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Becoming American: The Socio-Economic and Cultural Landscape of Kenyan Immigrants in Chicago, IL

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This study reports the emerging patterns of migration and settlement of Kenyans into the Chicago metropolitan area. Like most African immigrant communities in North America, economic downturn, political instability, and socio-economic polarization in African countries necessitated an appreciable quantum of emigration of Kenyans following the attainment of Africa's political independence in the 1960s. Most of the findings on housing characteristics, education, employment, patterns of family life, socio-cultural interaction, challenges encountered by new immigrants, and related phenomena evince parallels with other studies on African immigrants in North America.

Background

Migration and resettlement of humankind across large geographical and cultural boundaries is not a new phenomenon. The movement of people in and out of Africa can be traced to the origin of human species (Hammer et al, 1998, p. 434). Our ancestors first left Africa roughly 1.5 million years ago, initially settling in the Near East, and subsequently proceeded to Central, East, and Southeast Asia. Perhaps by 60,000 years ago, they had arrived in Australia.

Human migration can assume voluntary or involuntary forms (Lee, 1966, p. 54). Adventure and the desire to explore, learn, and change scenery were major push factors of voluntary migration prior to the era of globalization. An integral proportion of this wave of migration was more often than not a

domain of the economic and intellectual elite. However, this dynamic started to change in the mid 1970s as migrants from Africa to the West encapsulated all societal classes. Professional elites, traders, refugees, politically oppressed among others expanded the composition of Africans migrating to the West (Zeleza, 2005, p. 55). From the latter period onwards, neoliberalism and its resultant structural adjustment of developing world economies, economic globalization, and intensification of poverty in Africa triggered major voluntary migration out of the continent (Ferguson, 2006, p. 166; Hatton & Williamson, 2003, p. 483; Zeleza, 2005, p. 55). Political and religious unrest, ethnic hatred, warfare, famine, and disease are among the major causes of involuntary migration (Fig. 1).

In recent years, economic inertia, socioeconomic polarization, political unrest, ethnic and religious strife, and hatred and warfare have been the dominant stimulants of mass migration of people to North America and Western Europe (Castles & Miller, 2003, p. 124). This scenario warranted tremendous "south-north" transnational migration in the late 1970s, and further intensified in the 1990s (Hatton & Williamson, 2003, p. 467). This development can also be explained within the framework of "global citizenship" apparent in recent discourse on neoliberalism (Ferguson, 2006, p. 161). It can be argued that the quest for a form of "global citizenship" that is apparently absent in most developing countries and Africa in particular, has compelled Africans to migrate to North America in order to tap into the higher standard of living of the West, thus securing a form of global citizenship.

The recent transnational migration and resettlement of Africans, Latinos, Indians, Chinese, and Eastern Europeans into the United States and Western Europe is intimately tied to global economics and inequalities (Appadurai, 1996, p. 6; Portes et al, 2005, p. 227; Sassen, 1991a, p. 300; 2001, p. 321). Today, most major cities in the United States enjoy an ethnic diversity never known in modern history (Nagel, 1994, p. 157). The diversity of cuisine in American cities bears witness to multiculturalism that has been precipitated by the forces of globalization. Although older ethnic enclaves have been part of the American urban landscape, it is arguable that the new immigrants are of a different kind. Most new immigrants to the United States originate from areas outside the traditional source region in Europe. The majority of immigrants are from South and East Asia, Central and South America, and sub-Saharan Africa (Castles & Miller, 2003, p. 76; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, p. 58).
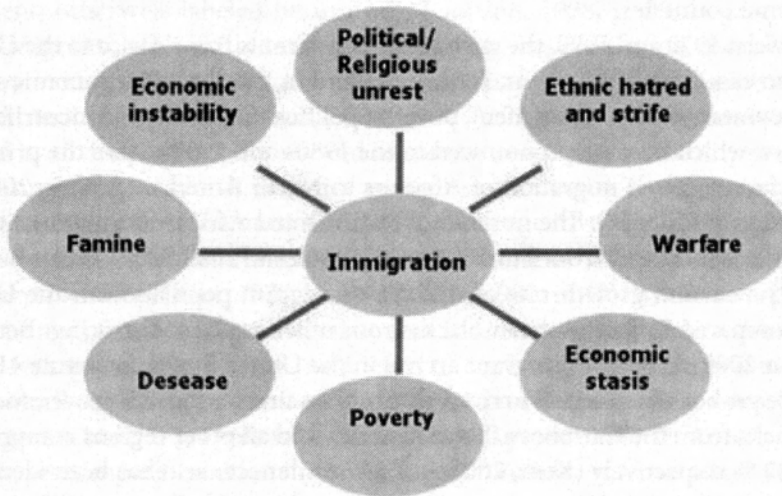
Political/
Religious
unrest

Economic
instability

Ethnic hatred
and strife

Famine

Immigration

Warfare

Desease

Economic
stasis

Poverty

**Fig. 1: Push factors for recent migration to
North America and Western Europe**

A number of theoretical frameworks exist for the study of communities in the Diaspora (Butler, 2000, p. 127; Braziel & Mannur, 2003, p. 3; Cohen, 2008, p. 162). While some are concerned with socioeconomic and cultural components of these communities in the countries of destination, others integrate the latter and the interactions between the destination and home countries. A framework that captures the above and also the temporal dimension of communities in the Diaspora is the multiple identities and phases of disaporization (Butler, 2000, p. 127). This framework compartmentalizes the study of the Diaspora into five dimensions which encompass (1) investigating the reasons for and characteristics of the migration, (2) relationship of the Diaspora and the homeland, (3) relationship with host-land(s), (4) interrelationship within diasporan groups, and (5) comparative studies of different diasporas.

