



Bambadjan Bamba is an actor, filmmaker, and immigrant activist. He is the proud son of Ivorian immigrants.

Bambadjan Bamba

WHEN I WAS TEN years old, in the winter of 1992, my family moved to the South Bronx from Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa. For my family, moving to America meant falling from upper-middle class to poverty. Back then, my pops was a high-level banker and we were "balling." We lived in the best neighborhood in Abidjan, we attended posh French private schools and spent Christmas Eve at the Hotel Ivoire ice-skating rink. Yep, ice skating in Africa. Imagine that! When I landed in the cold concrete jungle that is the South Bronx, nothing could have prepared me for the brutal culture shock I was about to experience. We lived about a mile away from Yankee Stadium. Right off the 167th Street stop on the 4 train. It was the hood but a step above the projects. It was a predominantly Puerto Rican, Dominican, African-American, and African community. This was pre-Giuliani era, so you could get robbed for your sneakers and MetroCard just walking down the block. Not speaking a lick of English and having a name like Bambadjan Bamba definitely didn't help.

My first day of school at James McCune Smith P.S. 200 was probably

the worst day of my life. The only advice or warning I was given by my pops was "*Il ne faut pas te battre sinon tu va en prison.*" Translation: "Don't get into a fight or else you will go to jail." It was the first week of January in 1993, right after the winter break. I was three weeks shy of my eleventh birthday, which meant I belonged in the fifth grade, but I ended up in the fourth—probably because my parents didn't speak English either. But that one little mistake made me lie about my age throughout all of grade school. I didn't want my friends to think that I was left back a grade and therefore I was stupid. I was the biggest people pleaser in the world, but we will get to that later.

If getting left back wasn't bad enough, I was thrown in a Spanish ESL class because that was all there was for someone like me. The school was primarily African-American, Puerto Rican, and Dominican kids. The only other French-speaking person in the entire school was a kid named Alpha, who was from another African country. The teacher called him from his class and asked him to hang with me the entire day to show me the ropes. When I met him, he seemed thrown off by my excitement, but I was hyped because I wasn't the only African kid anymore. Alpha was going to help me figure this whole thing out. I started asking him mad questions. When I spoke French to him, he responded in monosyllables as if he wasn't proud of speaking French. I'd say, "Why are the kids in class coloring and not learning multiplication tables?" He just shrugged. I kept the questions coming. "Why are there police officers in the school?" And "Where the heck are all the white kids?" He just shrugged again and said, "*Je sais pas.*" Translation: "I don't know." Then I asked him how to ask the teacher to go to the bathroom. He told me to raise my hand and say, "Kiss my ass." Not only did I raise my hand, but I also stood up like we did in Côte d'Ivoire and said, with the thickest African accent you can imagine "Kiss. My. Ass." The

entire class was on the floor rolling, including Alpha, who couldn't contain himself. The teacher got a bit stern with him and the entire class and said, "Bambadjan needs everybody's help to adjust." Yeah right! Then, the bell rang and all the kids jetted out of class, just like in *Saved By the Bell*. The teacher told Alpha to escort me to the bathroom and then to the cafeteria for lunch.

Of course he tried to lead me to the girls' bathroom, but I didn't fall for that one, because I saw the pictures on the doors. He was having the time of his life misleading the FOB (fresh off the boat) African kid. What he didn't know was that I had a reputation for being a trickster in Abidjan, but since I promised my parents I wouldn't get into a fight and I didn't want to go to jail, I played it cool. As we headed to the cafeteria I was so excited to have American food. Until then, all I had in Abidjan was our version of overmarinated French-style pizzas and hamburgers. The cafeteria looked and smelled like a hospital. There was nothing appetizing about the way the food was presented either. The food looked like it had been in the freezer forever. I chose lasagna, because it looked like spaghetti. I also got the cup of mixed fruit. For drinks, the only options were small red and brown cartons. I asked Alpha which one was sweet, and he told me the red carton. When we sat down to eat, I almost puked! The food had no taste at all. The lasagna was dry as hell, and the cheese inside smelled disgusting. The mixed fruit was slimy. How can people eat this? Alpha was laughing so hard he was almost crying. The straw that broke the camel's back was the unsweetened, cold white milk. First of all, I couldn't get the carton open! After trying a few times I just ripped it. Now, mind you, in Abidjan milk has to be warmed and sweetened before you drink it. As soon as the nasty cold milk hit my tongue I spit it out. It was almost like a gag reflex. Alpha was laughing out loud by now with tears in his eyes. That was it. I grabbed the chocolate milk

entire class was on the floor rolling, including Alpha, who couldn't contain himself. The teacher got a bit stern with him and the entire class and said, "Bambadjan needs everybody's help to adjust." Yeah right! Then, the bell rang and all the kids jetted out of class, just like in *Saved By the Bell*. The teacher told Alpha to escort me to the bathroom and then to the cafeteria for lunch.

