

# Contemporary African Immigrants to The United States

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## **Abstract**

The severe economic difficulties, increased poverty and the political instability that have plagued many African countries in the last two decades have resulted in the large scale migration of Africans Europe and the United States. Unlike their counterparts in the 1960s and 70s who were anxious to return home after acquiring an American education in order to contribute in the task of nation building, an overwhelming majority of recent immigrants are more interested in establishing permanent residency in the United States. Although these immigrants continue to be attracted to major cities like New York, Atlanta, Chicago and Los Angeles, they can also be found in increasing numbers in small and mid-sized cities in Ohio, Nebraska, Iowa and Maine.

To experience the sights, sound and flavors of Africa without leaving Minnesota, just step into a Somali mini-mall in Minneapolis or an African shopping center in St. Paul. There are the sweet, pungent smells of Somali dishes, the vivid colors of African clothing, and the rapid fire, foreign language conversations of Somalis, Ethiopians, and Liberians who moved to the states at a record pace during the past decade.

(Lourdes Medrano Leslie, Minnesota Star Tribune, June 4, 2002)

Africans permeate all aspects of Colorado life. They are doctors, lawyers, professors, engineers, students, cab drivers, clerks, security guards and chefs. They reflect some basic American passions: politics, the Broncos, day trading, eating burgers, even skiing.

(Sam Omatseye, Rocky Mountain News, March 19, 2000)

The influx of African immigrants to the United States in the last two decades has

been phenomenal. According to figures from the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), the number of African immigrants to the United States more than quadrupled in the last two decades; from 109,733 between 1961 and 1980 to 531,832 between 1981 and 2000. These new immigrants can be found in major metropolitan areas in states like New York, Texas, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland and California, to small towns in Idaho, Iowa and Maine. Even states like North and South Dakota that were only distant memories in the minds of many African immigrants to the United States in the 1960s and 70s have become homes to many Africans. For instance, South Dakota experienced an increase in the number of African immigrants from 210 in the 1990s to 1,560 in 2000. [\[1\]](#) Similarly, Tacoma, Washington saw an increase of more than 800 percent in the number immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa- from 202 in the 1990s to 1,802 in 2002 [\[2\]](#). Unlike their counterparts in the 1960s and 70s whose aspirations was to return to their respective countries with an American education and the skills necessary for the task of nation-building, many of the immigrants in the last two decades are more interested in settling in United States and building a comfortable life for themselves and their families. This essay examines why an increasing number of African immigrants decide to become permanent residents or citizens of the United States instead of returning to their home countries. It also considers the various measures that these immigrants have taken to become integrated into their new environment.

### **Motivations for African Migration to the United States: The Hopes and Disappointments of Independence**

At independence, Africans were filled with tremendous hope and optimism. For many Africans, independence was seen as more than just a period of self-rule and freedom. In their campaign speeches and rhetoric, they were led by many of the nationalist leaders to believe that independence would also lead to a significant improvement in their social and economic life, including improvements in education and healthcare, and greater employment opportunities. Indeed, the institution of single party rule shortly after independence in many African states was rationalized on the basis that it was the next logical political step to a more stable political environment and ultimately to impressive socio-economic development. Unfortunately, more than four decades after independence, the economy of most African states is characterized by grinding poverty, endemic corruption and high rates of unemployment. This sad state of affairs is reflected in the salary scales of University professors in many African Universities. With the

exception of South Africa and Zimbabwe where the starting annual salary scale for a University Lecturer in 1997 was over \$10,000, the salary in other countries was below \$4,000. [\[3\]](#)

Part of the reason for the declining fortunes of a continent so rich in natural resources is the authoritarian structure of the postcolonial state that continues to hinder the kind of open discussion and constructive criticism that might have fostered healthy and sustained economic development. Instead of leading to a more stable society, the one-party state fostered endemic corruption by political leaders, nepotism, and the establishment of highly repressive and dictatorial regimes that suffocated free speech and had little regard for the human rights of their citizens across the continent. The institution of such regimes allowed politicians and other important public officials to arrogantly drain the state treasury for their personal benefit. Most of the money procured in this manner is either invested in real estate or other business ventures overseas or stashed in foreign banks in Europe, North America and the Caribbean. According Whiteman, the Bank of France in 1988 alone bought back about 450 billion CFA francs (1.8 billion dollars) in bank notes that had been fraudulently transferred in full suitcases and diplomatic bags. [\[4\]](#) The net result of such uninhibited corruption and capital flight is the fact that resources that could be invested in the various African countries to generate economic growth and create employment opportunities are lost to the Western Industrialized nations that do not need African capital.