The earliest African immigrants to the Americas arrived as involuntary chattel slaves. Voluntary emigration from Africa was rare until the middle of the 19th century, when some 551 immigrants reportedly settled in the United States; this figure increased to 2538 by 1900 (Zeleza, 2005, p. 61). About 31,000 Africans migrated to the United States between 1900 and 1960 (Gordon, 1998, p. 83). Following the attainment of African political independence in the 1960s, the trend of African immigration to the United States changed. This era witnessed Africans arriving in the United States primarily for higher educational opportunities. Many were sponsored by their governments and

the United States. The majority completed their education and returned to their home countries.

Between 1970 and 1990, the number of immigrants from Africa to the United States increased fivefold (Arthur, 2000, p. 2; Gordon, 1998, p. 89). Economic stasis, unemployment, underemployment, poverty, political instability, ethnic strife, and civil wars, which became pronounced in the 1980s and 1990s, were the principle factors that triggered migration of Africans to North America (Arthur, 2000, p. 25; Apraku, 1991, p. 16). The number of documented African immigrants to the United States increased from 2 to 5 % between 1991 and 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The current growth rate of African immigrant population in the United States compared to foreign-born blacks from other regions is striking. Between 2000 and 2005, African immigrant arrival in the United States constitute 41 % of total foreign-born blacks that arrived within the same period. Moreover, foreign-born blacks from the Caribbean/Latin America and all other regions comprise 15 % and 22 % respectively (Kent, 2007, p. 5). A similar scenario has been identified in Canada's African immigrant population since the 1960s. Prior to 1961, African immigrant population in Canada was under one percent; between 1961 and 1970, it increased to 3 %. The growth in African immigrant population within Canada nearly doubled between 1971 and 1980 constituting 5.8 % of Canada's population (Opoku-Dapaah, 2006, p. 70). Furthermore, between 1991 and 2001, African immigrant population in Canada reached 7.6 %.

African migration patterns initially corresponded to colonial ties. Francophone Africans tended to migrate to France and Belgium while Anglophone and Lusophone Africans immigrated to the United Kingdom and Portugal respectively. However, with the implementation of more restrictive immigration policies in Western Europe, and the implementation of the 1965 Family Reunification and Refugee law in the United States, African immigrants veered to North America (Djamba, 1999, p. 210).

When compared with earlier European immigrants to North America, majority of the post-1965 immigrants display higher levels of education and professional attainment (Allen & Turner, 1996, p. 140). African immigrants in the United States possess the highest level of education vis-à-vis native born population and other immigrant groups (Zeleza, 2004, p. 268). As at 2000, 94.9 % of African immigrants age 25 and older had a minimum of high school education, and 49.3 % had bachelor's degree or higher making this immigrant group the most educated in the United States (Speer, 1994, p. 9; Zeleza, 2004, p. 268). Comparative figures for high school education are 86.6 % for native-born Americans, 76 % for Asians, and 46 % for Central Americans. A large fraction of recent immigrants from Africa to North America are skilled, well-educated professionals who occupied high occupational niches in their countries of origin (Zelinsky & Lee, 1998, p. 283).

Many African migrants constitute a subset of the international migration of talent, otherwise labeled brain drain (Gordon, 1998, p. 95; Logan, 1999, p. 445). Migrants with skills in high demand in the West often quickly secure employment, gain residency, and citizenship, and gradually became integrated into American culture (Arthur, 2000, p. 126). These new residents were later joined by their spouses, parents, and in some instances, other family members.

Immigrants to North America encounter numerous challenges especially in their initial years. The most significant challenge involves adjusting to a new culture and environment. These adjustments are done at the interpersonal and intrapsychic levels (Kim, 1978, p. 217; Padilla, 1980, p. 49). At the interpersonal level, immigrants must learn to relate well in interpersonal relationships, while at the intrapsychic level, they must learn to cope cognitively, attitudinally and behaviorally in a new cultural setting. Relocation-related stress is a pivotal issue immigrants have to grapple with in their initial years in North America. These stresses encompass emotional and cultural conflicts, interpersonal conflicts, role conflicts, poor self-esteem, and other stressors related to acculturation. Relocation-related changes produce psychological, spiritual, affective, and cognitive consequences (Kamya, 2001, p. 155).

Residential location of immigrants generally reflects their level of cultural and economic assimilation into mainstream North American society (Massey, 1985, p. 316). Several immigrant groups have maintained conspicuous geographical and residential concentrations within major metropolitan areas in North America. Moreover, immigrants garner mutual support from one another especially in their initial years in the Diaspora, and as such, tend to conglomerate. As a result of unfamiliarity with the region in their initial years, they tend to select central city locations in propinquity to employment zones. A relatively recent scholarship has contended the central city location paradigm of new immigrant ethnic communities. This notion is explained within the framework of heterolocalism, an alternative model on immigrant spatial and social behavior. Heterolocalism argues that recent populations of shared ethnic identity enters an area from distant places and quickly adopt a dispersed pattern of residential location, but at the same time maintain strong social cohesion through diverse means (Zelinsky & Lee, 1998, p. 285). The spatial location pattern of first generation African immigrants in North America is highly applicable to this model. Mechanisms through which African immigrants maintain social cohesion irrespective of wide spatial dispersion encompasses staying within the networks of ethnic associations at the country, regional, and micro levels. Other avenues of interaction in promoting social and cultural cohesion include telecommunication, online chat, and periodic visits. Heterolocalism challenges the well established opposing paradigms of assimilation and pluralistic schools of thoughts in explaining immigrant spatial behavior.

