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The Political Issues for African Immigrants in the United States

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Introduction

Since the 1970s the African-born population in the United States has grown steadily in numbers. This increase of African immigrants offers an historic opportunity for sustained reconstruction of ancestral relationships with Black America. At this point, however, Africans who are mostly English-speaking and highly-educated, remain largely isolated and even ostracized. So, what must be done for these groups, Blacks and African immigrants, to begin working together effectively? This essay begins with one basic query necessary for understanding this potential development: What is the current status of African immigrants in the United States? After providing a brief overview in response to this query, I will highlight a few issues relevant to understanding emerging political relations between U.S. Blacks and African immigrants.

In the 1980s foreign-born immigration to the U.S. reached almost 10 million, the highest numerical peak in history.[1] By late 1993 the foreign-born population reached the 22 million mark. In 1992, the total resident undocumented population in the U.S. was 3,200,000, representing 62 percent from Central America and the Caribbean, 13 percent from Europe and Canada, 11 percent from Asia, 6 percent from South America, and 4 percent from Africa.[2] Despite the small immigration from Africa, the numbers are increasing rapidly.

Overall, African immigrants recorded increases of 228.03 percent (1960-1969), 224.95 percent (1970-1979), and 82.16 percent (1980-1990). The number of Africans admitted between 1960 and 1990 was smaller compared to Europe, North America, South America, and Asia.[3] Between 1990 and 1995, about 196,109 African-born populations were admitted to the U.S. compared to Europeans (840,382), Asians (1,972,588), North Americans (3,357,718), South Americans (368,025), and people from Oceania (31,774).[4]

Sub-Sahara Africa is by far the largest bloc of the ongoing drain of African people to the U.S. In the 1970s, African immigrants were predominantly from South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Cape Verde, and Ethiopia.[5] As one scholar noted, "when Africa as a whole experienced a 9 percent increase in emigration to the U.S. in 1980, the increase for sub-Sahara Africa was 28 percent."[6] Between 1977 and 1980 the sub-Saharan regional component for African emigration to the U.S. increased from 47 percent to 65 percent.[7]

These immigrants, who are highly educated, also have impressive numbers for educational attainment. In 1980, for example, 81.9 percent of them were high school graduates compared to immigrants from Europe (51.2 percent), North America (61.8 percent), Asia (73.0 percent), and Latin America (41.3 percent). Similarly, a higher percentage of Africans were college graduates compared to those of the aforementioned regions.[8] By 1991, 58 percent of African immigrant respondents were found to be either holders of Ph.D. or M.D. degrees, while an additional 19 percent had master's degrees.[9] Nigeria alone had 1,314 practicing physicians in the U.S., of which 60 percent were African-trained, 33.94 percent American-trained, and 4.57 percent European-trained.[10]

Surprisingly, between 1950-1994, only 131,487 Africans were naturalized as American citizens. In 1990, a year in which 369,819 Africans were counted in the U.S., only 123,933 were naturalized Americans compared to 239,886 non-naturalized. A majority were on permanent residency status.[11] Despite strong disparity in the number of naturalized Africans, their overall impressive standing on education implies improved median economic status compared to 1970s.[12] A far more sophisticated and economically-cohesive class of African immigrants, ranging from physicians to university professors, had converged on the American shore.

By 1989, the per capita income of African immigrants was $20,117, compared with $16,661 for Asian immigrants and $9,446 for foreign-born Central Americans. Similarly, family poverty rates varied for the same groups from 11.7 percent for foreign-born Africans to 13.1 percent for foreign-born Asians to 20.9 percent for foreign-born Central Americans.[13] By 1991, "a little over 14 percent of Africans make individual gross annual salaries in excess of $100,000," while 53 percent "earn between $30,000 and $59,999 annually."[14] Thus, by the mid-1980s and thereafter, it becomes clear that a sector of African-born settlers with high median incomes were

well-established, and had acquired some of the tools needed for effective participation in the American mosaic.[15]

The Race Issue

African immigrants not only have attempted to evolve a viable communal foothold on the American shore, but they have demonstrated the potential to become an important voice on issues that shape the direction of American democracy, as well as, events in Africa. Of course, as is the case with all immigrants to the U.S., Africans are immediately confronted with issues related to race. So we must pose yet another question in understanding the implication of this migration: Do African immigrants, as Africans and Black people, have a special role to play regarding race matters in the U.S.?

