



Cultural Conflict: Second generation African immigrant children in the United States

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INTRODUCTION

It was estimated in 1996 that there were 24.6 million immigrants in the United States (U.S Census Bureau 1998) what Portes (1990) and Rumbaut (1995) have termed today's immigrants the "permanent unfinished society" of immigrants. It is this "unfinished society" of immigrants' that contemporary African immigrants are a part of. Since the end of forced migration in the mid eighteenth century only a small number of African immigrants have been able to come to United States compared to other groups of immigrants. For instance, from 1820 to 1993 America took in only 418,000 African immigrants according to Immigration and Naturalization records, while 345,425 Asians came to America just in 1993 (Adugna, 1998). Two thirds of all African immigrants currently in the United States arrived after 1980. According to the 1990 census, African born immigrants numbered 364,000. The authors of this paper speculate that the reasons as to why the number of African immigrants in the United States was and still is relatively small compared to other immigrants from other continents, is the difficult process of obtaining a visa to emigrate into the United States and the long and expensive journey that is in many ways beyond the reach of many African families. However, it must be noted that individuals have a choice of migrating or remaining in their homelands. Because these Africans make a choice to emigrate, they come in confident and with the perceptions that they are going to make it. The longer they stay here the more likely that they would start raising children in this society.

In this paper, the authors will provide insight through discussions into the following questions: 1). How successful are African born parents in their passing on African traditions and customs to their children? 2). Is it possible that African children born and raised in the United States will grow up to be part of the mainstream American culture? 3). How best could African immigrants and their children resolve cultural conflict?

How successful are Africans immigrants in passing on tradition and customs to their children?

The first African immigrants as mentioned earlier in this paper were slaves imported to the Americas in general and into United States in particular without their consent. They were uprooted and separated from their families, traditions, countries and the continent of Africa. On arrival in the United States, African slaves were forced to assimilate into the mainstream American culture. Of all the groups that immigrated into the United States, African Americans are the only group today that came unwillingly (Hunt and Collander, 2001, Mittman, 1998). Unfortunately for the Africans, the type of assimilation offered to them did not come with the same opportunities that white assimilation offered European immigrants.

African immigrants in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are distinguished from that of earlier centuries in that the former came based on voluntary decisions in search of better educational opportunities often referred to as "the American dream." Ogbu (1999) alluded to the fact that voluntary immigration may be extended to the understanding of the diverse conditions under which immigration is undertaken. For some, the 'pull' factors of the United States economy, education, and lifestyle are the primary motivators for migration.

Some of the African immigrants have not returned to their countries at the completion of their education but have instead entered the workforce in various fields of expertise. However, it must be noted that not all of the twentieth century immigrants have succeeded in pursuing their educational goals. A significant number have met financial difficulties and have settled for non-professional jobs for survival from day to day with the hope that they will save enough money and achieve their dream. In the meantime, many have married and raised children whose needs have become paramount to their own. A few African immigrants have put their careers on hold in order to provide a strong educational background for their children. As a result, traveling back and forth to their homeland with their children is a very expensive exercise to embark on a regular basis. This has led to some of the African immigrants' children having very little contact or exposure to the African continent, culture, and her people.

Hunt and Colander (2001) define culture as “the total pattern of human behavior and its products embodied in thought, speech, action, language, and artifacts, and dependent on the capacity for learning through the use of tools, language, and systems of abstract thought” p. 110. Therefore, it can be concluded that culture creates human beings and human societies. Reciprocally, by gradual accumulation over many generations, culture is the product of human societies and of the individual that compose them. Applying this definition to the discussion about the second-generation African immigrants does not have what it takes to learn and practice their culture. The best that can come out of this generation is a blended culture of African and American cultures.

Whereas parents may speak their native language(s) most of the second-generation African immigrants may or may not understand their parents’ native language(s) depending on how much their family use the language. Apart from communicating with their parents they may not have other opportunities to hear someone speak or read in their African language. Moreover, in the schools and in other places of socialization their friends do not share the same cultural backgrounds. Therefore, there is no motivation to learn and/or use their African language(s). In the immigrants’ children’s perception, the more they use English language as medium for all their communications the better the chances of being fluent and unlike their parents acquire American accent that will make them fit in the American society. On the other hand, African born immigrants want their children to maintain as much of their African culture as possible. Ironically, how do African born immigrant parents expect this to happen if they have not consistently instilled the cultural elements in their children?