African immigrants utilize a number of avenues created by older immigrants in coping with the challenges of relocating and adjusting within North America (Holtzman, 2000, p. 31; Stoller, 2002, p. 154). Senegalese "vertical villages" in New York City is a case in point where informal networks of employment has been established in partially assisting new immigrants from Senegal in meeting their welfare during their initial years in the United States. Furthermore, there are a number of African immigrant associations at the country level and even some exist at micro levels. These associations perform several functions which encompass economic, psychological, cultural, and political support for African immigrants (Arthur, 2000, p. 70). African immigrants are assisted during periods of crisis such as illness or death, and in some instances in the payment of legal expenses. The associations disseminate information about job prospects and access to capital for setting up businesses. There is a strong emphasis of unity among members, protecting and projecting ancestral cultures, providing support to members in times of need, and connecting them with development projects at home (Atta-Poku, 1993, p. 56; Owusu, 2000, p. 1167). Despite the cohesive intra-group solidarity among first generation immigrants in North America, African immigrants in the region have not entirely succeed in replicating the social structures and institutions enjoyed in their countries of origin (Opoku-Dapaah, 1993, p. 26). Differentials in culture, institutions, and infrastructures in North America militate against reconstructing a replica of African lifestyle in North America.

This paper reports the emerging patterns of migration and settlement of Kenyans into the Chicago metropolitan area using a modified version of Butler's multiple identities and phases of disaporization framework. The fifth dimension of Butler's framework was omitted in the theoretical framework adopted because it is beyond the scope of this study. The study is based on data solicited anonymously through a detailed questionnaire administered through the United Kenyans of Chicago. The study illuminates the dynamics, nature, types, conditions, and well-being of Kenyan immigrants.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Chicago and its suburbs. Primary data was collected through a detailed questionnaire uploaded onto the United Kenyans of Chicago website for easy access by respondents. The population of the sample was randomly drawn from the Kenyan immigrant community in the Chicago metropolitan area and contiguous zones. The survey was administered between January and June 2007. Eighty respondents correctly completed the questionnaire and were used in the analysis. The minimum age of respondents was limited to 18 years.

Data was analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics employed encompass percentage frequency distribution tables, graphs, and charts. Means and standard deviation were calibrated for some key socioeconomic indicators. Qualitative data was summarized and discussed.

Results and Discussion

Demographic characteristics

Almost all (98%) respondents were born in Kenya. The average age of respondents is 33 years, and half of the sample population ranged between 30 to 40 years (Table 1). This was followed by age group 41 to 50 years. Age group 51 to 60 recorded the lowest number of respondents (9%). The trend suggests voluntary migration characteristic of young educated professionals responding to economic stasis in the home country.

Table 1: Age distribution

Age category	%
18-30	15
30-40	51
41-50	25
51-60	9

Marital status is reflective of a typical African culture. Sixty-three percent of the respondents are married. The divorce rate, at 2 %, is extremely low compared to the United States average of 55 %. No case of cohabitation was reported (Table 2). We attribute this to the fact that Kenyan immigrants are still comparatively few and are mainly first generation immigrants. Most have spouses by the time they immigrate or prefer to marry rather than cohabit, a factor of life that reflects strong Kenyan values, which tend to discourage cohabitation.

Table 2: Marital status

Marital status	%
Married	63
Single	31
Separated	2
Divorced	2
Widowed	2

Religious distribution of the study population is dominated by Christianity (Table 3). This is not a surprising phenomenon as it reflects religious distribution in Kenya. A little over a tenth of the sample reported practicing African traditional religions. Others practice Islam while some do not belong to any religion.

Table 3: Religious Affiliation

Religion	%
Christianity	85
Traditionalist	11
Islam	2
Atheist	2

Africa is characterized by an amalgam of cultures exemplified by a plethora of ethnic groups. Chicago Kenyans interviewed in the study span nine Kenyan ethnic groups. The most commonly reported include Kikuyu (43%), Kamba (23%), and Luhya (14%). Table 4 shows the rest of the ethnic groups reported in the study.

