



African Immigrants Project

Interview transcription

Ibrahim Sanogo

Interview date: December 2, 2000

Location of interview: Ethnographer's house

Country of origin: Ivory Coast

Ethnic group/language group: Senonfo/Jula

Religion: Muslim

Profession: A paralegal, for an immigration law firm

Level of education: Associate's degree

Location of residence in Philadelphia: Overbrook

At the time of the interview, Mr. Sanogo had been in Philadelphia for seven years, until recently living in Elkins Park. He moved to the States after marrying an African American woman. He has a young daughter. He socializes mostly with white Americans. He is a member of the Association des Ivoiriens, which is inactive at the moment.

Interviewer: Leigh Swigart (LS)

Interviewee: Ibrahim Sanogo (IS)

Interview transcription

LS: Can you give me your name?

IS: Ibrahim --- I-b-r-a-h-i-m --- Sanogo --- S-a-n-o-g-o.

LS: What is Sanogo? Because I knew a "Sanogo" from Burkina Faso. What ethnic group is it?

IS: I am Senonfo.

LS: Oh, Senonfo, okay.

IS: I am Senonfo but it's --- we speak only Jula, you know.

LS: You mean, your family or ---

IS: We are Senonfo, but the language we speak is "Jula".

LS: So your native language is Jula?

IS: Yes.

LS: Senonfo --- those are the ones who are famous for the masks?

IS: Yes. I saw --- this is --- [indicating mask in room]

LS: Is that a Senonfo?

IS: It looks like Senonfo art.

LS: The man here, who lives here, has worked all over North Africa and West Africa. He's a political scientist.

IS: Okay.

LS: And you're from Ivory Coast?

IS: Ivory Coast.

LS: Okay. How long --- Tell me, how long have you been in the United States?

IS: It will be seven years in two months, in March.

LS: And have you spent that whole time in Philadelphia?

IS: The whole time, yes. From New York, from JFK, I came here. Actually, I was in Elkins Park until a few months ago.

LS: Why Philadelphia? Why? What did you know about Philadelphia to come here?

IS: Nothing, nothing. [LS laughs]

IS: I knew about Temple University, that's all. And I came here to join my wife. She is from here.

LS: Oh, I see. And you had met her in Ivory Coast?

IS: I met her mother in the Ivory Coast and we became pen pals, my wife and myself. And then she came to visit me, and things went like that, and then I came here.

LS: And you got married over there?

IS: We got married, yes.

LS: And then you came here?

IS: Yes.

LS: Well, that's quite a story. And you came here because she was from here. Is that the easiest way to get a visa? I mean, I do not say you married for that reason, but someone told me once that it's easier to come as a fiancé.

IS: It's easier, as a fiancé, yes.

LS: Why is that? Because they don't suspect it for --- that you're doing it for other reasons or ---

IS: No, no. I don't know exactly, but I think that you establish in the eyes of the INS, that, on paper, at least on paper, that there is a relationship.

LS: I see.

IS: And the INS can always, you know, the INS has a back-up. They can deny the Green Card application, you know. Once the fiancé gets here, they have ninety days to get married, and then they will apply for a Green Card. So if it's just to get somebody over here, and not marry her, they will never adjust your status. I don't know.

LS: Oh, I see. So if you came over saying you were a fiancé and then you never get married, then they say, then you're out of here? I see. [Tape interrupted]

IS: Recording okay?

LS: Yeah, it's fine. [both laugh] I was doing an interview yesterday and at one point I forgot to turn (). My human error. So right now you are living in Philadelphia?

IS: In Philadelphia. Overbrook.

LS: Okay. Tell me more a bit about the education you had in Ivory Coast?

IS: Ah, I went to law school. I never completed it but, uh ---

LS: At Cocody?

IS: Cocody. Université Nationale de Côte-d'Ivoire. At the time, it was Université d'Abidjan.

LS: They just restructured the university system, right?

IS: Mmm-hmm, yeah.

LS: Mmm-hmm. So you were there and you never finished?

IS: Mmm-hmm

LS: And so you did all --- Where are you from in Cote D'Ivoire? In the north?

IS: Again, technically, yes, But I was born in Bouaké, in the center of the country. First of all, my great-grandfather came from Mali.

LS: Okay.

IS: Okay. My grandfather was born in the south of the Ivory Coast. He created a village. And my father was born in the south. I was born in the center of the country. So, we kind of forget about where originally we came from and, umm --- [LS's child interrupts. Break in tape.]

LS: Okay, so, so are both your parents Senonfo?

IS: Yes, they are.

LS: But then you grew up in a Jula-speaking area?

IS: Mmm-hmm.

LS: So, they --- Senonfo de raisoneé(?). [both laugh]

IS: Actually, I grew up in Baoule-speaking area, which I speak.

LS: Baoule also?

IS: I speak Baoule. And while we are talking about languages, I speak also Anyi which is spoken in the east of the Ivory Coast.

LS: How did you learn that? Just from being with the speakers?

IS: Yeah.

LS: And French, of course, and English. Where did you learn English?

IS: I thought that I knew some English until I get here.

LS: So you had studied it in Cote d'Ivoire?

IS: Yes, I started en place du quatrieme(?)[French], which will be what here? Eighth?

LS: Sort of, like, yeah, freshman year in high school maybe, something, or eighth grade.

IS: Yeah.

LS: Did you go to school in the center part of --- You didn't go to Abidjan until you went to the university?

IS: Not until I went --- I started university.