Although mismanagement and corruption among African leaders have undoubtedly contributed to the continent's severe economic problems, a fundamental reason for the corruption can also be attributed to the lack of democratic governance and political transparency in most African states. In fact, despite attempts since the early 1990s to institute democratic governance, political repression, human rights abuses and civil wars are still prevalent across the continent - Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and The Democratic Republic of Congo are just a few examples. In these and other African countries, the fear and intimidation that make citizens less likely to criticize the political process has encouraged such severe economic problems. Apraku draws a correlation between an open political system and economic development when he argues that "without political pluralism, economic pluralism becomes very difficult to achieve, and without economic pluralism, private sector development becomes a very difficult and unrealistic proposition in Africa." [\[5\]](#) Nigeria's current president, Olusegun Obasanjo articulated the same point when he argued that the continent's economic

failures so far have been only symptoms of a more fundamental political failure. [\[6\]](#)

The situation has also been exacerbated by Africa's over-dependence on foreign markets for its raw materials and the continent's over-reliance on international financial institutions. Because Africa is unable to control the prices it receives for its primary products, it is forced, in most cases to accept prices that it is offered for those products by European and American buyers. Consequently, the prices it has received for those products have declined sharply in the last few decades. The fall in prices have had direct bearings on how much money is available to most of these countries to carry out development projects or meet the salary demands of their citizens. For example, the per capita gross GNP for Zambia is reported to have fallen by about 27 percent in the ten-year period between 1974 and 1984, mostly because of a 60 percent decline in the price of copper, the country's major export during this period. [\[7\]](#) Meanwhile, Nigeria, which in the 1970s enjoyed a healthy economy and the status of a middle income country because of the high price it received for its oil, had by 1993, fallen to the ranks of one of the poorest nations in the world primarily because of a decline in the price of its oil. [\[8\]](#)

The net result of such economic paralysis and political suffocation is that, many Africans, particularly highly skilled professionals, have been forced to seek their economic fortunes elsewhere, including the United States. [\[9\]](#) In fact, a 1991 report estimated that one out of every four African in the United States was believed to be a Nigerian. [\[10\]](#) And according to the United Nation's Human Development Report, in 1993, at a time when Nigeria's healthcare system was severely deficient there were more than 21,000 practicing Nigerian physicians in the United States. [\[11\]](#) Recently the situation has become so severe that many of the highly skilled and trained professionals who had been educated in the United States and Europe and had returned home in the 1970s and early 80s have been forced to return to the West in search of better opportunities. [\[12\]](#) Even some of the most patriotic African students who were still thinking of returning home after completing their course of study in the United States have become so disillusioned that many of them have given up the idea. [\[13\]](#) This brain drain has resulted in the loss of one-third of the continent's skilled professionals in recent decades. While these highly skilled professionals are a tremendous asset to the further development of the United States and other developed nations of the world, the \$4 billion that it cost to fill up the capacity gap created by their departure from their countries of origin

continues to be a drain on the meager resources of African nations. [\[14\]](#) This can only lead to further economic stagnation for the continent and its people. Commenting on the impact that the departure of these highly trained professionals is having on Africa, Dei and Asgharzadah note that:

The immediate effect of such an exodus on institutions of higher learning, research, and scientific work will surely be felt in that the brain drain deprives the African institutions of cutting-edge technological and scientific research that employs highly talented scientists and researchers. The exodus of highly talented from Africa also means the transfer of considerable amount of money, assets, and funds. Every African who takes money from Africa and spends it abroad fails to help Africa financially, economically, and commercially. Likewise, every African who makes money abroad fails to help Africa's commercial or economic development. [\[15\]](#)