Table 4: Chicago Kenyans by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	%
Kikuyu	43
Kamba	23
Luhya	14
Kalenjin	5
Maasai	4
Luo	3
Kisii	2
Meru	2
Indian	2
African American	2

Socio-economic Status

The basic socio-economic indicators investigated in the study include education, occupation, residence, residential patterns and preference, type and nature of tenure, and investment in the United States and Kenya. The study revealed that Chicago Kenyans are a highly educated group. About 85% of Kenyan immigrants in Chicago have a college education. Fifty-three percent are

professionally employed. Twenty-three percent hold management level positions, while 14% of them are involved in the information technology industry. Thus, the Chicago Kenyan community is characterized by high social mobility and capital, drawing its income primarily from the salaried sector. Consequently, though highly successful, Kenyans collectively compared to other immigrants such as Indians and overseas Chinese, have limited foreign direct investment potential (Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5: Level of Education

Education	%
Postgraduate/professional degree	49
Bachelors degree	36
Associate Degree/some college	15

Table 6: Occupational Distribution

| Occupation	%
Information technology	14
Student	10
Administration	8
Management	8
Nurse	7
Education (general staff)	7
Finance	7
Marketing	5
Self employed	6
Teacher	3
Skills trade	3
Research and development	3
Clerical	3
Engineer	3
Social work	3
Legal affairs	2
Customer service	2
Child day care	2
Sales	2
Accounting	2

The type of housing an individual resides in and income received are among the key indicators of socio-economic status. The study revealed that Kenyan immigrants reside in all types of conventional housing present in the Chicago metropolis (see Table 7). Table 7 shows that 76 % of Chicago Kenyans own their homes.

Table 7: Residential Type

| Housing type	%
Single family (owner occupier)	45
Apartment (rented)	28
Condominium (owner occupied)	17
Single family (rented)	3
Town home (owner occupied)	3
Condominium (rented)	2
Corporate residence	2

On the aspect of investment, the study revealed that 65 % of respondents have investments in the United States exclusive of owner occupied housing. Thirty-five percent are sole owners, while 29 % jointly own their investments. These investments are diversified. Moreover, the study also revealed that 71 % of Chicago Kenyans have multiple investments in Kenya, mostly in stocks, real estate, agriculture, and the transportation sector (Fig. 2). Not surprisingly, Chicago Kenyans with no investments in Kenya aspire to do so in the future. An overwhelming 84 % favor investing in the home country.

Fig. 2: Type of Investment in Kenya
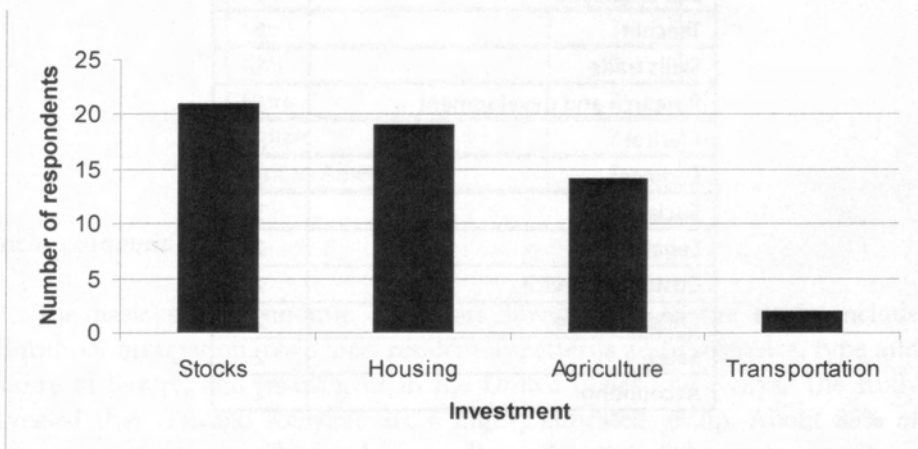
Generally, most immigrants' early experiences in the United States are fraught with difficulties (Holtzman, 2000, p. 32; N'Diaye & N'Diaye, 2006, p. 98; Stoller, 2002, p. 6). Adjustment problems, culture shock, alienation, psychological challenges, and inadequate guidance from established immigrants often compound the problem. How do Kenyans deal with these predicaments? Most respondents cite difficulties in establishing social connections and networking which are pivotal ingredients in gaining information to job opportunities in the United States. Studies have shown that underemployment is a crucial phenomenon affecting recent African immigrants in the United States (Dodoo & Takyi, 2006, p. 182). Most African immigrants entering the United States with advanced degrees from their home countries experience non-recognition of their degrees in United States institutions. Many end up driving taxicabs and performing other menial jobs. Respondents underscored underemployment as the second most important problem. Other crucial issues include gaining employment, business opportunities, housing, educational opportunities, and the preservation of traditional culture and lifestyle (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Most Pressing Challenges and Needs of Recent Kenyan Immigrants in Chicago Metropolis
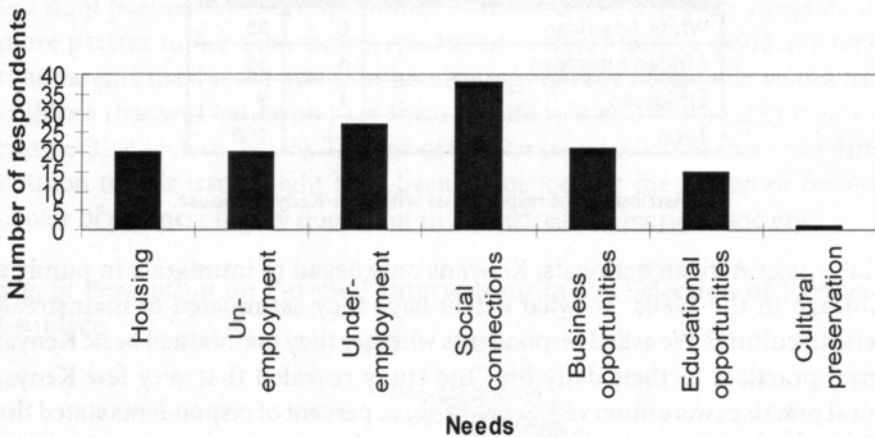
Family and cultural life

How do Kenyans adopt to life in America? How does this affect family life? The study revealed that Kenyan households ranged between three to six individuals. Due to the relatively young average age of Kenyan immigrants and the length of time spent pursuing education, most respondents do not have children and/or minors in the United States. Those that reported having the latter have an average of two (Table 8).