LS: And then you went to law school and you never completed the degree?

IS: No.

LS: Was, umm, there'd been problems, also with strikes and all those things at the university?

IS: Not while I was, no. But, but other problems.

LS: Yeah, other problems. Abidjan is just an amazing city. It's just so cosmopolitan. I just can't ---

IS: It is, it is. [break in tape]

LS: So when you came here, you were already married. And then what did you do here? You went into ---
?

IS: I started school almost immediately. My dream has always been to be able to get as much education as I wanted to. So we were living in Elkins Park, not far from a junior college. Manor, Manor College. So I enrolled there, in a paralegal studies program.

LS: That's the good thing about the United States ---

IS: Absolutely.

LS: --- that they have those junior colleges for people, who --- It's a great system.

IS: It was great. Small classes: six, seven students per class.

LS: Wow. And your English was good enough?

IS: It wasn't good. I was recording my classes and then go home and listen to the tapes over and over and look up words in the dictionary. Get some help from my wife, and memorize my lessons from the classes.

LS: Wow.

IS: But I did great. I was very pleased.

LS: And how many years was that?

IS: Two years, two years. I completed the associate degree in two years.

LS: So you got an associate degree but with a specialty in paralegal things?

IS: Yes.

LS: And then after that did you find a job?

IS: I was working while doing that. I was going to school at night. I was working in --- I started to be a cashier at Thriftdrug, Eckerd, now it's called. And then I had a job across the street in an aquarium.

LS: Oh, really?

IS: Yes, I was working with fish and going to school at night, almost every night and on Saturday all day. Then, once I graduated from there --- actually before I graduated, I started an internship with the city, legal department of the city.

LS: And that was no problem as someone who, umm --- but, you're not a citizen?

IS: No, I'm not.

LS: I mean, that wasn't a problem?

IS: Well, I had a Green Card. So to work with the city you don't need to be a citizen. You just need to be a permanent legal resident.

LS: I was just talking to a woman from Kenya yesterday who works with the city administration in Norristown. And there were a lot of questions, people saying she's getting federal money and she's not this, and then she became a citizen. It was when legislation started to change in 1995 about these kinds of issues. And what did you think about working for the city?

IS: Well, it was a great experience. To be in one place with several attorneys at once.

LS: So these are public defenders or prosecuting attorneys or --- ?

IS: No, it was the tax unit ---

LS: Oh, tax unit.

IS: --- of the legal department, so people will go after owners of buildings who don't pay their real estate taxes or stuff like that. Or the ones who represent the city in some kind of litigations, you know, people who fall and sue the city.

LS: Yeah, those things. Things that are --- You've noticed Americans like to sue.

IS: A lot, a lot.

LS: So currently you work as a ---

IS: A paralegal, for an immigration law firm.

LS: And this is a private --- ?

IS: It's a private practice. I have been there for the last five years now.

LS: Do you like it?

IS: I love it. I love it.

LS: Is there the law firm, umm --- What does an immigration law firm do? They just do all kind of legal questions surrounding immigration, they deal with?

IS: Absolutely.

LS: And what about the people who come in --- so, their clients are immigrants?

IS: Immigrants, most of the time.

LS: And they have the money to pay?

IS: Usually, yes.

LS: Do they just scrape it together?

IS: Yes.

LS: 'Cause I know a lot of people who work kind of on the legal aspects of that at, like Nationalities Services Center, which is what I think people do when they don't have the money.

IS: Yes. But all --- they are sponsored by US citizens or by companies, you know.

LS: Oh, and so someone else pays the fees?

IS: Exactly.

LS: So these are the people who come in and they come in --- Do some of them have visitor's visas and they're trying to get a long-term visa?

IS: A lot of them. When we are not dealing with companies for professional visas, we are dealing with individuals who most of the time came as visitors and overstayed their legal stay.

LS: And then it's really hard, right?

IS: It is hard.

LS: What's it now? Don't they say that if you overstay now they can bar you from the country for ten years or something?

IS: Yeah, if you overstay for more than one year, you can be barred from getting immigration benefit for ten years. Except --- there is an exception, except when you are married to a US citizen. Except when you fall under the family unity category.

LS: I see. But that's only marriage and not that you have a brother here or ---

IS: No.

LS: Because siblings, that's not considered a tight bond right?

IS: No. That's even not an immediate relative.

LS: Isn't that --- that's such an American thing. Your parents are and your children are, and that's it, right?

IS: Yeah, that's it. That's immediate relative.

LS: You can tell, they sure aren't thinking of Africa when they cut out siblings as an immediate relative.

[both laugh] No, someone was telling me that. What are the main nationalities of people that you see coming through? The people who come as "skilled" are sponsored by companies. Are there a lot of Indians?

IS: Indians, Chinese, Hong Kong.

LS: These are like the computer people?

IS: Yes.

LS: Yeah.

IS: Yes, basically. Europeans, you know French people for cooking, uhh ---

LS: Is there anything that Africans come in as sort of special ---

IS: Professionals?

LS: Yeah.

IS: Not that much. We had a few computer people, actually quite a few, from Ghana, from Egypt, from Sudan, uhh ---

LS: But are these people then who are actually recruited while they are in their home country by a US firm or they come here and then get a job?

IS: Yes.

LS: They come here as a visitor, look for a job and then they get the company to sponsor them?

IS: Yes, yes, exactly.

LS: Does the company have to prove that they have advertised the job?

IS: Oh, yes, yes.

LS: They have to go through this whole thing where they advertise ---

IS: Yes, they have to go through the whole thing, definitely.