Of course he tried to lead me to the girls' bathroom, but I didn't fall for that one, because I saw the pictures on the doors. He was having the time of his life misleading the FOB (fresh off the boat) African kid. What he didn't know was that I had a reputation for being a trickster in Abidjan, but since I promised my parents I wouldn't get into a fight and I didn't want to go to jail, I played it cool. As we headed to the cafeteria I was so excited to have American food. Until then, all I had in Abidjan was our version of overmarinated French-style pizzas and hamburgers. The cafeteria looked and smelled like a hospital. There was nothing appetizing about the way the food was presented either. The food looked like it had been in the freezer forever. I chose lasagna, because it looked like spaghetti. I also got the cup of mixed fruit. For drinks, the only options were small red and brown cartons. I asked Alpha which one was sweet, and he told me the red carton. When we sat down to eat, I almost puked! The food had no taste at all. The lasagna was dry as hell, and the cheese inside smelled disgusting. The mixed fruit was slimy. How can people eat this? Alpha was laughing so hard he was almost crying. The straw that broke the camel's back was the unsweetened, cold white milk. First of all, I couldn't get the carton open! After trying a few times I just ripped it. Now, mind you, in Abidjan milk has to be warmed and sweetened before you drink it. As soon as the nasty cold milk hit my tongue I spit it out. It was almost like a gag reflex. Alpha was laughing out loud by now with tears in his eyes. That was it. I grabbed the chocolate milk

off his tray, ripped it open, and tried it. It was sweet. I guzzled it down quickly. Alpha wasn't laughing anymore. He took his tray and jetted outside in a fit of anger. I was actually smiling now, because I had finally given him a taste of his own medicine.

I didn't see Alpha again until the final bell rang when school was letting out. When I got outside to the playground, kids were coming up to me telling me something about Alpha. I didn't understand anything other than the word *Alpha*. I felt kind of bad and wanted to talk to him. Before I got to the exit I saw him with a group of kids behind him. "*Alpha il y a quoi?*" Translation: "What's going on?" I tried to talk to him. Before I got to pushed me back and started swinging. I was completely caught off guard, because I never imagined that he would go from zero to one hundred over chocolate milk. He kept swinging at me, and I kept backing up, trying to talk some sense into him. He wasn't hearing it. We were surrounded by a crowd egging him on. I wasn't used to boxing, because in Abidjan we would wrestle. I grabbed him and tried to hold him close, but he broke free and clocked me with a couple of good ones to the chin. My temper started to rise, but I couldn't allow myself to fight back and get arrested. An officer stopped the fight, Alpha said a few things, and they let him go home, but I ended up in the principal's office. I was upset because I couldn't express myself, and I was scared because I thought I was going to end up in jail. Plus it was guaranteed that my pops was going to tear my ass up when we got home.

When my pops showed up, he was visibly angry. I did the one and only thing he told me not to do. I tried to explain to him how I didn't fight back because he told me not to. He yelled in the most disappointed tone you could imagine. "*La ferme!*" Translation: "Shut up." "*Quand j'avais ton age, je ne laissais pas mes amis me frapper.*" Translation: "When I was your age, I

never let my friends beat me up.” That statement broke my heart. He disregarded the fact that I kept my word to him in the face of being ridiculed in front of the entire school. I guess he, too, was trying to teach me what he had to learn the hard way. In America, he didn’t have any family around, or a family village as a plan B in case it didn’t work out in the city. He went from traveling the world and making huge financial deals for the bank to driving people in a gypsy taxicab. He was alone in a new country with new rules and he was doing his best to provide for his family. He had enough on his mind and didn’t have time for any additional unnecessary nonsense. Even Alpha was probably trying to take some heat off his back too. Now that I was here, he wasn’t the only African kid anymore. They say hindsight is twenty-twenty but in my ten-year-old mind I didn’t understand any of this. All I felt was betrayal from my pops and that I needed to teach Alpha a lesson.

The next couple of weeks in school were like breaking out of jail every day. After the final bell rang I had to run as fast as I could to catch the train because a mob was after me to jump me. I had become the punk African kid who didn’t fight back. They called me African booty scratcher and Kunta Kinte. They asked me if people wore clothes in Africa and if we slept in trees with monkeys. The jokes were never ending. I kept trying to figure out why it was mostly African-American kids I had the most beef with. I finally caught up with Alpha and actually kicked his behind, but beating Alpha down didn’t help me much because I was still African. Back then, being African made you a target. We didn’t have Akon, Idris Elba, or Black Panther. All people knew of Africa in the hood was *Roots* (the TV mini-series, not the band!), African safari programs on the Discovery channel, and charity ads about starving kids. Those ridiculous stereotypes about Africa were perpetuated everywhere you turned on television and in the

movies. The way that dehumanization manifested in the minds of kids was that since Africa equals war, disease, and poverty, then being African made you an easy target for bullying.