Table 8: Number of Children in the U.S.

Number of children	%
0	42
1	13
2	27
3	14
4	4

The study also sought to discern the marriage patterns of Kenyan immigrants. Our investigation revealed that although Kenyans predominantly prefer marrying Kenyan spouses, those that married non-Kenyans were more likely to marry white Americans. This was somewhat surprising but not unexpected. Clearly, more research is needed to find out why this might be the case (Table 9).

Table 9: Nationality of non-Kenyan Spouse

Spouse nationality	F	%
White American	6	55
African American	4	36
Ethiopian	1	9
Total	11	100

F= Distribution of respondents with non-Kenyan spouse.

Like most African nationals, Kenyans only began to immigrate in numbers to Chicago in the 1980s. To what extent have they assimilated to mainstream American culture? We asked respondents whether they maintained basic Kenyan cultural practices in their daily life. The study revealed that very few Kenyan cultural practices were observed. Seventy-three percent of respondents stated that traditional cultural practices that were in contradiction to mainstream American culture were either modified or abandoned altogether (Fig. 4). Modification and abandonment of these practices might have stem from the fear of being frowned upon by respondent's neighbors, or influenced by partial alteration in mindset resulting from the adoption of certain aspects of American culture.

Fig. 4: Pattern of Observance of Kenyan Cultural Practices in the United States
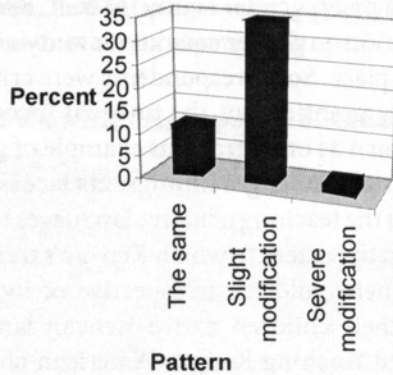
The institution of marriage is extremely important in African society. And, at least in traditional contexts, parents play significant role in guiding their children to select partners. Fifty percent of the sampled population strongly believes that parents should have a role in guiding their children in selecting the right partner for marriage; however, they believe that such a role should be more passive rather than stereotypically intrusive. Many respondents reported that parents need to be active in inculcating morally acceptable values to their children that will better prepare them for life in a multicultural and extremely competitive society (Fig. 5). The rest of the sample population that has a different opinion to this issue might have been influenced by the notion of freedom of choice of partners highly dominant in mainstream American society.

Fig. 5: Perception on Parental Intervention in the Selection of Partners for Children
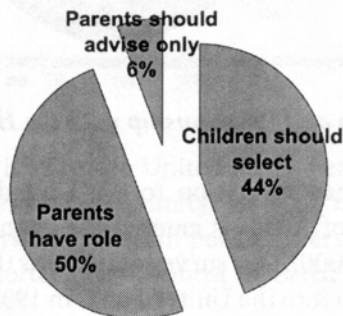
The Beijing conference on gender equality and the rise of feminism has been instrumental in transforming the role of women in most areas of the world. Africa has also witnessed some amount of feminist movements at various levels and scales in an effort to achieve gender equity (Mikell, 1997, p. 336). The survey explored Kenyan's perception on gender equality. Seventy-six percent believe that gender equality is well in place. Some respondents were critical of United States' position on gender equity pointing out the unequal income scales for similar jobs among men and women as one egregious example of gender inequality.

One of the instrumental challenges immigrants face is in the area of ethnic preservation, especially in the teaching of native languages to children born in the Diaspora. We investigated the extent to which Kenyan's transmit cultural values, especially language, to their children. Irrespective of living in the Diaspora, 72% reported teaching their children native Kenyan languages. Most of the respondents (76%) favored teaching Kenyan American children Kiswahili, the national language of Kenya, over their mother tongue (Fig. 6). The premium put on teaching American-born Kenyan children a native Kenyan language might be attributed to the desire of first generation Kenyan immigrants to preserve linkages between the homeland and their adopted country among subsequent generations of Kenyan immigrants.

**Fig. 6: Teaching of US-Born Children Kenyan Languages**
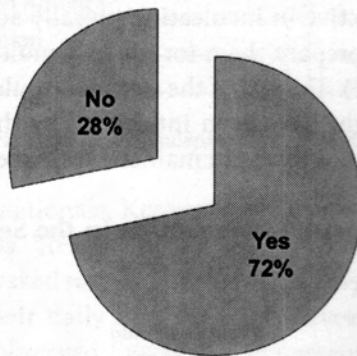
Migration from Kenya and Relationship with the Homeland

Statistics on African migration to the United States demonstrate that a considerable number of Africans entered the country between 1970 and 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Our survey data shows that respondents commenced migrating out of Kenya into the United States in 1985 (Table 10). A large fraction of the study population originated from Nairobi Province (65%). Other provinces

with significant emigration to the United States include Coastal (15%), Central (8%), Rift (7%), and Western Province 5 % (Fig. 7). Majority of respondents could have originated from Nairobi as a result of the existence of more opportunities to facilities, information, and infrastructure that can facilitate traveling to the United States compared to other locations in Kenya.