LS: Do you get request for free help from a lot of people you know, in helping them resolve their immigration problems?

IS: Well, they will --- people I know will ask me questions when we meet or call me up and ask me questions. But I will generally refer them to the attorney, because I can't give any legal advice.

LS: Right. I suppose that's true.

IS: But I could make some vague, very general suggestions, as to --- but, ultimately, I will tell them the best thing is to talk to an attorney, that's the best thing.

LS: There's an attorney, there's an immigration lawyer who advertises on --- did you ever listen to Radio Tam Tam?

IS: Mmm-hmm. J'ai ecouté(?) [French] ---

LS: It's always on (). No, c'est () après midi(?) [French] But there's an American lawyer who was in the Peace Corps in Mali, and he speaks French and he speaks Bambara ---

IS: Yes, they have told me about him.

LS: And he also really tries to work with a sliding scale. But, of course, he has his clientele, people who don't speak English. They just love the fact that ---

IS: Absolument. [French]

LS: --- he's there, so it's really great. Well, when you left, uhh --- Besides getting married, and, you know, I mean falling in love, whatever, was there another reason? Were you frustrated by conditions in Ivory Coast or did you see it as a dead end? Or was it really that you just wanted to come to rejoin your wife?

IS: Hmm. I first wanted to come and join her, but in the meantime it was great to come here because --- because --- Well, the US is the ultimate for what I wanted to complete my education. There was no better place than the United States.

LS: Just in legal studies?

IS: Yes.

LS: Is there anything comparable to being a paralegal in the French system?

IS: Mmm, we have clerks, you know, () [French]. There is no formal training program. They learn by doing.

LS: So they sort of just assist lawyers, but they're not lawyers?

IS: They are not.

LS: So this is something that's really recognized. And did you know about that before?

IS: No, I didn't, I didn't. And my plan was to come and be able to finish law school and start practicing law.

LS: Do you still want to do that someday?

IS: Oh, yeah. I'm still pursuing it. [laughs]

LS: Yes, although people say there are so many, there's such a glut of, you know, there's a surplus of lawyers. But I don't know. That must depend on what branch of law you choose.

IS: Absolument.

LS: So you'd never heard of Philadelphia before?

IS: Oh yes, I had.

LS: You had heard of Philadelphia?

IS: Yes.

LS: What had you heard about it?

IS: I played in a team called the Celtics while I was in high school. I knew about Temple University, as I told you, and I think that's about it.

LS: When you came here were you --- had you realized that it was a city that was majority black?

IS: Well ---

LS: I know Elkins Park is not majority black.

IS: Yes, you know, from New York that's where I went and I wasn't --- I didn't go out of Elkins Park until a year after I get here.

LS: It's a nice area.

IS: It is nice. It is very nice.

LS: Very affluent.

IS: And I was shocked by how kind people were.

LS: Mmm-hmm. Why? You didn't expect that?

IS: No, not at all.

LS: Why is that? Just because you hear about racism and all that? Or?

IS: Well, probably stereotypes, you know, about --- and we know a lot about New York City.

LS: What you hear from Ivorians who go back home?

IS: Exactly.

LS: Who've had bad experiences?

IS: And we think that, that's how the whole country is.

LS: Yeah.

IS: Brooklyn, New York City.

LS: How many Ivorians do you think are in the Philadelphia area? Do you have any sense?

IS: No. I wouldn't be able to tell you, to give you an exact approximation.

LS: Do you think it's a couple of thousand, or you just don't know?

IS: I will say five hundred.

LS: Five hundred. So it's still pretty small.

IS: Mmm-hmm.

LS: Yeah. And then New York, it must be thousands?

IS: Yeah, there is a huge population.

LS: I hear a lot of people in my work say that they started in New York and they came to Philadelphia because ---

IS: Yes, most of them ---

LS: Cité saturée(?) [French] and it's also so much more expensive. I mean, what you can get a business or storefront or whatever. The Ivorian --- the new mosque, is it in a storefront? Did they buy a building?

IS: They bought the building. Actually, it's a mini(?) block.

LS: Wow!

IS: Yes. They bought it and they are renovating it. They have plans to buy the land across the street for parking space.

LS: That would make them more popular with their neighbors, if they had parking. [both laugh] Had you ever lived in another country before you came here?

IS: No. I was in Burkina Faso for a few months. My aunt was there. And that's about it. I had the opportunity to go to France, but it wasn't the ideal at the time. Everything that I wanted was found in the Ivory Coast at the time.

LS: Yeah, well, I think you'd probably have to deal with more stereotypes about African immigrants there, than here.

IS: Absolument.

LS: I mean, people talk about some experiences there.

IS: Absolument.

LS: I met two North Africans who were working for a Guinean man who has electronic stores in North Philadelphia and I walked in this, you know, really inner city neighborhood and I see these two, you know, white men working as clerks, and I thought, well, that's unusual.

IS: That's unusual.

LS: In this whole neighborhood it was unusual. And then I looked at them, I said --- I started looking at them and I thought --- "Are you from North Africa?" And one was from Tunisia and one was from Morocco. So I think it was a francophone connection. That's why they're working for this man. But I

said, "What do you think of here?" They said, compared to France, this is so nice. There's so much anti-Arab sentiment that they just said they just didn't have --- You know, people don't have too many conceptions of Arabs at all. Well, no, that's not true. They have pretty negative --- but, those terrorists and all that --- but they just weren't experiencing that. And they said in France, you, just, it's not worth going there.