My new MO was that if I was to survive in this new world, I had to learn English and be as American as possible. My solution was to watch a lot of television. I would not miss an episode of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Gargoyles*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Family Matters*, and *Martin*. Those television shows were instrumental in the beginning—especially for learning what was cool in America and what wasn't. For example, being smart made you a dork. I couldn't understand the logic. Dumb guys were popular and got all the girls. It was the complete opposite in Abidjan. There, it was a ranking system, and if you were last in class you were humiliated.

Within a couple of months I was fluent in English, but I was still being bullied for being African because I didn't have the fly gear and my pops was not going to buy me anything above Payless knockoffs. I had to figure out how to make money. I started bagging groceries at the corner Dominican store, and people gave me their change. I remember the day I saved enough money to buy my first pair of white-and-blue Grant Hill I shoes. The smell of brand-new sneakers was heavenly; the fly designs with the big *F* and Fila on the base that continued into a wave of white on the side of the sneakers was immaculate. The first time I stepped out in them, I didn't want to walk too fast because I didn't want to put a crease or a stain on them. Fly sneakers in the hood earned you respect! And that day, I was respected. People were blown away. How the hell was this poor African kid able to afford these dope sneakers? It all started to come together once I started wearing fly gear, but it wasn't until I discovered hip-hop that it all clicked. The Fugees, Snoop Dogg, Tupac, Jay-Z, and Wu-Tang literally raised me. I knew

side A of Ma\$e's tape *Harlem World* by heart, from beginning to end. There's cool and then there's hip-hop cool.

Fast-forward two years. I had completely lost my accent and I was down with hip-hop, doing everything possible to hide the fact that I was African. I spent most of my time hanging with a neighborhood crew. We got into a lot of trouble, but we had each other's backs. No one could mess with me anymore. No one said my real name ever—my friends called me BJ. I was finally “cool.” But deep down I was a fraud, desperately trying to be someone I wasn't, which was so obvious to everyone else except me. Eventually my boys asked: “What's up with you? We know that you're African. Why don't you ever represent where you're from?” That was a huge question for me to answer. While I was trying so hard to become American, I internalized all the pain and anger. It wasn't until that moment that I realized that I was ashamed of being African.

That realization made me do some serious soul-searching over the next couple of years. It is said, “When you submit your will to other people's opinion, a part of you dies.” Well, I was dying inside, because I was a people pleaser. I spent most of my time trying to be something I wasn't just so I could survive and fit in with my peers. I was trying to be my idea of cool. It wasn't until I started studying acting in college that I allowed myself to emotionally explore how this internalized resentment affected my life. As an actor you have to draw from your own personal emotional bank to breathe life into characters. I did not have the capacity of being my authentic self. I usually said things for the sole purpose of having a desired effect on people. I had become a master manipulator. It was hard as hell to acknowledge it and be that vulnerable with others, but it was the most important self-improvement journey of my life. I started keeping a personal “emotional bank” journal as a way of training myself to express my true feelings. Over

and over again, I would force myself to confront how I really felt about circumstances in my daily life that may have previously inspired me to default to people-pleasing or manipulating. Telling people what they wanted to hear was disempowering. Truly understanding the deep effects that this self-hatred was having on my soul was liberating.

I started doing some research to find African role models that I could look up to. I had a mirror in my room, and I put pictures of my African heroes all around its edges, so when I looked at myself, I saw them too. From Thomas Sankara, the revolutionary Burkinabe president who's considered the African Che, to Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, who started the Pan-African movement toward independence. I fell in love with the prime minister of Congo Patrice Lumumba, who was assassinated by the CIA. Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. Reading about these powerful black leaders and understanding the history and lasting effects of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism helped me understand the African struggle. I started to value the age-old traditions and saw the wisdom in them. I saw the beauty in respecting my elders. I learned to accept that my parents' way of saying "I love you" was by praying for me and blessing me. Hip-hop played a big role in my journey. Lauryn Hill's *Unplugged* album, Kanye's *The College Dropout*, and Blitz the Ambassador's *Soul Rebel* became the soundtrack to my search for authenticity.

I was curious and interested in connecting with the African community in NYC and sought to hang out with other Africans like me who grew up here but still honored their culture. It gave me a sense of purpose, belonging, and pride in being African. It was around that time that my acting career started taking off. As an artist, being authentic and having a distinct voice has been one of my greatest assets. I still have a lot of work to do, but I've made a lot of progress.

My past experiences have helped me define what it means to be American. It has nothing to do with speaking perfect English, trying to be the American version of cool, or fitting into a mold. It's about celebrating the diverse cultures and heritage that enrich this country. It's about playing your part to help make it a better one.

Becoming the best version of you is hard as hell—and it takes time. But as long as I'm doing that, I'm cool.