Although Africa's rather desperate economic and political future have been important factors for recent large-scale migration to the United States, it could be argued that the apparent relaxation of the United States' immigration policy has also been very helpful. [\[16\]](#) Two policies in particular are worth mentioning: the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act and the Diversity Visa Program that was introduced as part of the 1990 Immigration Act. While the 1986 Act made it easier for undocumented immigrants, including those from Africa then living in the United States to become permanent residents, the Diversity Visa Program, which was aimed at promoting immigration from hitherto underrepresented countries and regions of the world allowed up to 50,000 "qualified" Africans annually to migrate to the United States through a lottery process. At the same time that new opportunities for immigration to the United States were occurring, the slumping European economy, especially since the 1990s, and tighter immigration by many European countries, including Great Britain and France that had been the traditional areas of immigrants from Africa, have made the United States even more attractive to African immigrants. [\[17\]](#)

These changes have resulted in a significant increase in the number of African immigrants to the United States. For instance, the number of African immigrants to the United States in 1996 was 52, 889. That number was almost double the 26,716 that had entered the country in 1994. [\[18\]](#) In fact, the "new" African immigrants to the United States no longer come only from former English-speaking colonies-as

had been the case for decades since those from non-English-speaking often found it difficult to learn a new language- but include immigrants from former Portuguese, Spanish and French colonies. According to the New York Department of City Planning, there were about 2,000 immigrants from Senegal - a former French colony in 2002. [19] These men and women, some with very little education are willing to do anything to achieve the American dream. Unlike their counterparts in the 1960s and 70s, who always had the vision of returning home after completing their course of study and were therefore reluctant to become United States citizens, the new immigrants are quick to apply for citizenship once they become qualified to do so. According to Zeleza, the number of African immigrants acquiring U.S. citizenship increased from 7,122 in 1988 to 21,842 in 1996. [20] Altogether, about 108,441 Africans became naturalized citizens during this period. A major reason why an increasing number of Africans are acquiring United States citizenship rather than remaining just permanent residents with a green card is because many of them have finally reconciled themselves to the fact that the United States is home and that they are here to stay. Additionally, the acquisition of citizenship allows them to participate in the political process, thereby giving them a voice, albeit a small one, in the political decision-making process in the local, state and national government.

### **Living the American Dream**

Although African immigrants can be found in many small towns and cities throughout the United States, major cities like New York, Chicago, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Houston, Dallas, Atlanta, Boston, and the Washington D.C. area continue to attract the largest number of immigrants. It is estimated that in 2000, 1 percent or 92,435 of the population of New York City were African-born immigrants, while Montgomery experienced a 15 percent increase to 25,776 in the number of African immigrants in the 1990s. [21] Similarly, there were about 200,000 African immigrants in Atlanta in 2003. [22] These cities remain magnets for African immigrants because of the presence of friends and relatives who are able to provide temporary residence for the new immigrants until they are able to situate themselves. Another advantage of living with these acquaintances, albeit on a temporary basis is the fact that they also provide the new immigrants with important advice on surviving in the United States.

Increasingly, the quest for areas where the immigrants can live is influenced by the



immigrant's desire to live a more tranquil life and raise their children in safer environments than can be provided in some of the larger cities like New York, Chicago, Houston or Los Angeles. But perhaps the most important factor influencing the decision to migrate to any particular city or area is the prevailing racial climate, political tolerance toward immigrants, and employment opportunities. That may explain why Atlanta, where Blacks occupy important economic and political positions in the city administration has become a Mecca for African immigrants. [\[23\]](#)

Often, these immigrants are quick to take any employment opportunity that they can get. Although there were about 100,000 highly educated African professionals throughout the United States in 1999, [\[24\]](#) many more are also involved in jobs where less education and often less skill may be required. They work as cab drivers, parking lot attendants, airport workers or waiters, waitresses, and cooks in restaurants. Still others have become entrepreneurs. In Washington D.C., New York, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Houston and Miami, for example, African immigrants own restaurants, healthcare agencies and specialty stores that cater to the needs of the large African and other immigrant population in these cities. Even African women who have traditionally been in the background of most traditional African family structure now find themselves at the forefront of economic opportunities in the United States and thus are playing important economic roles in maintaining the family structure both for the family members who are still in Africa and those in the United States. Commenting on the importance of African women immigrants to the United States, Daff reminds us that African women, especially those from West Africa have stopped waiting for their men to mail checks home from the United States and have joined them, earning their own income, while others have been coming alone, leaving husbands and children behind. [\[25\]](#)