IS: It's something else.

LS: What do you miss the most about Ivory Coast?

IS: [laughs] A lot, a lot. Family. You know, gatherings, being able to meet with friends, to have tea after work. Soccer, to be able to go to the stadium.

LS: Yeah, Isn't there any soccer here?

IS: It's the general atmosphere. There is soccer here, but it's indoor, and it's different, very different.

LS: One of the things that, umm --- I'll be handing out a questionnaire at this event tonight. One of the things that were going to ask people is if --- 'cause I've heard a lot of people talk about soccer, and some people have teams, but they don't have a formal league --- to ask if people would like to come up with a formal African sports league. Because sometimes, you know, the Sudanese'll play the Ethiopians or the Palestinians or something, but it's not organized in any way and people seem to really, really miss it. So. There is no Ivorian team here?

IS: There is one.

LS: There is. But whom do they play against? Just against each other?

IS: Against each other.

LS: Do you think they'd like to play against other African teams, if that existed??

IS: Oh, yeah, yeah.

LS: Unfortunately, the only person who's coming tonight from the Ivorian community is the president of the Association des Femmes Ivoiriennes, because the other association I think is not active, right? The general one, Association des Ivoiriens?

IS: C'est peut-etre actif?(?) [French]

LS: I didn't have a name, and I didn't have an address. Umm ---

IS: Moussa, you know Moussa, the owner of the restaurant, passed away?

LS: Oh, he passed away?

IS: Yeah, last month.

LS: Oh, I didn't know that?

IS: Mmm-hmm.

LS: Oooo.

IS: And he was the president. Il est parté(?) [French] --- he went home --- actually, he went to Mali to get some traditional, natural medicine, but it didn't work.

LS: And then he died there, he died in Mali?

IS: He died in Mali.

LS: What's going on with the restaurant?

IS: Aaah, there is kind of partnership with some friend. It happened shortly before he became ill.

Actually, we have to ---

LS: That's very sad. Well, it's just too bad that there is not someone from the Ivorian --- If you wanted to come tonight, you'd be most welcome. The reason I invited the presidents of associations is because, you know, they have some role ---

IS: Absolument.

LS: --- already as a head of a group of people, they represent a group of people.

IS: Moussa was this kind of leader. Simply, the circumstances were that we were all meeting at his place. So he knew everybody. He would have been a great person to talk to.

LS: You know, I'm not sure I ever met --- the other person I talked to at the restaurant is somebody else, and he keeps saying that he --- maybe he was the partner. () --- Moussa, what's his last name?

IS: Oh! Okay, Moussa Doumbya(?). I think you talked to Dao(?).

LS: Yes.

IS: Yes, and Dao had just gotten partnership, inter-partnership with Moussa.

LS: I think Moussa Doumbya's(?) name was down, but I never met him. The person who collected the information before me had met him. Well, anyway after this, let me --- If you wanted to come tonight, umm, it would be really good to have a representative of the Ivorian community, in addition to the woman who --- you know, the association of women is really for women. I mean, it's very, they do --- fashion shows and stuff. [both laugh]

IS: Where will it be?

LS: Down at the Balch Institute in Center City.

IS: Oh, okay.

LS: So, anyway, I will tell you about it, because it will be nice to have someone do that, and you know, even if this Imam could come, it would be great. Although he probably has to be back for the nine o'clock prayer.

IS: What time will it be?

LS: This is from six to nine. Some of the discussion maybe might go ---

IS: Over.

LS: We'll let the city officials go and hope that some other --- that people will remain to talk about concerns and things they want to have happen. Because one of the ideas that people want to explore, I think, is the idea of having, of creating, a pan-African coalition, to have more power in relation to the city.

IS: Absolutent,

LS: Because the Asians did that, the Asians from all over the place.

IS: Laos, Vietnam ---

LS: From Laos, from Vietnam, from China, from whatever. And they don't necessarily do that much together, except in their relations with the city, and they are very powerful. So they could actually keep the stadium from being built in Chinatown, whatever, because they're unified, you know?

IS: Mmm-hmm. Their voice counts.

LS: And African communities would probably have more bargaining power if the city perceived them as together.

IS: Scattered. Scattered means séparer?[French]

LS: Disperser.[French] Scattered. Yeah, so ---

IS: C'est tout disperser.(?)[French]

LS: Yeah, exactly. Well, what do you like the best about the US?

IS: To be able to go to school. [laughs] To get the best education. Health care is expensive, but it's the best. I was diagnosed with diabetes probably a year, about a year after I get here. I believe that --- actually, I'm sure that I am lucky to be here.

LS: Do you think that you had had it in Ivory Coast and it was not detected?

IS: Exactly. I probably had it. I was living with it.

LS: Did you know that you seemed unwell?

IS: I was fine, I was fine. Until about a year after I get here.

LS: And then someone noticed the symptoms, and they ().

IS: It was during a regular physical, actually, that the physician suspected that my blood sugar might be too high. And we just run a test, and it was certain that I had it.

LS: That must have been a shock.

IS: Aah, yeah. [laughs] It was a shock, yes.

LS: Do you inject insulin?

IS: Mmm-hmm.

LS: But, yeah, if you're here, at least you can () and you have to have health insurance, which is ---

IS: Expensive.

LS: You know, if you work and you have an employer who does it, it's wonderful. The people that I run into, and you must also, are all the people who are undocumented who have no possibility of employer-based insurance. Tell me a little bit about the Ivorian community. Do you know a lot of people from Cote D'Ivoire?

