The Historical Society of Pennsylvania with The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies

EXTENDING COMMUNITY: INSIDE AND OUT

African immigrants arriving in Philadelphia tend to settle in the same neighborhoods as friends and family members who came before them. This "chain migration" creates pockets of different populations around the area – many Sierra Leoneans, Liberians, and Ethiopians live in Southwest Philly, for example. Sudanese tend to settle in either West or Northeast Philly. There is a small Kenyan population in Norristown. And a number of Eritreans live in Lansdale.

Community meeting places – churches, groceries, restaurants, and community centers – are usually established in these same neighborhoods. This concentration of people and services facilitates the frequent interaction of community members. In many ways, Africans prefer to remain ***inside their communities***, where they feel most at home.

But African immigrants also interact with the larger Philadelphia society, that is, ***outside their communities***. This contact takes place in the workplace as well as through the mutual cultural and religious activities that are becoming more common in Philadelphia.

Extending a Sense of "Home": Inside the Community

Businesses

African businesses are not only commercial enterprises. They also help immigrants to recover a sense of "home." Restaurants offer busy immigrants a "taste" of their country of origin when they do not have time to cook for themselves. Music stores sell the "home sound, " either traditional music or the latest hits of poplar music from the continent. Such businesses may also act as a meeting point for community members. An Ivorian immigrant summed up the relation of his compatriots to an Ivorian-owned restaurant with this statement: *"If you miss the community, you just stop by the Benkady Restaurant. There are always people."*

Grocery stores are similarly multi-purpose. Since most immigrants continue to eat African dishes, they usually buy ingredients at African markets, although other "ethnic" groceries, such as those run by East or South Asians, may also carry the desired products. African stores also become gathering places for conversation about politics and people at home. For example, many Sierra Leoneans meet at the Freetown Market in Southwest Philly to discuss recent political events at home. Ivorians stop by the Baltimore African Market to watch recordings of television programs originally broadcast in Ivory Coast. Meanwhile, taxi drivers congregate in front of the store in the late afternoon to take a break and exchange news and stories about the day's fares. African grocery stores may also offer money-wiring services, which attract an additional clientele. The Nigerian-owned Amigo Market posts advertisements for sending money through both Western Union and a Nigerian money-wiring service based in Atlanta.

Socializing outside Baltimore African Market
Photograph by Vera Viditz-Ward

Other kinds of businesses appeal to the African community by offering services they especially need or by hiring personnel who speak African languages. Liberian-owned Mt. Nimba Computer Center offers technology training for those who purchase equipment. Owner Moses Voker also helps newly arrived Liberians with Immigration and Naturalization Service formalities on a consulting basis. Sudanese-owned Nilien Insurance often employs clerks who speak French and Amharic, which attracts a clientele from the West and Horn of Africa. Owner Siddiq Hadi had a strategy when he chose a location for his business: "*I had that background of an immigrant coming to the United States. I was quite convinced that the ethnic market was my potential market. So I started a business in West Philadelphia."* African entrepreneurs have similarly found that locating their shops or offices in neighborhoods with concentrated populations of immigrants has proved a boon to their businesses.

Associations

Many African national and ethnic populations have created associations that cater to their respective groups. In the Philadelphia area, there are now more than forty such associations. Community associations recreate a familiar atmosphere for socializing and mutual aid. They may also assist newcomers in locating housing, employment, and social services, and a few have schools and summer courses that teach the community's language and culture to the second generation.

The first association to seek and obtain non-profit (501(c)3) status in Philadelphia was the Ethiopian Community Association of Greater Philadelphia. Incorporated since 1984, the ECAGP has been very successful in providing services to its membership and in collaborating with other ethnic communities in Philadelphia on a number of programs. The Ethiopian Association also has a community center, as do the Sudanese Society of Greater Philadelphia and the Eritrean Community of Philadelphia, where members may meet and organize activities.

Although a source of help and comfort to African immigrants, community associations, especially those based upon ethnic criteria, may serve to recreate divisions present in home countries. A Sierra Leonean immigrant notes that this has been a problem in his own community in Philadelphia: "*One of the problems in Africa is tribalism. We have left home to come here, and we begin to divide ourselves into Mendes, Mandingos, Fulas… I find it very divisive."* Recognizing this danger, some community associations, including a new Sierra Leonean one, are seeking to forge a sense of unity among immigrants from the same country. The United Liberian Association, United Sierra Leoneans for Peace and Development, and the Sudanese Union of Philadelphia have adopted this perspective, for example; Liberia, Sierra Leone and Sudan are all currently experiencing ethnic strife and civil war. A recent refugee from southern Sudan noted that while he would not have socialized with northern Sudanese back home, things are different here: *"We have conflicts back home between the Dinkas and the northern Sudanese, but when we come here we brush them aside and become one."* Leaders wish to avoid the replication of divisive relationships in their Philadelphia communities.

