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Diversity and Transformation: African Americans and African Immigration to the United States

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Successive generations of African immigration have continuously transformed the African American community and the sociopolitical climate of the United States.

Though the history of African immigration to the United States has at times been a turbulent one, the arrival of many different African peoples has profoundly impacted the social makeup of the United States. During this nation's infancy, hundreds of thousands of captive Africans were delivered to American shores. Overcoming tremendous adversity, this population and its successive generations laid the foundations of opportunity for a new wave of immigration after 1965. From Jim Crow to the Civil Rights Movement to desegregation, African Americans have been instrumental in transforming the sociopolitical climate in the United States, creating an environment far more accepting of new immigrants. A series of post-1965 immigration policy shifts opened the doors to a steady increase in African immigration in the latter part of 20th century. Today, approximately 50,000 Africans arrive annually.

Today's African Immigrant

Of the nearly 35 million African Americans, approximately one million are African born.¹ These immigrants are settled in diverse locales across the country. Although highly urban as a whole, African immigrants have not clustered only in select

metropolises. The community has its highest representations in Washington, D.C. and New York, although they are a far more geographically dispersed community than, for example, their West Indian counterparts. The largest influx of African immigrants was reported in Minneapolis/St. Paul, where the population increased 629 percent between 1990 and 2000.² Overall, African migration increased 170 percent during that period, with Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Ghana, in that order, having the largest communities in the United States.

Although the United States has provided refuge to hundreds of thousands of Africans fleeing persecution, that is not the typical portrait of present-day African immigrants. In fact, of all refugees admitted to the United States between 1990 and 2000, only 10 percent were African.³ Of all African immigrants adjusting status in 2003, only 16 percent were refugee and asylee adjustments, as compared to 17 percent of Europeans.⁴ Today's African immigrants tend to be upwardly mobile professionals. Most come to the United States by way of the Diversity Lottery visa.

As a result, contemporary African immigrants have the benefit of a relatively

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high level of educational attainment. Diversity visas, which require a high school education for eligibility, accounted for one-third of immigrant visas awarded to Africans in 2003, compared to less than 7 percent for all countries.⁵ Nearly 98 percent of all foreign-born Africans in the United States have a high school education.⁶ These immigrants generate a large proportion of the \$3 billion in remittances sent back to Africa annually.⁷

African immigrants are also taking advantage of newfound economic opportunities by establishing small businesses in cities across the country. According to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, “Some highly educated [African] immigrants, realizing that their limited proficiency in English and their foreign degrees would make it difficult to get the American jobs they coveted, have instead opened their own businesses. This entrepreneurial spirit is deeply ingrained in Africa, where the informal economic sector is particularly dynamic.”⁸ Whether as hair braiding salons in Philadelphia, corner stores in Harlem, or nightclubs in Washington, D.C., entrepreneurship is emerging as a vehicle to economic stability. Cultural associations, religious institutions, and communal rotating savings funds pool social and economic resources, thus creating and maintaining opportunity for present and future generations.

History of African Migration

Of course, Africans first arrived in this land under far different conditions. The narrative of African immigration to North America begins with the emergence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Although the trade began as early as 1450 in West Central Africa with the arrival of the Portuguese, it wasn't until the 17th century that the British

started transporting Africans to North America. Initial slave trading to the United States brought Africans from the Bight of Benin, Senegambia, and the Gold Coast in West Africa mainly to the coasts of Georgia, South Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia.

From 1700 to 1807, the sociocultural patterns and economy of what was to become the United States were profoundly impacted by the arrival of African captives. Of the nearly 12 million Africans uprooted by the trade, about 450,000 were brought to the United States. By the mid-1800s, people of African descent were craftsmen, teamsters, porters, and domestics as well as plantation workers. However, naturalization was open only to free white persons who had lived in the United States for more than five years. The 1857 Dred Scott decision had declared Negroes were ‘beings of an inferior order,’ not afforded rights by the Constitution, including citizenship.

While slave labor was vital to the early colonial economy, some political leaders were proclaiming the institution of slavery as contrary to the principles of freedom, equality, and inalienable rights on which the nation was founded. Eventually, legal provisions were made to gradually phase out the ‘peculiar institution.’ The date designated for the prohibition of trade in African slaves was January 1, 1808, but the practice continued well into the mid-19th century. In 1810, President Madison wrote, “It appears that American citizens are instrumental in carrying on a traffic in enslaved Africans, equally in violation of the laws of humanity, and in defiance of their own country.”⁹ As late as 1859, Senator Stephen Douglas suggested that as many as 15,000 African slaves were arriving in the United States annually.¹⁰ In 1863, however, the transatlantic slave trade was permanently ended by the Emancipation

Proclamation. Then, in 1868, the fourteenth amendment to the Constitution overturned the Dred Scott decision and guaranteed citizenship, due process, and equal protection under the law for people of African descent.

Although African immigration to the United States declined drastically after slavery ended, the late 19th and early 20th centuries were marked by far-reaching internal migration which was critical to solidifying the foundations of black America. Organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1909), National Urban League (1911), and United Negro Improvement Association (1916) took on the task of facilitating and managing the advancement of black America. In addition, institutions of higher learning, including Howard (1866), Morehouse (1867), and Spelman (1881) provided a forum within which African Americans were able to solidify a collective consciousness. Immigration policy during this period was discriminatory and heavily Eurocentric, although there was some migration of black Cape Verdean mariners to Massachusetts in the mid and late 19th century.¹¹ Even when the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 eliminated all racially specific language from the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), national quotas remained and migration from the African continent was set at the lowest quota of 1,400 annually.

