

EXTENDED FAMILIES: HERE AND THERE

"I miss the family, the extended family, because our culture is very much interwoven with the extended family."

– Nigerian immigrant

Family is very important throughout Africa. Families, not individuals, are the building blocks of African society. Most people live in households that include not only the nuclear family (mother, father, children) but also members of their extended family (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and others). Family members act as both an economic and emotional network and provide individuals with a sense of who they are and where they belong. Many African immigrants, such as this Guinean immigrant living in Philadelphia since the 1960s, express a sense of loss at no longer being surrounded by their family: *"What I miss most about Guinea is the extended family structure. When I am at home, I feel safe. My children are safe, my wife is safe. Whether I am there or not, they will be taken care of. In America, I don't have that."*

Immigration to the United States changes the African family. African families in the United States are very restricted compared to the extended model they would follow at home. If African immigrants come with family members, it is usually with a spouse or children. They thus adopt the nuclear family arrangement common in the United States. Extended family members may, however, stay in their relatives' household temporarily when they arrive in Philadelphia. For example, one Kenyan immigrant explained that both her husband's sister and her brother's wife were staying in her Norristown home while deciding what course their new lives would take. And a Tanzanian family willingly played host to a distant relative who won the green card lottery while he became familiar with Philadelphia and integrated into the local economy. But usually, as newcomers themselves settle into their new

lives and find jobs and housing, they move on to form their own households.

In rare cases, grandparents may rejoin the nuclear family group. But most older Africans who come to the U.S. to visit their children and grandchildren have a hard time adapting to the social isolation and choose to return to Africa rather than resettle. A Nigerian woman described her mother's reaction to the United States like this: *"My mother came to visit and stayed a year and that was it, because she did not like it. It was isolating for her. Back home, people are in and out of your house, in and out, friends and families are walking down the street. They stop and say hello."* In Africa old age is looked forward to since elders are generally highly respected and younger people defer to their wisdom and authority. Giving up this status to live in an unfamiliar and youth-oriented society is not a popular option.

Some of the older Africans who live in Philadelphia were resettled here as refugees and thus did not immigrate voluntarily. The Liberian community of Philadelphia has tried to help older refugees adapt and form new social groups through the creation of the Agape Senior Center. At Agape's bi-weekly meetings, older Liberians

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practice their English, learn basic literacy if they have never been to school, and get oriented more generally to life in Philadelphia. Agape Director Pastor John Jallah observed that these meetings act as a social lifeline for those who attend; without this contact, elder Liberians would have little opportunity to leave the house and socialize.

Attitudes toward aging shape younger immigrants long-term plans. A Kenyan immigrant described her view on growing old in America this way: *"I don't think I can be an old person in this country. I like the reverence that*

the youth have for the elderly back at home and the way the community just kind of embraces you. You continue with life in a more gentle fashion as opposed to worrying about Medicaid, if you have heat, and the cost of living. I couldn't grow old here." Despite making new lives in the United States, younger immigrants dream of returning home after retirement. That way, in their old age they would once again be surrounded by their extended family.

Immigration changes not only family structure but also the relationships between household members. Married couples often share both paid work and housework in a more equal way than they would in their country of origin. Consequently, women become active decision-makers in the household. An Ethiopian man described the shift in household work patterns this way: *"In Ethiopia the wife has to take care of the whole house. Here, I cook for my kids, I wash their clothes, I get them dressed. I am the one who takes them to school and then my wife picks them up. In Africa a man wouldn't generally do that."* Women immigrants from Africa often welcome this shift, and men seem to adapt well to their wives' new roles.

Parents also tend to have less authority over their children than they would in their home countries, where discipline is usually strict and respect for elders obligatory. Loss of authority may be countered by steering one's children toward those of other immigrant families from the same country. Many community events are multigenerational so that children are exposed to the African model of child rearing. Churches and mosques are another place that children meet other young people from their community.