Ethiopian coffee at an ECAGP picnic
Photograph by Vera Viditz-Ward

While many Africans are involved primarily in their national or ethnic associations, some leaders have begun to extend interaction across

these lines through the creation of the Coalition of African Communities - Philadelphia (AFRICOM). Member association presidents and religious leaders recognize that they will exert more power on the local scene by using a single "African" voice. The Coalition aims to increase its members' access to social and health services, educate the media about Africa, and collaborate with African American organizations. To date the Coalition represents immigrants hailing from fourteen countries.

News programs like Radio Tam-Tam, broadcast on WNWR (1540 AM), also unite African immigrants across national borders by providing a clearinghouse for African news and community information. Radio Tam-Tam, created by Senegalese businessman Mody "Modibo" Diagne, is broadcast twice a day, once in French and once in English. Eric Edi, an Ivorian graduate student at Temple University, assists him. The program is supported primarily through advertising by both African-owned businesses and those that target an African clientele, such as travel agencies and immigration law services.

Social Life

Community is also built in less formal ways, through socializing and visiting. This socializing includes informal tea and coffee drinking, cooking and eating together, and attending each other's weddings, baptisms, and funerals. When communities congregate, they also like to listen to music from home. This music, whether old favorites or new popular recordings, may be bought on trips back to Africa, or at special shops in Philadelphia, New York, or Washington D.C. Dances are also very popular, and they are always a joyful event, recreating through familiar music and movement the home atmosphere. For example, a Senegalese or Ivorian dance party will typically start after midnight, just as it would in Dakar or Abidjan. And a Liberian immigrant noted that hospitality continues as a strong tradition in his community in Philadelphia: *"I think that there is unity here among Liberians. Most of the parties you will go to, you don't even need an invitation. You just go there and the door is open."*

Sometimes, communities will hire live musicians, who often come from New York or Washington D.C. At a recent Eritrean event, a live band played at the Eritrean community center into the small hours of the night. People of all ages joined in the exuberant dancing while small children slept on chairs around the periphery of the dance floor, finally tired out from their earlier active participation. People often comment nostalgically after such events that they "felt just like being back home."

Gatherings are also an opportunity for African immigrants to wear traditional clothes, usually not worn on a daily basis in Philadelphia. West

Ivorian women at soireé dansante. Photograph by Vera Viditz-Ward

Africans don sumptuous robes, often adorned with complex embroidery, or brightly colored two-piece ensembles. Ethiopian and Eritrean women may wear dresses of white gauzy fabric, trimmed with colorful strips of traditional cloth at the neck and hemline. Sudanese women wrap their torsos and heads in lengths of shiny and textured fabrics, while their male escorts wear white tunics and turbans. African children, on the other hand, are usually not dressed much differently than their American counterparts – Mary Janes and frilly dresses or jeans, tee shirts, and sneakers predominate.

Finally, community gatherings are a time to use one's native language and to expose one's children to it. Africa is a continent with well over 2,000 languages. Several dozen are widely used in the immigrant communities of Philadelphia. In settings where people of different language groups come together, the official language of the home country -- usually English or French -- is the neutral choice. Local varieties of these languages -- Ivorian French, Liberian English, and, in the case of Sierra Leone, the English creole called "Krio" -- may also be used to communicate across ethnic and linguistic lines.

Some African communities have taken to very American kinds of socializing. Some families begin to observe American holidays, such as Thanksgiving, Halloween, and the 4th of July. They may organize picnics in public parks, and swimming and skiing outings with their children. For example, at the Ethiopian community picnic in Summer 2000, the men played cards at picnic tables, the women made coffee in the traditional manner for the entire group and prepared the barbecued meal, while children played in the nearby swimming pool. The Eritrean youth group comes from high schools all over the Delaware Valley to hold parties and fundraising events such as car washes. The Kenyan Women's Investment Club (KWIC) meets regularly to make group investments in the stock market and to provide a social outlet for its members. Its aims are not unlike those of many American investment clubs, although KWIC is also reminiscent of the traditional "revolving credit associations" that are very popular among women all over Africa.

Interacting Outside of the Community

Responding to Images of Africa

> *"Many prominent people in Christianity were African, such as Clement of Alexander. There was Christianity in Ethiopia, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, but people forget that. When they see that your name is African, they question what you know about Christianity."*
> – African chaplain in a Pennsylvania state prison.

Africa is not a place that most Americans know much about. Not only are African history and geography rarely taught in depth in American schools, but the American media also contribute to the average American's perception that Africa is nothing but a "continent in crisis." Some African immigrants in Philadelphia express frustration about the imperfect knowledge that most Americans have about their home, such as this Ghanaian: *"There are nice places in urban Africa but unfortunately they are not newsworthy. I guess it is better to take a picture of someone who is naked in a village than to show some of those things. My mother was visiting and she went to the library and borrowed a video on Ghana. She watched it but did not recognize anything. It was like Ghana from a nature program!"* An Ivoiran sets the record straight in this way: *"Americans should know that we go to school, that we have highly educated people. That we have very modern cities, computers, TVs."*

"Americans should know that we go to school, that we have highly educated people. That we have very modern cities, computers, TVs."
-- Ivorian immigrant correcting American views of Africa.