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The status of African immigrants as well as Africa, to a certain extent, is directly related to the issue of race, and the political status of Black Americans. For example, when Black America voted approvingly for Jimmy Carter in 1976, the resultant policies of his presidency generated internal changes more favorable to African Americans and African states. Consequently, African build-up in the American world reflected the kind of domestic and international policies which the Carter Administration generated.[16] In 1980, when President Carter lost his bid for a second-term to challenger Ronald Reagan, Black America's historic civil rights gains began to crack,[17] and concomitantly, African immigrants also suffered, including those with advanced education and high skills.[18]

Other developments illustrate how the fate of African immigrants and Africa is partially dependent on Black political activism in the U.S. By 1991, a handful of Black mayors headed majority-white cities, as well as more majority-Black cities. During the 1980s and 1990s, the size and influence of the Black Political Caucus in Washington, D.C., increasingly determined the direction of U.S. policies in Africa.[19] Such developments as the release of Nelson Mandela in South Africa in 1990, and the subsequent end of apartheid marked a leap in the collective struggle to end the threshold of racist exploitation in Black America and Black Africa. These events encouraged greater dialogue between African American and African leaders, culminating in a series of summits in 1991 to examine issues that confront their societies in the spheres of cultural, economics, health, and politics.[20] These summits represented the crossroad of a new epoch, an age sustained not only by the turbulence of Eurocentrism but one witnessing the spiral ending of the centuries of European global conflagration.[21]

But none of the preceding backgrounds imply that African immigrants and African Americans have developed substantive partnership for empowerment in the U.S. as two related and historically-affected groups. Quite often, genuine efforts toward issues of African development by some African Americans are not linked to the concerns of African immigrants in the U.S. And some African immigrants misunderstand the deep-seated problems and history of African Americans. The tacit complications of centuries of dislocation and distortions sometimes compel both parties to behave as if they were unrelated.[22] In worse-case scenarios, the perjury of the American material culture which stratifies these groups allows little or no time for cooperative partnership without one seeking to exploit the weakness of the other.

And, neither does the preceding emphasis imply that intergroup relationships among African immigrants themselves are stable or satisfactory. The success of Ethiopian immigrants, for instance, in places like Washington, D.C., Boston, and Chicago, require linkages with groups, such as Eritreans, who were adversaries in Africa! The same course is necessary for Liberian immigrants, Black South Africans, Rwandans, Somalians, Sudanese, and Nigerians. The duplication of Africa's factionalism among immigrant groups must be avoided if they are to be successful in the U.S., and advance the interests of their home country. This is an issue in which U.S. Blacks can make an important contribution. U.S. Blacks can serve as linkage between African immigrant groups. It does seem that with the recurring U.S. racial crises and growing dysfunctions in African homelands, African immigrants and African Americans are beginning to converge into a significant collective voice on some crises. This is important because the general thrust suggests a strong likelihood of a continuous, historic, and expanding partnership between African immigrants and African Americans.

Inter-generational Crisis

Although U.S. Blacks may serve as a bridge between African immigrant groups, interestingly enough, second generation children of African immigrants can also create an opportunity to strengthen bonds between all of these groups. This role may depend on how effective the offspring of African immigrants in the U.S. are able to maintain their culture in this country.

As African immigrants become a settler community, they must confront the realities of either allowing their offspring to adopt American mores, or doing what they can to educate them along the lines of African traditional cultures. Some have sought to revitalize their African heritage by rotating their children between the African and American worlds for a balanced and educated experience. The emergent crises of African offspring might have been one reason Chinua Achebe urged his Ibo brethren, as well as other Nigerians to "stick to your roots" and "learn about the customs and traditions of our people."[23] Chuks Nwaka reported that Professor Achebe lamented:

...about the fact that children born in the U.S. are not taught and do not know how to speak

Ibgo. He illustrated this unfortunate irony by reminding his audience that most children listening to him did not understand what he was saying.[24]

Despite this pessimistic outlook, African offspring can be poised to develop patterns of relationships with Black America that would be markedly different from those of their parents. They do represent a conciliatory generation to Black America; their generational and historical plateau are quite dissimilar to those of their migrant parents. A more faithful blending within the African and African American bloc forms the backdrop of this conciliatory impulse.[25] Black America increasingly will have more potential bridges to connect with Black Africa, as a result of the growing presence of the children of African immigrants.

Conclusion

To succeed in the possibility of collaboration and solidarity, partnership between African Americans and African community leaders and African indigenous scholars is imperative. Either African world crises will be solved through a more faithful alliance between the two kindred groups or there may be conflict. But as I suggested, there is a hopeful possibility regarding this issue and it involves the children of African immigrants in the U.S. The growing numbers of second and third generation African offspring represent substantial historical recreation and continuity within two or more traditions; hence, they can represent two strongly knit cultural amalgams from which to construct a more natural and viable mechanism of survival in urban America, and the overall strengthening of Black communities.