IS: Yes.

LS: Do they tend to spend a lot time together?

IS: As much as we can, yes.

LS: Where do they tend to meet?

IS: Mostly at the restaurant or at the mosque. But at the mosque, it's very rigid. You know, we have set days. But at the restaurant, you just miss the community, you stop by. There are always people there.

LS: You are lucky to have that.

IS: Absolutement.

LS: Are there a lot more men than women, or is it pretty even? Are lot of men with their wives?

IS: I would think that there are more men. Yes, more men.

LS: So there's the celibater.(?) [French]

IS: Absolutement.

LS: Do men tend to have a particular kind of employment or they are doing all kinds of things? I know, there are a lot of taxi drivers.

IS: A lot of taxi drivers, a lot of parking attendants.

LS: Yes, I've seen a lot of people as parking attendants.

IS: A lot --- actually, I would say a few people managing their own businesses in retail.

LS: They seem to be pretty entrepreneurial. I know, besides the grocery, there's a man who has a clothing store over in Germantown.(?)

IS: Clothing stores, uhh ---

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE]

[START OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

LS: Okay. Some people are import-export?

IS: Mmm-hmm.

LS: And then they actually have to have a visa when they come and go?

IS: Most of the time they are Green Card holders or US citizens.

LS: What do they import and export? Electronics and ---

IS: Clothings, electronic will be between the Ivory Coast and here. They will go home with computers or computer components and bring art, things like that.

LS: And then where do they sell it? Do they sell it through --- are they middlemen? Do they sell to other people? Or do they sell in stores? Or do people sell on the streets at all?

IS: You mean when they take ---

LS: When they come here?

IS: Oh, when they come here?

LS: If they have artwork, for example?

IS: They will sell it to other people generally in New York City ---

LS: Who resell it.

IS: Exactly. Who will resell it, yes, generally in bigger stores.

LS: Do they bring back African clothing also?

IS: African clothings, art.

LS: So that's the big, umm, kind of, the market for Afrocentric Americans.

IS: Exactement, oui.[French]

LS: That's interesting how they have been able to utilize that niche.

IS: Absolument.

LS: What about women? What do they tend to do? I know a lot of them are in braiding stores?

IS: Yes, hair braiding. Baby sitting. A few of them have their own businesses where they will watch children from new born to a certain age.

LS: And do they do this informally? They don't go through the state? They're not licensed as a day care or anything?

IS: No.

LS: Do they do it for Americans or do they do for other Africans?

IS: Other Africans most of the time.

LS: So they might baby sit for someone who has a hair salon.

IS: Yes.

LS: So they can do that.

IS: Or for a single father.

LS: Okay. [pause] That's interesting. Are there are a lot of single fathers here?

IS: Not that I know of, no. But once in a while.

LS: Once in a while there is somebody who's here --- yeah. Do you have any sense of what percentage of Ivorians are here without their papers or undocumented?

IS: I wouldn't give, I wouldn't be able to give you a ---

LS: But is it more than half? Or do you think not that high?

IS: Hmm. Probably, fifty-fifty. Because, my job is to deal with these people and I see a lot of them, but in the meantime I know a lot of other people who ---

LS: Who have their papers, yeah. Sometimes I see the women from Ivory Coast, or Senegal, or Mali or whatever who do hair braiding and it seems like it's kind of a trap, because they never learn English as long as they are in there.

IS: Absolument, mmm-hmm.

LS: So they never --- they're very sheltered.

IS: Yes.

LS: So in a way it kind of keeps them from moving beyond to anything else.

IS: That's true, that's true.

LS: But do you think that's the thing that a lot of women just naturally turn to because they can make money. It's very poorly paid, though.

IS: That's probably, you know, it's something they can do right away as soon they can get here. And I think they get trapped into it, because they can make some money that would allow them to live decently and they get used to it. They are content.

LS: Mmm-hmm. () [French]

IS: Non. [French]

LS: () pour il coiffeur?(?) [French]

IS: () [French] Actually, maintenant c'est plus difficile () beaucoup d'argent () (?) [French].

LS: () propriete?(?) [French]

IS: Absolument.

LS: I think the people they employ are not well paid. The owners probably do okay.

IS: Capitalism. [both laugh]

LS: I know. Well, when you are undocumented you don't have too many ---

IS: Absolument.

LS: What about the Ivorians who are here? Do they tend to be in very tight contact with people at home?

IS: Oh, yes.

LS: Do they send money?

IS: Oh, yes.

LS: Everybody?

IS: Everybody, everybody. [both laugh]

LS: I've never heard anyone tell me that fewer than a hundred percent of their community sends back money. Everybody does.

IS: Everybody. Well, I think everybody does. Vous avez ()?(?) [French]

LS: Oui, oui, bien sûr. [break in tape]

LS: Do people send money through Western Union?

IS: Mmm ---

LS: Someone told me there's something new called "Moneygram."

IS: Moneygram is better.

LS: It's cheaper. 'Cause Western Union sounds expensive.

IS: It is expensive. And at the African Market, they send money home. They have a service.

LS: Oh, okay. So that they have someone on the other side who ---

IS: Mmm-hmm.

LS: And that's always trustworthy? You are never afraid that your money is going to disappear?

IS: No.

LS: That's good. And that's just a really informal arrangement? What do they do? You give them money and then someone has a bank account over there and they take it out?

IS: Exactement. You have the partners over there who will pay it. They'll just make a call, go to such family, give them such amount.