Fictive Kin

Many African immigrants replace their absent extended family with "fictive kin" – members of the same ethnic or national community who play the role that family would at home. Community members may counsel young people, mediate during domestic conflict, provide moral and financial support at times of crisis or death, and help celebrate joyous events such as weddings and births. For example, the president of the Guinean Association of the Delaware Valley resolved cultural problems between a young Guinean woman and the family she worked for as a babysitter. In many cases the entire community functions as a kind of extended family. A Sudanese family organizing a

traditional wedding extended an open invitation to all members of the Sudanese community of Philadelphia, many of who were personally unknown. And the death of a Senegalese taxi driver in July 2001 inspired an outpouring from the larger Senegalese community of both sympathy and funds to repatriate the body.

Many African immigrants are single men or men who have left their families at home. Often they have come to the U.S. in order to support economically the very people who are the most important part of their lives. These men may feel very isolated in the United States without their wives, children, and extended family network. Single men may get together to drink tea, listen to music, celebrate national or religious holidays, or simply chat in their native languages. Spending time with co-ethnics or co-nationals helps them to recreate the home context and to recover some of their identity.

Another kind of fictive kin is found among the southern Sudanese "lost boys" who were resettled in the Philadelphia area in 2000. After fleeing the civil war in their homeland, these boys lived in the Kakuma refugee camp in northern Kenya for years. There, they created fictive "families" with other older and younger refugees, groups that were kept intact when the boys were resettled in the U.S. Many of these young Sudanese are now living with American foster families, a new kind of fictive kin. Describing her adopted sons, one foster parent commented, *"They call me 'mother.' But any woman who is nice to them they call 'mother.'"*

Keeping in touch

African immigrants extend their lives back across the Atlantic, remaining in constant contact with their families on the continent. Most are very honest about longing for home and those they left behind. A young Eritrean woman put it this way: *"I miss the weather in Eritrea, the family closeness we had. I am close with my brothers and sisters here, but it is very hard to keep up, with all the work and our busy schedules. I miss my family. Of course, the main thing is I miss my mother."* The success of immigrants' lives cannot make up entirely for what they have lost.

Africans keep in touch with their home countries in many ways. Innumerable letters and e-mails are sent back and forth everyday between

Philadelphia and the African continent. But nothing can replace the human voice in its ability to conjure up images and emotions connected with home. For many immigrants, the telephone is the preferred channel of communication with home. Most immigrants call home frequently, and may even reach their relatives who are in refugee camps, awaiting resettlement. Phone cards that offer low-cost calls to African countries are available around Philadelphia, often on sale in groceries and other businesses in neighborhoods with large African populations.

Immigrants also stay in contact with their families at home by sending "remittances," or sums of money that they wire abroad using a number of different services. One Sierra Leonean described sending money home as "the African immigrant's burden." Some services are international, like Western Union. Others are small businesses that are run with one partner in Philadelphia and the other in the home country.

like this: *"You do not exist as a separate unit. You are part of a family so you support them whenever you can. I make sure that my younger sister at home has at least enough to keep food on the table and to buy clothes."* A Nigerian doctor, in Philadelphia since the 1960s when he came to study at Temple University, similarly associates his continued monetary contributions to family back home with the cultural perspectives he learned there as a child: *"One thing that is unique about Africans is that the extended family system is very, very important. If you make one thousand dollars this month, you try to send five hundred dollars back home."* Remittances help immigrants remain an integral part of their relatives' daily lives though separated by thousands of miles.