With a median income of over \$40,000 in 2003, [\[26\]](#) many African immigrants are not only expected to support their families in the United States, but also other relatives back in Africa. In his 1991 study for example, Apraku noted that 37 percent of his respondents remitted between \$1,500 and \$3,000, while 20 percent sent between \$3,000 to more than \$10,000 annually to support friends and relatives back in their home countries. [\[27\]](#) While these amounts may not be significant to an average middle class American, they are of vital importance in continent, and to a people where a few hundred dollars might determine whether a parent lives or dies, or whether a sibling continues to attend school or not. The new African

immigrant is no longer just interested in making money they are also interested in building stronger communities and organizing themselves in order to become a more powerful political and economic force in their respective communities. Groups such as the All African Peoples Organization in Omaha, Nebraska, the Nigerian-American Chamber of Commerce in Miami, the Tristate (Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky) Cameroon Family, the Nigerian Women Eagles Club in Cincinnati, Ohio, and the African Heritage Inc. in Wisconsin all aim to help their members become active in their communities and create a better understanding between Africans and Americans. Some Africans point to the tremendous influence of the Cuban community in Miami as a blueprint for what Africans in cities like Atlanta, Chicago, Houston and Minneapolis can accomplish if they are well organized.

Despite their dedication, hard work and determination to realize the American dream, African immigrants are often faced with the reality of what Aman calls the "innocence about race relations" [\[28\]](#) that they had left Africa with as they struggle to make a living in their new homeland. First, they encounter some of the same stereotypes often associated with their African American counterparts. [\[29\]](#) They are often perceived as lazy, criminals, drug dealers and welfare cheats. This perception often results in police harassment, intimidation, unlawful arrests and even murder. In fact, the February 1999 killing by New York police officers of Amadou Diallo, an African immigrant from Guinea near his home in the Bronx has become a metaphor for the way African immigrants are perceived and treated by some law enforcement authorities. Uwah, for instance, questions why successful African immigrants like himself, who have all the right American values of hard work, and education, and have embraced assimilation into the mainstream culture are still not accepted like other immigrants from Europe, Cuba or Asia who also possess those same values or are even less enterprising. [\[30\]](#)

Another problem faced by African immigrants is the lack of acceptance by some of their African American counterparts. African immigrants are perceived by some African Americans as responsible for the fact that their ancestors were sold into slavery. There is also the accusation that African immigrants see themselves as better, if not superior to their African American counterparts. [\[31\]](#) Unfortunately, this perception has led to an uneasy relationship between some African immigrants and their African American brothers and sisters that continue to divide and paralyze Blacks in America thereby making them ineffective political and economic forces in national politics.



## Conclusion and Observation

This paper has focused on how the breakdown of the post-colonial economy and the collapse of viable political institutions have contributed to the significant increase in the number of African immigrants to the United States, especially since the early 1980s. Unlike their counterparts of the 1960s and 70s, whose primary objective was to obtain an American education before returning home to contribute to the task of nation-building, the "new" immigrants are mainly refugees and asylum seekers escaping the ravages of civil wars and political persecution in their homelands, or highly skilled professionals disappointed by the worsening economic situation in many African states. Also unlike their early counterparts, these "new" immigrants come with every intention of establishing permanent residency and acquiring United States citizenship. Consequently, they are fast learning how to live the American dream; they are becoming involved in their communities, starting small businesses, and participating in local politics. Their children are becoming professional football, baseball and basketball players. They are also becoming highly trained professionals who are employed in both the public and private sectors. What the future holds for the continued flow of African migration to the United States is unclear. But from all indications it appears that African migration, immigration, and integration into American political, social and economic spheres will continue. The continuous proliferation of civil wars across the continent-Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of Congo- is not a positive sign for a continent where nearly half a century ago the prospect of independence was greeted with tremendous optimism and great expectations.

## Endnotes

[1] Medrano N. Leslie, "Immigration: Africans Find They Have Everything Here"; Minnesota Has Become a Migratory Hub for Some groups&" *Star Tribune*, June 4, 2002.

[2] Rob Carson, "African Immigrants at 172-year High" *The News Tribune*, January 5, 2003.

[3] Soumana Sako, "Brain Drain and Africa's Development: A Reflection" *African Issues*, 30 (1), 2002, p. 28.

[4] Kaye Whiteman, "The Gallic Paradox" *Africa Report*, January/February 1991, p. 19.

[5] Kofi K. Apraku, *African Émigrés in the United States*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991, p. 82.