LS: So they actually got to that family and deliver it?

IS: Mmm-hmm.

LS: And what about places --- I don't know what's like in Abidjan, but a lot of African cities seem like they don't have addresses and street names and it must be hard to find ---

IS: It is, it is. [both laugh] But they can describe, the way you just described me how to get here, instead of giving me the address. You pass, Pier One, start looking at the left. [laughs]

LS: Exactly. [both laugh]. I remember helping somebody in Dakar fill out the immigration lottery thing once. The address he put down was "()" [French] [both laugh]. And I said, I don't know! It was just such a funny address. Somebody told me that in Dakar they are saying that the immigration lottery is not running this year. Is that true?

IS: I never heard that.

LS: I never heard that either. I wonder if it's just a rumor that's going on around in Dakar.

IS: It's probably a rumour.

LS: Yeah, because I think --- Bush isn't president yet, he can't change that fast. Although who knows what he'll do. What do you think about the Ivorians who are here? Do you have a sense of how they --- how they feel about --- do they think that they are here for long term? Do they think that they fit in? How do they kind of think about themselves in relation to American society? Or would they like to eventually return home?

IS: We have no problem with American society. No major problems. We do what we have to do. If we are students, we go to school. We have American friends. On the job place, we get along fine with people and, ultimately, we always think of going back home some day.

LS: So this is really, umm ---

IS: Try to --- you know, it's the time in your life where you try to make the most ---

LS: Mmm-hmm.

IS: Make money.

LS: Do people, do Ivorians ever get accused by Americans of just sort of using them to make money and not really participating? Or are they not even that aware of what they're doing, that this is a pattern or whatever?

IS: Rephrase the question.

LS: Well, I just wonder if Americans ever accuse Ivorians, saying, "You just come here to make money, but you're not really being part of the American society because then you want to go home."

IS: I've heard these comments, yes. I've heard that. To be accused of --- I've heard very mean things, actually.

LS: Through your work or just on the street or --- ?

IS: Personally, from my work, once. But other people have told me their stories and --- But we just think, you know ---

LS: This is what you have to put up with, then you go home?

IS: Exactly.

LS: Do people try to get money to build a house in Ivory Coast?

IS: We usually do. Build a house. A few of us buy homes here, invest here, as much as we can.

LS: So people do buy houses here?

IS: Oh, yeah. It's very common. And it's a dream to be able to buy a house here.

LS: And if you don't have a Green Card, you're undocumented, do you have any problem buying real estate?

IS: That's difficult.

LS: It is hard? So you really need ---

IS: You need to be documented.

LS: I've never even bought a house so I don't even know what ---

IS: You need to be documented. Have a social security number.

LS: Right. And you can really only get that if you have a green card?

IS: Absolutment. Or if you have a work permit.

LS: You can get one?

IS: Mmm-hmm.

LS: Where do people go for health services and all that? Do they go to the clinics that are around? The city clinics?

IS: Mmm-hmm. When they can't afford through an employer, they will go through the clinics.

LS: What happens in a case when somebody has a major problem? Does the community sort of band together to help somebody?

IS: Yes.

LS: If they have a medical problem?

IS: Yes.

LS: Do they have a collection for money?

IS: We'll put money together, quick, and try to take care of the matter.

LS: What about somebody who has a problem with the law? Do you raise bail for anybody or have you ever had to do something like that?

IS: Once, once, I personally participated, but it was an immigration law. And personally I have no knowledge of anyone having had any problems with the law, for breaking the law. I have no knowledge of that.

LS: Are there people who sell on the street? Are there any vendors?

IS: Oh, okay. Yeah, it happens. [laughs] If this is to break the law, okay. [laughs]

LS: No, I just wondered if they've got permits and did the thing they have to do? Or do they know they have to do that?

IS: A lot of them have permits. Not the one selling tapes and things like that. But the other ones having carts, selling food, and things like that. They will need a permit absolutely from License and Inspections.

LS: What happens when somebody new, a new Ivorian arrives? Do they find out pretty fast that there's a restaurant where they can meet people and do people give them advice about housing and jobs? Do people try to do that?

IS: No, unfortunately.

LS: So people just sort of figure out things up by themselves?

IS: Yes. Most of the time, after mistakes, they will figure out what it is.

LS: Do most people come because they already know somebody? Or some people just come here knowing nobody?

IS: It happens that they come here knowing nobody. But most of the time, there is always someone here, always.

LS: When the association was active did they --- were you a member of that, when it was active?

IS: Mmm-hmm.

LS: Did you pay dues?

IS: Mmm-hmm.

LS: What kind of activities did they have?

IS: Well, I didn't participate in the activities, unfortunately, I don't know --- But it was, most of the time, the soireé dansant.[French]

LS: Can't have enough of those.

IS: [laughs] Le soireé dansant () beaucoup () orientation politique(?).[French]

LS: Okay. So was the association associated with a particular political party?

IS: Absolument.

LS: Oh, it was, so it was sort of a political thing, too. I remember when all the events were happening a little while ago, I was walking outside the restaurant and all the taxi members were gesticulating and I said, I know what they're talking about.

IS: A lot of fashion with, you know, with politics.

LS: Are you active in any other kind of associations?

IS: The Ivory Coast?

LS: No. Any kind of association.

IS: The Philadelphia Association of Paralegals.

LS: Okay.

IS: And the National Immigration Association.

LS: What's that?

IS: Actually, it's for lawyers but I want to learn more and ---

LS: It's for lawyers who work specifically in immigration ---

IS: Immigration law.