The younger generation

African immigrant children – those who were either born in Philadelphia or arrived here at a



Yoruba children at Christ Apostolic Church. Photograph by Vera Viditz-Ward

Virtually all African immigrants send money home. Family members at home may depend on these sums for survival. A Mauritanian immigrant described his financial responsibility

young age – face many challenges while growing up. They notice the differences between their own immigrant households and that of their American peers – their family eats differently, speaks differently, and socializes differently –



*Eritrean youth socialize at Asmara ConXion
Photograph by Vera Viditz-Ward*

and may feel self-conscious about this. Adapting more quickly to the new society, children may be called upon to help their parents understand American life or language. This leads to a reversal in traditional patterns of authority that makes everyone feel uncomfortable. Since their parents may be unfamiliar with the role families are expected to play in their children's education by schools and teachers, younger Africans may receive less educational support than their American peers. And parents may also have little understanding of the psychological distress their children experience in adolescence when "growing pains" are intensified by concerns about cultural identity and belonging. Many African parents expect to raise their children as they themselves were raised, often disregarding the different social and cultural context in which they now find themselves. This gives rise to frustration or rebellion on the part of the younger generation. Some refugee children may even make a concerted choice to leave their "African-ness" behind as part of an attempt to forget the often traumatic events they have experienced in Africa before arriving in the United States.

Despite the separation they feel from Africa and its traditions, younger generation Africans *do* feel that they are different from their American peers. They enjoy their knowledge of two cultures, and feel that they have greater options about where and how they will live their adult lives. They interact well in mixed generational groups, which is the norm for their community gatherings. And they tend to have a respect for their elders which is uncommon in our American, youth-oriented society. A young Eritrean woman put it this way: *"So we young people try to keep the culture, but we also know that there is a lot of culture and traditions that we don't agree with. So you would like to keep some things, like family values and the respect we have for each other, and the closeness we have. Things like that we try to teach."*

For their part, African parents have a lot to say about the frustrations of raising children in the U.S. Most groups would like to transmit their language and the cultural values they consider the most important, such as self-discipline and respect for authority and elders. A Tanzanian mother describes the efforts she and her husband make to bring up their children in what they view as the proper way:

First, they are Muslim kids so they also have to learn the Koran. We do not have much time, so it does not get done very much. But whenever we get a chance, when they go to Tanzania for two or three months, they will have a teacher who comes and really teaches them. My son has been very good at taking time to continue reading the Koran. And also, we have dress codes in the family, like not wearing shorts and very short miniskirts.

Many immigrants do not wish their children to adapt the behavior of the average American child. Immigrant families do several things in order to slow down this Americanization. African children tend to spend more time at home with their families and are generally allowed much less freedom of movement than their American peers. Many African children do not socialize very much with their schoolmates. An Ethiopian father describes the routine his children follow and how it limits their activities:

I believe that they might get into trouble. I am trying to work on that and I am not sure what will happen in the future. What they do is that they go to

school and after that they go straight home. If they want to go somewhere I take them and bring them home. That is why we designed the Oromo Community Association, so they will be busy and not spend time on the streets.

When they see other children outside of the classroom, it is at an event organized by their community. A father who helped found the Guinean Association in Philadelphia saw the role that such an organization could play in socializing his children, who have an American mother: " *Now we are beginning to create links between the second and first generations. One of my own motivations for creating the association was that I wanted my own kids to be introduced into the Guinean community.*" Some African communities dream of having a daycare center for their members, which would solve problems of expensive childcare and at the same time provide a safe and culturally correct atmosphere for their young children.

The African community associations that have summer schools encourage families to send their

children for language and cultural training. In this way, the second generation will learn in a special context what they are missing in day-to-day life. Families that have the means and come from countries at peace, may try to have their children spend summer vacations in the home country. This is the best way to have a "crash course" in the home culture.

Most African families try to strike a balance in raising their children in the U.S. They wish their children to succeed according to the American model but hope to instill in them an appreciation of the home culture. A Nigerian mother described her family's approach to parenting like this: "*We have tried to make them realize, to understand where they are coming from. Their backgrounds, their beginnings, some of the values of their culture. They consider themselves Nigerian Americans. They have the sense of who they are and they can choose wherever they want to live.*" This sense of "who they are" is something that many younger Africans in Philadelphia seem to have. It will be interesting to see where they ultimately choose to live.

Excerpted from: *Extended Lives: The African Immigrant Experience in Philadelphia*, by Leigh Swigart, Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, 2001, pgs. 4-8.