1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act

Voluntary immigration of peoples of African descent did not begin in earnest until passage of the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act of 1965, which revolutionized the criteria for immigration to the United States. The Act called for the admission of immigrants based on their skills, profession,

or relationship to families in the United States. The drafting and passing of the Act is widely considered to have been spawned by the ideology of the Civil Rights Movement. Conversely, the Civil Rights Movement owes much to the pan-African movement championed by leaders throughout the African diaspora, including Marcus Garvey (Jamaica), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), and W.E.B. DuBois (USA). Reformists, building on the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, demanded a nondiscriminatory U.S. immigration law. Allied with the independence struggles in South Africa, these same protesters took up the cause of freedom, sovereignty, and anti-colonialism on the African continent as well as at home.

In the years after the 1965 Act, immigration from Africa burgeoned. Nearly three times as many legal African immigrants entered the United States in the 1970s as compared to the preceding decade. By 1995, 40,000 Africans on average were being admitted annually.¹² Yet liberalization of immigration policy is only part of the explanation for the steady rise in arrivals. European recessions during the 1970s and 1980s led to a tightening of immigration laws, leading many Africans to migrate to the United States rather than to Europe. In addition, mounting economic pressures on the African continent after the 1970s, including economic “structural adjustment” programs demanded by the International Monetary Fund, led to unprecedented unemployment. Severe currency devaluations in the 1990s exacerbated many African nations’ dire economic situation. With economic recovery seemingly out of reach at home, those Africans with the necessary means sought a better life in the United States in record numbers.¹³

In addition to the changes taking place in Europe and Africa, Congress reformed U.S.

policy toward refugees in the 1980s, thereby facilitating a rise in the number of Africans turning to the United States for refuge. The Refugee Act of 1980 amended the definition of a refugee, raised regional refugee ceilings, and offered new arrivals permanent residence after one year. In 1986, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, granting legalization of status to 31,000 Africans living in the country since 1982. The Diversity Visa Lottery, introduced by the Immigration Act of 1990, offered immigrant visas to high school graduates in nations underrepresented in the United States. This lottery quickly became the primary method by which Africans immigrated.¹⁴ The Act also established a Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program providing temporary refuge to foreign nationals present in the United States who would be subject to either violence due to armed conflict or environmental disaster if repatriated. In recent years, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Somalia, and Burundi have been designated eligible for TPS by the U.S. Attorney General, all due to civil strife or armed conflict.¹⁵

Conclusion

African immigrants in the United States are introducing their own vibrant cultures, ideological diversity, and entrepreneurial ingenuity into the mosaic of American society, while providing Africa with much needed economic resources. In black

communities around the country, you will find a multitude of Africans mixing with their native-born brethren, bringing a diversity often overlooked by mainstream America. Although their stories differ greatly, what these various black communities share are common historical roots and an experience of adaptation and renaissance.

In this process, the African second generation is bridging much of the gap between the native and foreign-born populations.¹⁶ Second-generation Africans are commanding leadership roles in arenas large and small throughout the country. Whether members of Congress such as Barack Obama, leaders of black community and student organizations, or even up and coming hip hop artists such as Akon, African second-generation immigrants are wholehearted participants in and even creators of today's African-American culture. Continuously infused with new influences from their own diaspora, Africans are contributing to the fluid adaptability of America's dynamic urban culture. In the process of redefining their race and culture in a social order far different from that of their parents, African immigrants are both giving to and taking from African American tradition in a reciprocal and mutually advantageous relationship.

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Endnotes

¹ U.S. Census, 2000. 35 percent West African, 26 percent East African, 20 percent North African, 7 percent South African and less than 3 percent Central African.

² John R. Logan and Glenn Deane, "Black Diversity in Metropolitan America," Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, University at Albany, August 15, 2003, p. 4.
http://mumford.dyndns.org/cen2000/BlackWhite/BlackDiversityReport/Black_Diversity_final.pdf

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Office of Immigration Statistics, Department of Homeland Security, *2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, Table 8, p. 29-30.

⁵ *2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, p. 34.

⁶ "The Brain Drain," *In Motion: The African American Migration Experience*, February 2005.

⁷ Pamela Bridgewater, Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, U.S. Department of State, "The African Diaspora and Its Influence on African Development," Remarks at Kentucky State University, March 28, 2003.

⁸ "A Class of Entrepreneurs," *In Motion: The African American Migration Experience*, February 2005.

⁹ Lawrence Tenzer, "The Illicit Slave Trade," *The Multiracial Activist*, October 2001.
<http://www.multiracial.com/readers/tenzer4.html>

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Marilyn Halter, *Between Race and Ethnicity: Cape Verdean American Immigrants 1860-1965*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993, p. 67-98.

¹² Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, "The Waves of Migration," *In Motion: The African American Migration Experience*, February 2005. www.inmotionaame.org

¹³ Sylviane Diouf, "The New African Diaspora," from *In Motion: The African American Migration Experience*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY, 2005, p. 1. www.inmotionaame.org

¹⁴ *2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, 2004, p. 34

¹⁵ Department of Justice, *Federal Register Notices*, Virtual Law Library, 8 CFR 2003.
<http://www.usdoj.gov/eoir/vll/fedreg/tpsnet.html>

¹⁶ Second generation refers to American born children of African immigrants, or children immigrating before the age of 8.