LS: Okay.

IS: I am just a member.

LS: And they have a newsletter or they do things like that?

IS: Mmm-hmm. My boss, also, is the national president. [pause]

LS: You go to the new Ivorian mosque?

IS: I went there once.

LS: Okay. Is there another mosque that you tend to go to?

IS: I go to a mosque in Overbrook. It's an international mosque.

LS: And that has mostly Americans in it?

IS: Americans, people from Sri Lanka, from Morocco, Switzerland. I found out last time I was there, there was a lady from Switzerland.

LS: And that Imam is from where?

IS: He is from Sri Lanka. The Vice-Imam is American.

LS: The Vice-Imam? I've never heard of that term.

IS: I mean, () [French]

LS: () [French]

IS: Oui.

LS: No, I understand --- [both laugh]

IS: Just like the vice-president.

LS: And so then everything is in --- the () [Arabic] and everything is in English?

IS: Absolument.

LS: And so this new mosque is really strictly for Ivorians or for other people who understand --- who are from West Africa, who understand Bambara?

IS: Mostly --- let's say for West Africans who speak French or Bambara.

LS: Okay. And that's a lot. So they might be some Malians there?

IS: Mali, Guinea, beaucoup () [French], but la majorité Ivoirien [French].

LS: When you went there, how many people were there?

IS: That day?

LS: Or did you go on a Friday?

IS: We went for () [French].

LS: So that was an unusual crowd?

IS: On Fridays, it can be crowded, it can be very crowded. (softly) Do you want to stop it?

LS: (softly) Oh, yeah. [break in tape]

LS: Okay. I know you came here and you were married and that gave you automatic relations with Americans here, but, in general, your social life, when you're not with Ivorians, who do you tend to socialize with in Philadelphia? Is there a particular group that you feel you fit into?

IS: Americans. American friends.

LS: Mmm-hmm. Do you tend to be with African Americans, or white Americans, or both?

IS: Most of the time, white Americans, most of the time. I have personally experienced some problems with African Americans. And, in the community, it is well known that African Americans have shown us, you know, a certain side that we would never have guessed.

LS: In what sense?

IS: Well, I don't know if I could call it racism, because it would be weird but, uh --

LS: Cultural marginalization or vous etes marginalisé(?)[French]?

IS: No, actually, rejected, I would say. Really rejected by African Americans.

LS: How is that? Because there is also this sort of fascination with Africa that African Americans have.

IS: Well, I know we get a long better with women than with men.

LS: Do you think that there is a sense of competition there or ---

IS: I don't know. On the job there is, you know, no competition per se, but personally I have experienced some problems with African Americans. Bosses, who were my bosses, you know.

LS: Interesting.

IS: () mon experience personnel(?)[French].

LS: Well, it's something I heard a lot, actually, in lots of different ways. But I've also heard other people say that their first perception is that white Americans are a lot friendlier, but with time, they understand that it's very superficial and in fact the group where they do fit in best is African Americans. So it depends on how long they've been here. I don't know. Everybody has a different experience.

IS: Yeah.

LS: But your daughter's --- her identity must be African American, right? So, in fact, you are raising an African American child, right?

IS: Absolutement. () I get along fine with ().

LS: She also lives in a neighborhood that's probably majority white, right? Elkins Park?

IS: Yes, it is.

LS: Has ever that been ---

IS: Maybe it has something to do with it, I don't know.

LS: But she doesn't have any problems. She's just sort of ---

IS: No problem.

LS: This is a city, I think, that has some of the worst racial tension that I have felt anywhere in the United States. And it's not just race, it's just that also the racial lines coincide with socio-economic lines.

IS: Yes, I think it's more socio-economic.

LS: It is. People think about it in terms of race, but I think it's really that you have an underclass, and they happen to be black ---

IS: That's what it is, exactly.

LS: And they don't just happen to be black --- it's not a mistake they're black --- that's the way America's structured. But the problems aren't race, per se. They are socio-economic.

IS: That's what it is.

LS: And I don't know how the United States is going to solve the problems that are so pervasive. It's really very distressing. What kind of food do you eat? When you cook for yourself?

IS: Chicken, a lot of chicken, I mean ---

LS: Oh, you have to be very careful, so you can't necessarily eat Ivorian food?

IS: I have to be careful, yes. I am very careful. The rice is very rich in carbohydrates. Along with the oil, that's a lethal combination.

LS: So, that's cuts out a lot of Ivorian food right there? [both laugh]

IS: Yes.

LS: So when you go to the BenKady, you just sort of ---

IS: Oh, I will have some, but very little portion. I wouldn't have regular, the normal ---

LS: What somebody else would eat?

IS: Yes.

LS: It must be hard. I've seen people who are diabetic in Senegal and that's very hard for them, to not eat what other people are eating.

IS: Chebjem.(?) They can't have it.

LS: They can't have it. It's full of oil. () [French]

IS: () [French]

LS: Ooh! () [French]. Restaurant senegaleé () [French] Lansdowne Avenue. Est très bien.

IS: () [French] très bien () [French].

LS: Oui. () [French] le femme () [French] travailleir pour Moussa(?) ---

IS: Ah, oui.

LS: --- () [French].

IS: () [French]

LS: () [French]. Elle cuisine bien.(?)

IS: () senegalese(?) [French]?

LS: Mmm-hmm. () [French]

IS: () [French]

LS: () [French] Okay, what about music? What kind of music do you ---

IS: I like reggae music. And I know it's atypical, but I like classical music.