Fig. 7: Map of Kenya showing origin points of Chicago Kenyans
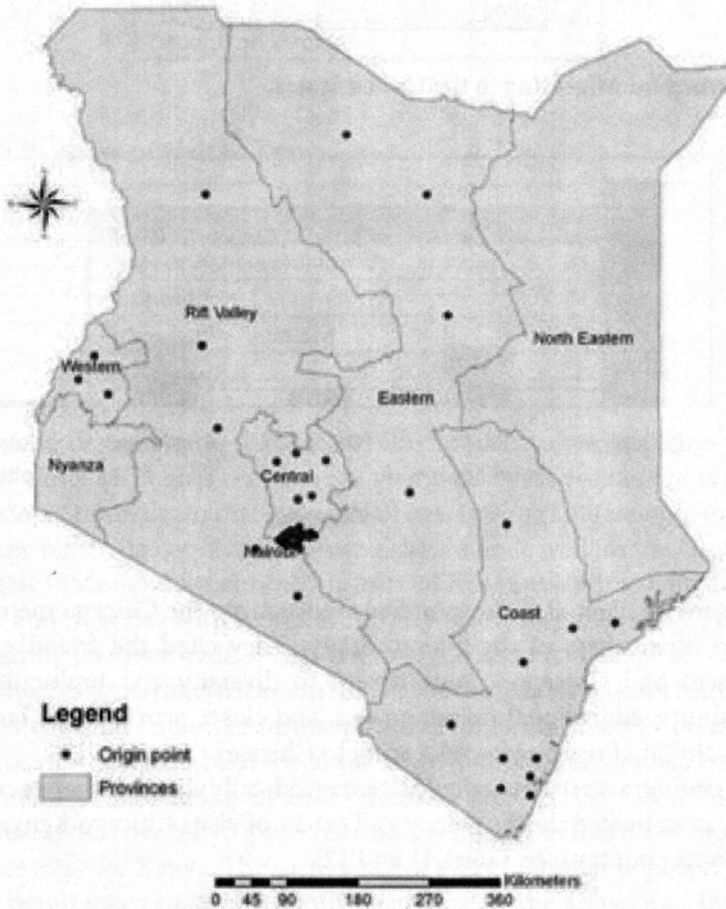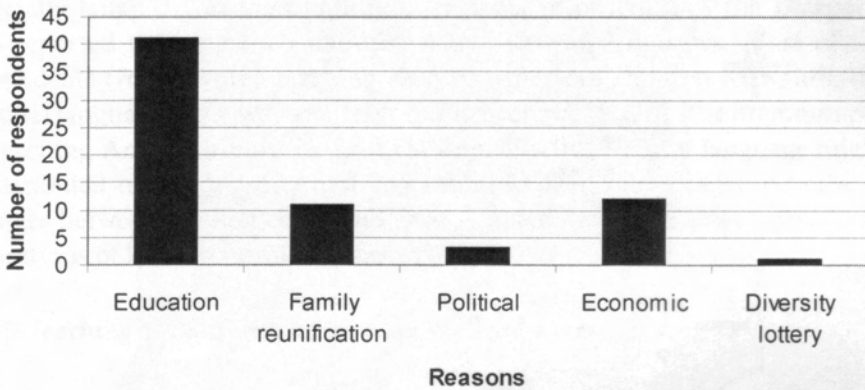

Most of the respondents arrived in the United States between 1996 and 2000. Pursuance of higher education, opportunity to work in a robust economy, reunion with family members, escape from political persecution, and winning the United States Diversity Lottery are the most reported reasons for migrating to the United States (Fig. 8).

Table 10: Year migrated to the United States

Year	%
1985-1990	12
1991-1995	22
1996-2000	36
2001-2005	28
2006	2

Fig. 8: Reasons for Migrating to the United States

Forty-five percent of the respondents moved into the Chicago metropolitan area from other parts of the United States. They cited the friendly cultural environment and Chicago's commitment to diversity and multiculturalism, job availability, educational opportunities, and closer proximity to family and friends as the chief reasons for relocating to Chicago.

Most immigrants in the United States periodically visit their native countries. The study investigated the frequency and extent of visits Chicago Kenyans make to their home country (see Tables 11 and 12).

Table 11: Frequency of visits to Kenya

Frequency	%
Twice yearly	2
Yearly	18
Every other year	41
Not yet visited	31
Rarely	4
Depend on income	4

Table 12: Purpose of visit to Kenya

Purpose	%
Vacation/family reunion	83
Business	11
Other family functions	3
Wedding	3

The study demonstrates that 89 % of Chicago Kenyans visit Kenya for social purposes, while 11 % goes on business ventures. These results are typical of a unidirectional brain drain that is typical of new immigrants striving to establish roots in the receiving country. This result should bode well for the United States as it suggest that an overwhelming majority of Kenyans are investing in the U.S. economy and their ties with Kenya are largely of an emotional type. People visit when a family member weds or dies but rarely to conduct business.