For African immigrants passing on African traditions and customs to their children is becoming more and more important. Parents are concerned that their children born or raised in the United States will grow up to be part of the mainstream American culture. To provide means of transmitting their culture to the children many African immigrants are sorting other alternative avenues to achieve this. In cities where immigrants have settled in large groups communal groups run weekend schools and organize camps for children that help nurture cultural identity through formal and informal education. In large cities like Washington DC, New York, Los Angeles, African immigrants publish newspapers and also produce radio programs with the main purpose of serving the immigrant community and promoting African traditions and cultures. For example, the “African Shopper” is one of the newspapers widely sold in African stores and other places where Africans are likely to meet in Washington Metropolitan area. Apart from newspapers, there are many radio broadcasts that provide entertainment programs as well as news and information about events in various African countries. Moreover, some of the radio programs also give African immigrants opportunities to discuss issues affecting their lives here in the United States and the lives of those in their homeland (Adugna, 1998).

Many African immigrants as well as their children have taken religion seriously by attending church services and church related activities. In areas where there are large concentrations of African immigrant populations like Columbus, Ohio, Jersey City, New Jersey, Dallas Texas, Minneapolis, Minnesota, African churches have been started and led by African ministers. Congregations gather over the week for worship, socialization, catching up with homeland news brought by visitors who have traveled recently or from those who got news from their homes. Also through potluck, traditional foods and variety of dishes are shared which in many ways continue to be cherished among many first-generation African immigrants. However, second and third generation African immigrants in many cases are not enthusiastic and appreciative of traditional African foods because their tastes are used to American foods. In many African immigrants’ homes children demand American type of dishes while the parents partake of both American and African dishes. Therefore, on their own second-generation African immigrants will eat American and not African foods.

Many African immigrants still follow other ancestral traditions. For instance, many African immigrants have followed their traditional child naming ceremonies in selecting their children’s names and in the child naming rituals. Moreover, those who can afford it make arrangements for their mothers to travel to the United States and participate in the naming ceremony of their grandchildren. The interesting part of this practice is that the children bear African names but ironically he or she may not communicate in any African language nor practice any part of African culture as much as their parents would like them to. Why is this the case? Many parents have been caught up with the fast pace of the workplace having very little quality time left to socialize their children in the way they were socialized in Africa. As stated in the African proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” well the “village” around the second and third generation African immigrants does not have the same traditions and customs the African parents would like their children to be equipped with. Moreover, this “village” is a different culture with different regulation in many cases where families deal with their own children with no interference from outsiders. Notwithstanding parents want to protect their children against possible abuse from people they may not know about their backgrounds. It therefore becomes difficult for the immigrant children to practice their African culture once they move away from their parents’ home (arguably). Plus, they seem to be more comfortable identifying themselves with the mainstream American culture that they have known all their lives.

Another drawback of passing African traditions and customs to the immigrant children is the fact that the African immigrant community does not form a homogenous group. It is extremely diverse, comprised of people from different races, countries of origin, ethnic groups, cultural, and social backgrounds. Such immense diversity makes it difficult for immigrant

children to sort out which cultural elements are from their parents' countries of origin and which ones are as result of a blend from various African cultures. In reality there seems to be another new culture emerging as a result of a blend of the dominant African immigrants, African American, and white American groups (Adugna, 1998). It remains to be seen as to how this generation would like to be identified as. The authors of this paper after discussing with other African immigrants would like to propose the title of American-African as a separate label for American born African immigrants.

Is it possible for the second and third generation of African immigrants to grow up to be completely part of the mainstream American culture?