Other immigrants find that some Americans hold romantic notions about Africa that have little in common with contemporary economic and political realities on the continent. All immigrants become used to explaining where they are from, starting with the continent at large, and gradually focusing in on their country.

One Eritrean explained, *"The first thing I say is 'Have you heard of Ethiopia?' When they say yes, I say 'Eritrea is in the northern part of Ethiopia."* They cannot assume any familiarity with the more than 50 countries that make up the continent of Africa.

African Immigrants and "Race"

Many Africans are unused to living in a society where race is a defining factor. In fact, many immigrants may never have thought of themselves as "Black" before arriving in the United States. As one Eritrean commented, *"In Eritrea we don't identify people by color. I would think of a white person as the same as me. That's how our culture is in Eritrea."* This difference in racial identity sometimes leads to conflict with African Americans who expect Africans to identify automatically with their group and participate in its struggle against discrimination.

At the same time, many Africans appreciate the fact that they can blend in racially in many Philadelphia neighborhoods. They would not have this experience in Europe, where one can be stopped on the street by authorities and asked for identification simply for looking like a foreigner.

Yet they are disturbed by the racial polarization found in the United States. One Nigerian immigrant expressed concern about American attitudes toward difference:

> *I wish race relations were farther along in the U.S. than they are. People perceive you as an African American person and treat you accordingly. Maybe if I had tried in the last 25 years I could have lost my Nigerian accent, but I don't want to because that's me. But then Americans treat you differently because either you look different or speak different. We are a little bit worried about my son. He is now driving and you hear about African American males and profiling."*

A Kenyan pointed out, "*Something I don't like about the U.S. is that racism is so pervasive, but people pretend that it is not there."* Race is for many a new experience; at home, conflict and discrimination may be based on other factors, such as ethnicity or religion.

The perceptions of African immigrants toward racism often depend upon their prior experiences, either at home or while living in other foreign countries. One southern Sudanese refugee found the United States to be less racially polarized than other countries: *"America is far better than any other place that I have lived. My color is not important, compared to what I felt in Sudan or Egypt."*

For many African immigrants, the puzzle of where they fit into the racial landscape of the United States may not be solved until the second generation grows up and finds its place. If the African experience is anything like that of earlier Black Caribbean immigrants, immigrants from the continent will find their children identifying with African Americans, either by choice or, indeed, by lack of choice.

Extended Identities – Being "African" in America

Although a shared heritage and experience of discrimination do not create an automatic empathy between African Americans and African immigrants, the two groups are gradually beginning to explore their common interests. Many African retailers market import merchandise to African Americans eager to connect with Africa. In the last decade successful collaborations also have emerged between members of these two groups in Philadelphia. At

"I wish race relations were farther along in the U.S. than they are. People perceive you as an African American person and treat you accordingly… Americans treat you differently because either you look different or speak different. We are a little bit worried about my son. He is now driving and you hear about African American males and profiling."

-- Nigerian on race relations in the U.S.

Odunde, an annual Yoruba celebration recreated by African Americans, many African vendors offer cultural goods for sale. Philly Dance Africa, organized by the Philadelphia Folklore Project, features collaborative performances by African immigrant and African American dancers. And Victoria Onwuchekwa, an immigrant from Nigeria and proprietor of an African boutique in Philadelphia, actively shares her African heritage with African American

youth. She has published her family tales, entitled *Ibo Folktales My Mother Told Me*, and performs as a storyteller in the Philadelphia schools during Black History Month.

African immigrants have contributed to local Philadelphia life not only as "Africans," that is people with a certain cultural perspective to offer, but in other ways as well. Their identities are becoming local in character. Dr. Cyprian Anyanwu is a good example. He came from Nigeria in the 1960s to study at Temple University, and since then Anyanwu has served the Philadelphia community in a variety of capacities. He currently directs a residential drug addiction center in North Philadelphia, serving mostly inner city Americans. Anyanwu also has been active in local politics, running for City Council.

Dikembe Mutombo, a new member of Philadelphia 76ers, is also making an impact on the local community. Philadelphia's most famous African immigrant, he is an enormously popular athlete among young Philadelphians, who love to wear Mutombo jerseys. Mutombo is also known for his humanitarian work in his home country of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where he is contributing to efforts to improve health care. His local success in the United States makes his work back at home possible.

Many immigrants from Africa feel that Philadelphia offers them opportunities they would not have had elsewhere. They recognize the challenges of adapting to a complex, multi-racial and multicultural society, and are usually willing to take on these challenges. In particular, Africans know that many immigrants have come before them to the United States, and that their families have become established members of American society. A Sudanese immigrant expressed confidence in the possibilities of life in America, especially in comparison to other places he might have settled: *"As an immigrant in Oman where I was before, you are always just an immigrant. You will never be part of the society, no matter how long you stay there, one year, fifteen years, or thirty years. You do not feel that here in the United States. This country belongs to hard-working immigrants."*

Excerpted from: *Extended Lives: The African Immigrant Experience in Philadelphia*, by Leigh Swigart, Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, 2001, pgs 8-14.