Despite this scenario, Africans in the Diaspora make significant contributions to the flow of liquid and other forms of capital to the continent. In recent years, this provocative scenario between brain drain and remittances has engendered some amount of interesting debates (Adams, 2003, p. 19; Faini, 2003, p. 9). Further research is needed to give a pertinent rejoinder to this brain drain versus remittance issue for Kenya. The sustenance of a large number of people in Africa rests on remittances made by family members in the Diaspora. Though the study did not monetarily quantify the amount of remittances made to Kenya, respondents were asked to state the frequency of making such remittances. The survey revealed that 65% of Chicago Kenyans regularly remit money to Kenya. Seventy percent of those remittances are for family support compared to 20 % in investments (see Table 13).

Table 13: Frequency of Remittances to Kenya

Frequency	%
Monthly	37
During cases of emergency	29
Every other month	18
More than once monthly	10
Whenever in a position to do so.	4
Christmas	2

Table 13 demonstrates that financial remittance is a common phenomenon among Kenyans; this practice also transcends most immigrants from the developing world. Remittances are made for a number of reasons; principal among them is the care for nuclear and extended family, including friends (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9: Reasons for Making Remittances to Kenya
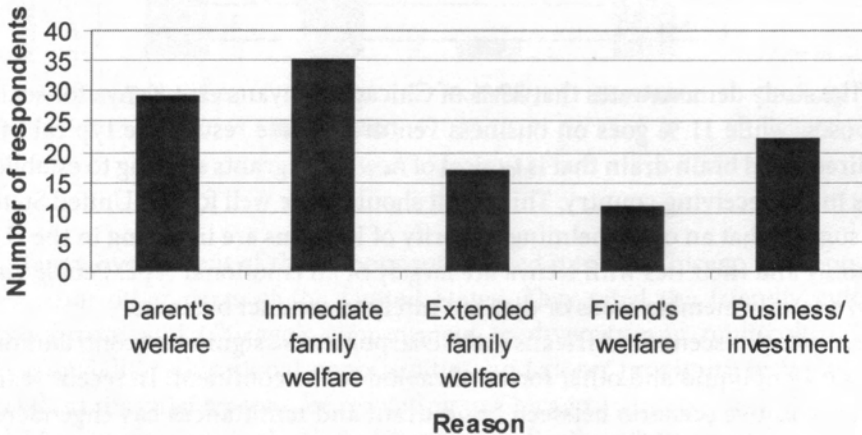
Compared to non-resident Indians and overseas Chinese, one could argue that Chicago Kenyans are spending comparatively little money in investment vis-à-vis the consumption economy of Kenya. This should be a concern for both the Kenyan and United States governments. From the Kenyan perspective, these investments have short term gains as they are unlikely to outlive the native generation Kenyan. Their children have few ties with Kenya and are not likely to continue remitting money to Kenya. From an American perspective, those remittances rob the country of much needed investment capital and exert a burden on the government after these workers retire with little personal

investment, having spent the bulk of their earning supporting family members abroad rather than investing it for future use. This interpretation is supported by data (Table 14). The table discloses the enormous financial obligations Chicago Kenyans have for family and friends in Kenya.

Table 14: Financial and other expectations of acquaintances in Kenya

Level of expectation	%
Moderate	37
Minimal	31
Considerable	26
Nothing	6

Relationship with the Wider American Society

We posed the question regarding the nature of relationships our respondents had with other Chicago communities, including African Americans and other African immigrants. An overwhelming proportion (88%) said they had amicable relationship with African peoples, whether recent or older immigrants. There were some minor concerns with language problems. Some respondents pointed out that African Americans complained of difficulty in understanding the strong East African accent of the English language. Some complained that African Americans demeaned Africans as people coming from a poor, uneducated, and underdeveloped continent. Still other respondents opined that memories of slavery had left an indelible mark on the demeanor of African Americans preventing them from freely engaging and embracing recent African immigrants. Some respondents decried the absence of a forum for inter-African associations, which could serve as a catalyst for bringing together peoples of African descent to meet, talk, and iron out their "perceived differences," as well as overcome their collective fears and suspicions of one another. They also believed that the existence of an inter-African organization can enhance the embracement of their collective shared historical experiences as children of Africa who call America their home. This concern may have ebbed with the establishment of the United African Organization in Chicago.

A little over two-thirds of the sample population (67%) reported having amicable relationships with other ethnic groups. Where differences arose, they cited language barrier and ethnocentrism as the leading cause. Interestingly, 35% reported that they had been a victim of discrimination. Many examples were given to illustrate their allegations of overt and or institutional racism. A few examples will suffice here. One respondent narrated that while in the

company of a group of African students in Los Angeles prior to the 1992 riots, they were stopped and questioned by a policeman who was looking for a group of African Americans who were allegedly engaged in pilfering. Another respondent was repeatedly trailed by a police car and asked to produce identification while jogging in a white neighborhood. One was assaulted by four white men apparently for being black and in a "white place." Some had police lights flashing on them while driving in white neighborhoods even though they had not committed any traffic offense. Others had their car stopped and searched even though no infraction had occurred.