Most of the second and third generation African immigrants have not been to the African continent. They were born and raised in the United States by their first generation African born immigrants. What they know about Africa is what their parents and grandparents have told them or what they have read from Western published books and world explorer channel. They have not mingled with other African children, sung and played children games, and learned the life lesson these games teach; they have not basked in the tropical sun, nor ran down the hill slopes tending animals and learning from nature the variety of plants that are not found in any other continent. They have not formed a vivid picture in their mind of an African how can we expect them to practice what they have not had the opportunity to experience. The images in the media have also shaped the picture of Africa in their minds. They have not experienced African culture first hand in its setting on the African soil. It is one thing to be told and is another to experience and be immersed in the culture first hand.

Young African immigrants must choose between being African or African American. Their parents' pull in one direction and their peers pull in another. African immigrants' intension is to prepare their children to benefit economically, educationally and all other aspects in this land of opportunity. Their purpose of migrating to the United States was to better their economic condition (Viadero, 1996). Historically, African Americans have experienced racial discrimination; racial profiling and some have held low paying jobs. In African immigrants' opinion they would select a "path" that will not marginalize them in this society. For these reasons African immigrants according to Adugna (1998) have adopted different strategies. In their estimation to be successful in this country, they must work hard to preserve their cultural distinctions rather than blend in with African Americans. Moreover, to blend with African American is to engage in downward economic trend, a process by which new immigrants are absorbed into survival jobs on minimum wages. In large cities for example, the retention of foreign accents and culture at times helps African and West Indian Blacks to get jobs. Given the strong negative stereotypes attached to Black Americans, African immigrants maintaining their distinctiveness in their estimation is particularly important and perhaps one of the survival strategies (Mudede, 2001).

Whereas the first generation Africans would like to dissociate themselves from African Americans in an attempt to distance themselves from the stereotype images for a long time associated with African Americans and job discrimination, second generation African immigrants have different perspectives. Second generation Africans do not mind being called and identified with African Americans. Moreover, they are born and raised side by side with African Americans. They have been Americanized. They dress, talk, act, and get along just fine. Their attitudes towards African Americans are very different from those of their parents. How can one distinguish an African American from second-generation African immigrants? According to the Mudede, (2001) African immigrants arrive in America fleeing desperate circumstances ranging from war, famine, dictatorship governments, poverty etc. Once they arrive in the United States deportation is only a phone call away if they do not continue to maintain their status. They are usually forced by circumstances beyond their control into poor black neighborhoods riddled with crime and harassments, and if they have a job it is usually not stable or meaningful. This is why so many black immigrants hold such low opinions of African Americans, the very people they should identify with.

African immigrants moved into the United States to improve their lives as fast as possible, and they do not see many Black Americans living the lives they dreamed they would live once they migrate to the United States - the land of opportunity and prosperity. Hence, their attempt to become another type of traditional American may be "Black American." First generation immigrants may look like Black American, but their core is still African. Second generation immigrants, however, will be identified as African Americans in every aspect. Their children do not share their parents' perspectives, they are already Americanized and they seem to be comfortable that way except when their accent gives them away (Mittman, 1998).

Whose fault is it that the second-generation immigrants have not maintained their African distinctiveness? It is the opinion of the authors of this paper that African immigrants are not exposing their children long enough to African language, customs, dances, foods, way of dress, folktales, music, homeland visit etc. Significant number of African immigrants may not speak the same African language and that becomes difficult for the children to learn an African language when their parents communicate in English at home and English is the medium of instruction at school or at the work place. The African immigrants may be determined to see to it that their children maintain their distinctiveness but the odds against this dream are overwhelming. It remains to be seen as to how many second and third generation African immigrant practice their culture and remain in close contact with their African ties or roots. African immigrant children will always know much more about their African connections than African Americans but in terms of practicing their African traditions and culture they may not be very different from African Americans (arguably).

Reflecting upon and learning from the experiences of African Americans and the frustrations they go through not knowing which particular country in the African continent they came from or which of the 3,000 African languages they would be speaking today, what would have been their traditional attire and so on and so forth, African immigrants and their children should do everything they can to make sure they do not become part of the “melting pot”. They have choices unlike the African Americans who did not have the privilege of choosing either to maintain their culture or to assimilate. It is necessary to have an identity, it is a human nature and desire.