Even if many African immigrants and their children were compelled to return to their homelands, chances are that they would still represent a much needed talent in the cross-cultural and economic contacts between Black America and the land of their fathers and mothers. They could, as well, be one of the most logical assets for use in configuring policy toward Africa. And similarly, they could begin important bridges for many African Americans to reconnect with the land of their great, great, great fathers and mothers. The needs of this possibility are now in place.[26]

Notes

[1]Michael Fix and Jeffrey S. Passel, *Immigration and Immigrants: Setting the Record Straight* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 1994), 19.

[2]Ibid., 21, 24.

[3]Ibid., 25-27; Also see U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Time Till 1970*, 11; "Socio-economic Characteristics of U.S. Foreign-born Population," Table 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, October 17, 1984), Table 1; Susan J. Lapham, "The Foreign-born Population in the United States: 1990, CPH-L-98," Ethnic and Historic Branch, Population Division (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990), Table 14.

[4]Fix and Passel, *Immigration and Immigrants*; "Foreign-born Admittance to the United States 1990-1995" (Washington, D.C.: Immigration and Naturalization Service).

[5]U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Socio-Economic Characteristics of U.S. Foreign-born Population," Table 1.

[6]Kofi K. Apraku, *African Emigres in the United States: A Missing Link in Africa's Social and Economic Development* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 41.

[7]Ibid., 41.

[8]Leon F. Bouvier and Robert W. Gordon, "Immigration to the U.S.: The Unfinished Story," *Population Bulletin*, vol. 41 (November 1986): Table 8.

[9]Apraku, *African Emigres in the United States*, 2.

[10]Paul Udofia, *Nigerians in the United States: Potentialities and Crises* (Boston: The William Monroe Trotter Institute/University of Massachusetts Boston, 1996). Also see, Yinka Shoroye and Ancho Emeruwa (Eds.), *Directory of Nigerian Physicians in the United States 1994* (Riverside, CA: Nigerian Medical Directory, 1994), 5-102.

[11]Fix and Passel, *Immigration and Immigrants*, 21.

[12]U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Socio-economic Characteristics of the Foreign-born Population," Table 1.

[13]Susan J. Lapham, "1990 Profiles of Foreign-born Population: Selected Characteristics by Place of Birth, CPH-L-148," Ethnic and Historic Branch Population Division (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990), 13 and her subsequent report, "Census Bureau Finds Significant Demographic Differences Among Immigrant Groups," Public Information Office, #CB93-165 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, September 1993).

[14]Apraku, *African Emigres in the United States*, 7.

[15]Udofia, *Nigerians in the United States*.

[16]Ibid.

[17]See James E. Blackwell's examinations of the "Reagan Administration and Blacks" and "Relationship Between Blacks and Presidents Carter and Reagan," in *The Black Community: Diversity and Unity* (New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1985), 77, 270; See also the following articles from *State of Black America: 1990*, Janet Dewart (Ed.) (New York: National Urban League, 1990): John E. Jacob, "Black America, 1989: An Overview"; David H. Swinton, "The Economic Status of Black America During the 1980s: A Decade of Limited Progress"; and, Gene S. Robinson, "Television Advertising and Its Impact on Black America."

[18]Udofia, *Nigerians in the United States*.

[19]Rod Bush (Ed.), *The New Black Vote: Politics and Power in Four American Cities* (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1984), 1-11; *Black Power in Chicago: A Documentary Survey of the 1983 Mayoral Democratic Primary in Chicago, Vol. 1* (Chicago: Peoples' College Press, 1983), 1-6.

[20]Charles Whitaker, "Black Leaders Meet in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, To Build a Bridge of Cooperation Between Two Continents," *Ebony* (August 1991): 116-122; Coretta Scott King, "Investment in Africa is in Our Best Interests," *Detroit Free Press*, June 1, 1993, 20-23; Peter Uduehi, "Reinvesting Western Investment in Africa at Tuskegee," *African Business Source* (May 1992): 7, 21, 39.

[21]Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict From 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), 4-413.

[22]Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of the Black Leadership* (New York: Quill, 1984), 342, 436; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: Norton & Company, 1992), 88.

[23]Bon Uzzi, "Chinua Achebe at a Nigerian Gala." *The Good Hope News: The African Perspective* (Dallas), July 1991, 1, 17.

[24]Chuks Nwaka, "A Call for Cultural Rejuvenation," *Nigerian News Digest* (Asheville, N.C.), July 1991, 7.

[25]Udofia, *Nigerians in the United States*.

[26]Ibid.

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