LS: Is that something that you liked in Ivory Coast ---

IS: Yes.

LS So even before you got here ---

IS: Yes.

LS: Are you doing anything for your daughter to try to transmit Ivorian culture or language, or is that sort of hard?

IS: It's hard. And every time we are together, we try to communicate as much as we can. It's like we don't have time to ---

LS: For you to be teaching her?

IS: Yes, the language. But I will talk to her about home, about my parents, how we do things.

LS: Do you have any relatives here?

IS: No.

LS: You don't have anybody?

IS: I have a cousin, a second cousin. In New York City.

LS: So that's hard, that she doesn't see you with any of your ---

IS: I tell her about my parents. Any circumstance will be a good opportunity to say, "Okay, home, we do things this way."

LS: Did somebody ask her where she was from or --- what ---

IS: She says she is from --- let's ask her. Can we do that?

LS: Oh, yeah. [break in tape]

LS: [to IS's daughter] I just wanted to ask you something. When somebody asks you what your name is or where you are from, what do you say? [pause] Does anyone ever ask you what your name is? Where your name is from? What do you say?

IS's CHILD: I say my name is Therése.[pronounced "Ter-eze] [IS laughs]

LS: Do they ask you if you are an American or if you are not American? Does anyone ever ask you that?

IS's CHILD: Uhhh --- [pause]

LS: [to IS] Elle est petit pour(?) () [French]

IS: [to CHILD] What's the name of your country? [pause]

IS's CHILD: Ivory Coast. [IS laughs]

LS: [to CHILD] Ivory Coast! That's right!

IS: [to CHILD] The Ivory Coast. But, you know, Mummy's from here and Mummy's American, so you are American and from the Ivory Coast.

LS: [to CHILD] Yeah. Does anyone ever 'cause --- [to IS] Her last name's Sanogo?

IS: Mmm-hmm.

LS: [to CHILD] So when people say your name is --- [to IS] Oh, Therése --- 'cause that's not --- they just call her Therese?[pronounced "Ter-eeese"]

IS: Therese, yes.[pronounced "Ter-aze"] [both laugh]

LS: [to CHILD] Therése Sanogo. Does anyone ever say, "Sanogo! I've never heard that name." Does anyone ever say that to you?

IS's CHILD: No.

LS: No? Wow, your teachers are good then. They figured that out right away.

IS: How about your middle name?

LS: What's your middle name?

IS's CHILD: Khadida.

LS: Khadida?

IS: [to LS] Khadija.

LS: Khadija. Okay.

IS: [to CHILD] Nobody ever asked you?

IS's CHILD: No.

IS: No? So everything is fine. [IS and LS laugh]

LS: [to CHILD] There you go!

IS: [to CHILD] Good! Have fun!

LS: Elle est ()?[French]

IS: Both, both. ().[French]

LS: We're going to have an exhibit next fall that's on African immigrants in the Philadelphia area. Is there anything in particular --- because there will be Americans mostly coming to see this and lots of school children --- is there anything in particular that you would like to have to see communicated about life in Ivory Coast --- or, more generally, in Africa --- that you think Americans should know about?

IS: Yes, it would be great if people could find out that we go to school. We have highly educated people, too. Basically, that we have very modern cities.

LS: Yep. Especially Abidjan. [both laugh]

IS: I don't know, it's --- but that we have computers, we have TVs.

LS: Okay. So that you're not coming here as if you have never seen these things?

IS: Yes, exactement.

LS: Yes, I think that is important ---

IS: Oui.

LS: --- especially if there are gonna be a lot of children.

IS: Mmm-hmm. Every year, I speak in a school to kids.

LS: You do?

IS: Yes. And it's in a small school, Saint Genevieve, in Glenside, and the kids --- I think that's what they hear or see, but they will ask questions about, you know: "Have you ever seen electricity?" They don't know, they don't know and ---

LS: But, of course, there are people who live really far out, who do live in villages that do not have electricity.

IS: Well ---

LS: It's just not the majority any more.

IS: It's not the majority. But it's common thing.

LS: No, of course. I understand what you're saying.

IS: Or kids will ask me if elephants are on the street or if you can pet a lion. [laughs]

LS: These must be little kids, or I hope they're little kids. You're not a citizen?

IS: No, not yet.

LS: Do you want to become a citizen?

IS: Yes. Actually, I should be done pretty soon.

LS: And can you keep also your Ivorian citizenship?

IS: If I want to.

LS: If you want to. So you plan to stay here?

IS: Well, I would like to retire home. To stay here for a long time.

LS: Yes, retire home. If somebody you know in Ivory Coast asked whether they should immigrate here, what would you say?

IS: Aaah ---

LS: Would you recommend it to them?

IS: Yes.

LS: You would?

IS: Mmm-hmm.

LS: So you think, with everything you give up, it's still worth it?

IS: It's worth it, definitely. It's worth it.

LS: And I know a lot of people have very hard lives here.

IS: Mmm-hmm.

LS: Do you think that Ivorians will continue to come here? Are they liking their American experience in general?

IS: I think so, in general. Although, overall it's positive. But will the INS make it possible for them to come here? You know.

LS: Well, it's going to be interesting to see what happens in the next --- you know, with the Bush administration. I am assuming that Bush is going to be the president by that time.

IS: Yes, I think he will be the president.

LS: Which is really too --- I mean --- don't get me started. I think he's an idiot.

IS: And --- [laughs]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