Whereas African born immigrants may very much wish that their children maintain their African traditions, it is not practically possible to live in the United States with very little contact with their country of origin and expect their future generations to maintain their culture. Indeed, the future African immigrants’ children will know where they came from and a little bit of their origin, their perspective will be very different from their parents and those of their grandparents. They were born and raised in this culture and African culture may appear foreign to them. For the generations that have not been to the African continent they are going to be exposed to the media and the stereotyped images about the African continent. The truth about Africa has been distorted for so long to the extent that most Westerners are still ignorant about the earth’s second largest continent. For the African immigrants who did not expose their children to their culture they will learn about African culture in their classrooms either as multicultural education, global or international education. Ukpokodu (1996) makes the distinction between the two as follows: Whereas multicultural education focuses on the study of issues of ethnicity, linguistics, class, religion, gender, and other exceptions within United States, global education promotes an understanding of peoples and cultures of other regions of the world. Unfortunately, the study of peoples and cultures of other regions of the world is often limited to a museum or tourist approach in which emphasis is placed on handmade artifacts, foods of a cultural group and some exotic music. The fact that a non-African teacher will teach African immigrants about their culture in the classroom most probably and the perceptions of African immigrants’ children about Africa will not be any different from that of African Americans who have not been to the African continent (Schnaiberg, 1997).

The authors of this paper will not regard this paper as complete without mentioning the fact that there are some African born immigrants who are ashamed of their culture and their continent. The authors of this paper in conversation with some African born immigrants has heard them refer to their countries of origin as “a place where fire is always burning (hell)” or “our country is terrible that is why we are here.” For this group of people, they do not make any attempt to expose their children to the African culture in terms of teaching them about their African languages or clothing, customs, practices, foods, dances, art, etc. In light of this, how committed would they be in exposing their second-generation immigrant children to their cultures?

How best could African immigrants and their children resolve cultural conflict?

The authors of this paper make the following suggestions:

1. African born immigrants should instill in their children from an early age about the importance of their culture. Children must be made to understand that they do not have to give up their culture in order to fit into the mainstream culture. They can acculturate. There is room for bilingual in this country and second-generation African immigrants should not feel that they have to choose one language over the other.
2. African immigrants’ children if they are successfully helped to acculturate will accept and integrate parts of both cultures in their lives. Children in these circumstances from educational standpoint are likely to display success in school and in life. In contrast, those children who have not successfully acculturated may tend to have two separate lives that will be split between home life (African culture) and his or her out of home life the mainstream culture. The role of parents is to make the process of integration as smooth as possible. Failure to integrate successfully may make their children to experience fear or lack of acceptance for their African culture in the mainstream culture.
3. African immigrants must emphasis multicultural education and multilingual to their children as a ticket to social mobility. Whereas this is important successful acculturation will enable second-generation African immigrants to resolve their cultural conflict with their parents.
4. African born immigrants should send their children to their home countries for a period of time to be immersed in their culture. Such trips to the African continent will help second-generation immigrant children to polish on their African language(s), get acquainted with their grandparents, cousins, and other extended family members. Culture is learned and must be taught in each generation. With this kind of connections second-generation African immigrants will be firmly anchored in their culture and will have something to pass onto their children, the third generation African immigrants.

CONCLUSION

Whereas some African born immigrants have tended to assimilate into American culture, others have tended to maintain their own culture and sense of peoplehood over the years. Recent African immigrants have continued this tradition and established ethnic enclaves of small communities in large cities across the United States. These groups observe cultural patterns that differ from those of mainstream America. Members of these groups, for example, may adhere to particular family roles, and patterns for carrying on daily activities. Many African immigrants continue to value their own African historical experiences (outside and

inside the United States), celebrate particular holidays, and prefer certain African foods. Second generation African immigrants who grow up in such families and communities will be greatly influenced by these practices. And for most of these groups there is little cultural conflict between them and their children. On the other hand, there are those African born immigrants who have not exposed their children to African culture, these second-generation African immigrants have been Americanized. There is another group who practice African culture but their children do not appreciate these practices. For this group, the cultural conflict is greater the parents pulling one side and their children the other. For all African immigrants the key is instilling their culture in their children before they lose their values and identity. To what extent they choose to practice their culture it will be up to the second-generation African immigrants to decide and not their parents.

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