smile. What a cosy way of receiving a stranger to a city, to a country, to a continent. LATIN AMERICA. How did the name move from Spanish America to Latin America? I wondered. There was certainly some politics of naming that I shall need to examine closely.

As I moved out of the airport, the historical knowledge in my mind touched the ground. Latin America, there is that sense of meeting something strange and familiar. I might have read several books, conversed severally with Peruvian and Latin American friends, but approaching it from the historical point of it being the historical first son of the enlightenment project, there was something special about setting foot on that continent, on its hitherto capital Lima, *la ciudad de los reyes*, “the City of the Kings”, The Rome of Latin America. So much buried under the ground, almost literally, a place where fiction meets reality in a continuum.

Outside, roughly ten metres from the exit door, there was a multitude waiting for their loved ones, family members, business partners and, perhaps, customers. Many carried different forms of placards with

names of persons they were looking out for. *Señora*¹ Milli Sanchez, my host's friend, had promised to pick me up from the airport in her car. I had written to her earlier on to inform her of the delay at Frankfurt airport. By the time I was leaving, she had not yet responded. I craned around once more but saw nothing similar to my name. I also scanned through the crowd to see if someone looked like Milli. I had only seen her picture on Facebook and hoped she was not too different. All in vain.

One man, well-kempt, in sleeve pleated shirt, looking relatively old, having noticed me trying to peer helplessly at the raised nametags, came and inquired which direction I wanted to take.

"Don't bother, *Señor*², certainly the person has not come. It happens very often. I am willing to take you to your destination," he said, brandishing his taxi-driving card to me. I told him I had to call my host to know exactly what happened to the arrangement with Milli Sanchez. He offered to call for me, saving me the trouble of looking for a phone booth around that area. He then dialled the number and gave me the handset to converse with Elena Alvarez, my host.

"Hi Elena, it's Gil."

"Hi, Gil. I hope you arrived safely."

"Yes Elena, but I can't see Milli anywhere here. Is there anything amiss?"

"Oh! Perhaps you did not see her last message to you. She called me yesterday saying her cousin fell sick and she is with her in the hospital tonight. Just take any taxi and it will bring you here, *Jirón Soledad 565, Cuadra 26 de Avenida Petit-Thouars*. It will cost you about S/60."

"Ok Elena. No problem. See you soon."

The taxi driver followed our discussion anxiously and was finally happy for getting a customer. He agreed to the price and so we went out to his vehicle, a Toyota corolla in perfect shape. He was quite a lovely old man. On our way, we discussed life in Lima, a city of about 10 million inhabitants, almost 1/3 of the total population of Peru. He asked me about the political situation in Cameroon.

"It is a democracy, *mas o menos*."³

"¿*Por qué más o menos?*"⁴

1 Spanish word for "Ms."

2 "Sir."

3 "More or less"

4 "Why more or less"

"We have the same president for thirty-two years."

The guy burst into laughter and confessed he now understood why I used that expression. He told me the history of Peru had also been very turbulent until recently. Things are generally stable now. In the middle of the discussion, he insinuated, in a rather benign way, that I was going to pay him S/70 because the distance was *QUITE* far. And I should not forget his tip, he insisted.

I told him I would pay nothing more or less than what Elena recommended and to which he initially agreed. We argued in a very friendly way. I told him I was a student and did not have the status of the many tourists he was used to carrying.

"Oh, now you have become a student since I raised the fare to S/70!" He exclaimed, laughing.

"Both of us are students; we have been playing master and student on Cameroon and Peru respectively ever since we left the airport!" I retorted in the same jolly mood.

"I thought you have become a student just because of the taxi fare."

"Tell me, you said you were in Paris some days ago, how is Paris? Is it the gateway to heaven as we usually think here?" I smiled and responded. "Of course, it is a very beautiful city but not the gateway to heaven as such. I doubt if any place is! Every place has got its challenges. Life is quite expensive there for an average earner. For example, I went to a kiosk to buy a piece of *döner kebab*⁵ and it costs €5.80 whereas in Berlin and most of Germany it is less than €4. However, it depends on what you want in any place in the world, you will always get it."

"Oh! I see, people here have a very high esteem about Paris. They also have good food. Above all, my friend, one thing you will enjoy in Peru is the food. Best in Latin America and even the world, only equal to Paris, but I am not sure."

"Oh, that is great, I have heard so much about Peruvian food. I hope to have a taste of that very soon."

"Sure, you will. And the women too!"

Our discussion was interrupted by an incoming call to which the driver responded with an expression full of slangs. I could hardly get a word. The remaining part of our trip was dedicated to a difficult German crash course.

5 Turkish dish consisting of spiced lamb or calf cooked on a spit and served in slices, typically with pitta bread and a variety of spices.

"How do you say good morning in German?"

"Guten Morgen."

"Biken Makeñe", he repeated after me, with enthusiasm.

"G-u-t-e-n M-o-r-g-e-n."

"P-u-t-i-n M-o-n-i-n-g-e-n."

It took us about ten similar trials to come to something that could be associated with the original German expression. In the end, I congratulated him for being a fast learner, in a bid to avoid him committing an accident for the sake of learning German.

I tried as much as possible to catch a glimpse of the city. When you arrive at a strange and foreign destination at night, it is a psychological torment. You are tormented with a sense of non-arrival, you feel frustrated that much is offered to you in twilight form. You wait impatiently for the light of the day in order to consume the full breadth of the city with your eyes, and since it is Peru we are talking about, with your mouth too. However, I was slightly disconcerted by the heavy trail of smoke that cars emitted as they drove. I always feel nauseated amid petrol scent, be it in Cameroon or Germany. It seemed Lima was not going to make the situation any better. From the cars on the avenues, you could notice the conviviality between American-style dream cars and more modest ones, some of whose slightly dirty linen could be perceived right from the outside.

"Tell me, my friend, since I arrived here I have not seen any signs of a black man. From the airport to where we are. Am I the black Columbus, coming to re-discover the new world?"

"Hahahahah! This young man is very funny. Hahahahaha! There are some blacks in Lima. But not many. Where you can see them in their numbers is in the town of Chíncha. They have a big community there."

"Is it far from here? I would like to go there."

"Not very far, just about two hours drive. They usually organise cultural festivals and it is a big tourist attraction."

"I really would like to go there if time permits."

"Sure. Sure. You will identify with their dances... We are almost around the street to your destination. In two minutes, we will be there."

We arrived at Jirón Soledad 565 at about 9 P.M. Elena had been standing at the entrance with her friend. After embracing me, they offered to help me carry the bags. I settled the taxi bill as he was about to leave, the taxi driver said to me.

“Goodbye, my *Chinchano*⁶ friend, have a nice time in Peru.”

I answered: “Thank you,” but Elena was not impressed by the driver’s expression.

“Why call him *Chinchano*?”

“Just joking, we were just talking about Chinchá some few minutes ago.”

“He told me about Chinchano and I would like to go there.” It is then that Elena calmed down. Certainly, she had taken offence for the appellation, with the lightheartedness, shown by the taxi driver. We went upstairs with the bags to the flat, the second floor of a green/white painted structure.

“Gil, this is your room.”

“Thank you, Elena, it is nice meeting you finally.”

“You are welcome.”

“Thank you.”

She showed me around the house and explained how to manage the main utilities. I took my bath soon after. When I was through, Elena invited me for coffee with pear and some biscuits, to the parlour where she had been drinking with her friend. I relished the combination. After a few minutes of self-presentation between the three of us, I took my leave to recover from the long and tiresome trip. More so, I had to make up for the night spent at the airport in Frankfurt.

6 Related to the town of Chinchá, Peru.