[6] Olusegun Obasanjo, "Africa in the 1990s: The Challenge of Economic Reform" in Olusegun Obasanjo and Hans d'Orville, (eds.), *The Leadership Challenge of Economic Reforms in Africa*, New York: Crane Russack, pp. 1-11.

[7] Ahmad Abubakar, *Africa and the Challenge of Development: Acquiescence and Dependency versus Freedom and Development*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989, p. 27.

[8] "Nigeria: Where Does it Go From Here?" *West Africa*, October 4-10, 1993, p. 1760.

[9] George S. Dei and Asgharzadeh Alireza, "What is to be Done?: A Look at Some Causes and Consequences of the African Brain Drain" *African Issues*, 30 (1), 2002, p. 32.

[10] James Butty, "Dream or Drain?" *West Africa*, March 4-10, 1991, p. 295.

[11] Cited in Soumana Sako, "Brain Drain and Africa's Development: A Reflection," *African Issues*, XXX(1), 2002, p. 26.

[12] Joseph Takougang, "Recent African Immigrants to the United States: A Historical Perspective" *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 19(1). Also see, Kinuthia Macharia, "The Truth- Students who have Returned and those Who Won't" *The East African Standard*, February 17, 2003.

[13] Kinuthia Macharia, "The Truth- Students who have Returned and those Who Won't" *The East Africa Standard*, February 17, 2003.

[15] George S. Dei and Asgharzadeh Alireza, "What is to be Done? A Look at Some Causes and Consequences of the African Brain Drain" *African Issues*, 30 (1), 2002. p. 33.

[16] See, for example, Halimah Adbullah, "African Immigrants Defer Dreams of Returning Home" *The Dallas Morning News*, April 2, 1999; John A. Arthur, *Invisible Sojourners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States*, Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000; Rob Carson, "African Immigrations at 172-year High" *The News Tribune*, January 5, 2003.

[17] Paul T. Zeleza, "Contemporary African Migration in a Global Context" *African Issues* 30 (1), 2002, p. 13; Yanki K. Djamba, "African Immigrants to the United States: A Socio-Demographic Profile in Comparison to Native Blacks" *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 34(2), 1999.

[18] Paul T. Zeleza, "Contemporary African Migration in a Global Context" *African Issues* 30 (1), 2002, p. 14.

[19] Cited by Marieme Daff, "Women-Migration: Women Taking their Places in African Immigration" *Inter Press Services*, August 9, 2002. Some Senegalese immigrants in the city estimate that the number might be as high as 30,000.

[20] Paul T. Zeleza, "Contemporary African Migration in a Global Context" *African Issues* 30 (1), 2002, p.12.

[21] David Snyder, "Signs of a Boom in African Influx: Surge's Impact Seen Throughout Country" *The Washington Post*, July 11, 2002.

[22] Rick Bodie, "Entrepreneurial Spirit Brings Africans Here: Growth Points to Bright Future" *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 9, 2003.

[23] *The Florida Times*, May 7, 2000.

[24] *Africa News Service*, November 21, 1999.

[25] Marieme Daff, "Women-Migration: Women Taking Their Places in African Immigration" *Inter Press services*, August 9, 2002.

[26] Cindy Rodriguez, "Study Shows US Blacks Trailing Immigrants from Africa, Caribbean" *The Boston Globe*, February 17, 2003.

[27] Kofi K. Apraku, *African Émigrés in the United States*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991, p. 6.

[28] Mohammed Aman, "Foreword" in Obiakor Festus E and Grant Patrick A (eds.), *Foreign-Born African Americans: Silenced Voices in the Discourse on Race*, New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc. 2002, p. xiii.

[29] Njubi F. Nesbitt, "African Intellectuals in the Belly of the Beast: Migration, Identity and the Politics of Exile" *African Issues*, 30 (I), p. 71.

[30] George O. Uwah , "Reflections of an African-Born Immigrant: Story of Alienation" in Obiakor E. Festus and Patrick A. Grant, (eds.), *Foreign-Born African Americans: Silenced Voices in the Discourse on Race*, New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc. 2002. Also see other chapters in the book for an excellent discussion of some of the problems faced by African immigrants.

[31] My personal observation is that it is not a matter of African immigrants seeing themselves as superior to their African American counterparts or vice versa. Rather, like with other immigrant groups- Irish versus Italians, English versus Irish etc.- it is an issue of deep-seated cultural differences with neither side often unwilling to acknowledge those differences and working through them.

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