An appreciable proportion of respondents expressed some amount of difficulty in a number of scenarios while dealing with the wider American society. These situations encompass ordeals with United States Customs and Border officials at airports especially when returning from international trips. Some shared their experiences of being turned away from hotels and other public functions. Racial slurs were heaped on a male respondent for dating a white woman. Interestingly, these slurs originated from both whites and African Americans. Racial tensions are not only between whites and Africans as cases of African Americans race related incidences were documented. A respondent was told to go back to Africa by an African American. Some narrated white cashiers behaving inappropriately to them while checking out items in stores. A respondent narrated that whites sometimes move a seat away from him in public places including buses and trains. The latter complained that some white people will only sit next to him after all the seats have been occupied.

Most respondents complained about the very slow pace of upward mobility in their places of work including differentials in income between them and other races. Even though they have similar qualifications and more experience vis-à-vis their white coworkers, the latter happens to move faster along the institution's rung compared to Africans. This finding closely relate to a study on differences among African immigrants in the United States wherein wages earned by blacks was 19 % less than whites (Dodoo & Takyi, 2002, p. 921).

On United States Immigration Laws and Policies

The most important issue for immigrants in the United States today is immigration laws and policies. These laws are so intricate and esoteric that few immigrants comprehend them. Immigration lawyers are available but the cost of retaining them for these new immigrants is exorbitant. The study attempted to understand Kenyan's familiarity with United States immigration laws and policies. The results indicate that one-third of the respondents are unfamiliar with United States' immigration laws and policies. As such, they highlighted the

importance of educating the Kenyan community on their responsibilities and rights as immigrants. This can be done in Kenya before migrating to the United States or immediately when people arrive in the country.

On the highly divisive issue of undocumented immigrant crisis, an overwhelming proportion of the sample population (96%) support regularization of undocumented immigrants' status and an eventual path to citizenship. On the other hand, some countries in Africa, including Kenya, constitutionally object to dual citizenship for their citizens. Over 9 in 10 (96%) respondents unflinchingly support a dual citizenship provision for Kenyans in the Diaspora. A similar response was obtained regarding the issue of participating in Kenyan elections from abroad (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10: Perception of the Right of Kenyan Citizens in the Diaspora to Vote in Kenyan Elections
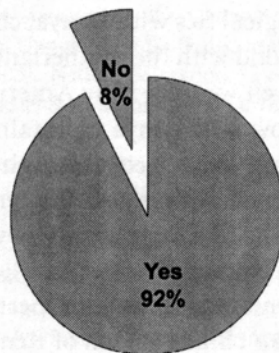
Thus Chicago Kenyans strongly believe that being out of the country should not forestall their privilege to participate in Kenyan electoral process, as doing this relinquishes their right to vote with citizens residing within Kenya. They argued that as Kenyans in the Diaspora, they are contributing immensely to economic development in the country through regular remittances, and as such should participate in elections. Some stated that the number of assets Kenyans in the Diaspora have within Kenya necessitate their right to vote in order to be part of the decision making process that directly and indirectly affect their investments in the country.

Conclusion

This study documents the socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural dynamics of Kenyans in the United States, with specific reference to those who have settled and

made the Chicago metropolitan area their home. The study indicates that Kenyans who have immigrated to the United States may constitute one of the most highly educated and upwardly mobile immigrant communities in the country. As a group, their aspirations closely mirror those of the United States mainstream society. Like other immigrants, Kenyans cherish work and are highly disciplined. They love their adopted country and have taken a relatively shorter period to adjust to the rigors of life away from the motherland. A large percentage of Kenyans invest in their adopted country but they have not shunned their homeland, where the bulk of their relatives still reside. Consequently, they continue to maintain extremely strong ties with the homeland. They follow events in Kenya through the internet, newspapers, email, and telephone. Virtually all Kenyans remit money to support family members. Most also continue to invest in their homeland.

A major concern of most Kenyans is that Kenya's constitution does not make provision for dual citizenship. Many Kenyans living and investing in the United States have either become permanent residents or naturalized Americans. Due to their emotional and psychological ties with Kenya, changes in citizenship status have not affected the strong bond with the motherland. However, these same ties are not shared by their children who are fully American and the law bars them from becoming Kenyans. How will Kenya maintain a relationship with these children, many of whom do not speak Kenyan languages nor will ever have any strong bond with the land of their fathers and mothers? How will Kenya hold on to the benefits of remittances by this increasingly powerful community?

A partial solution is to change the law to allow dual citizenship. Dual citizenship will allow the seamless transfer of property from parents to children. The current law bars American children born of Kenyan parents from claiming their parent's property in rural Kenya. How will these children have a relationship with a country that denies them what they believe is an inalienable right—a right to inherit their parents' and grandparents' wealth?

The other pressing issue concerns the right to vote in general elections. Kenyans abroad want to participate and influence the political process in their homeland. They want to have a role in shaping the political and economic culture of a country they love and where they have investments. One reason why many invest in the United States is because U.S. laws encourage investment. Liberal laws in the U.S. encourage legal immigrants to attain permanent residence and eventually citizenship. Should Kenya take a leaf from the United States' book?

In summary, the Kenyan community in the Diaspora is atypical, as it is almost exclusively a community that has voluntarily immigrated to the United States. Due to the restrictive nature of United States immigration laws, this community has turned out to be one of the most highly educated in America. Chicago Kenyan community represents a major brain drain to Kenya but also an

opportunity. The onus is on Kenya to see how best to take advantage and exploit this potentially powerful economic, technological, and political capital living in today's most powerful nation in the world.

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