An Ethnographic Study on the Role of Education and Language among African Immigrants as they Struggle to Integrate and Succeed in the United States

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Opinion Paper

Abstract: The increase in the numbers of African immigrants to the U.S. has raised more questions than answers not only within government authorities but among the immigrants themselves. Although these questions abound, immigrants are more interested in developing ways of adapting in their host countries instead of wasting precious time to think on how to fix the already dilapidated conditions in their countries of origin. Although intending immigrants have the distorted mentality of how things are great in the Diaspora, success is not always that obvious especially when one is new to the system. For this reason, Africans have over the years realized that in order to succeed, one must immediately learn the language of the host country and obtain an education or a career in that system. In a bid to investigate this phenomenon thoroughly, we would first of all analyze the causes of African immigration and the coping challenges and then proceed to look at the methods used to succeed before rounding up with a conclusion.

Keywords: Causes of Immigration, language and education, Africa, United States

Introduction

The immigration of Africans to the United States is a phenomenon that has taken place for decades and will continue since the world has increasingly become globalized. Although African immigration to the U.S. has taken place for decades, a gamut of reasons account for it, thus justifying the varying methods used. The first African immigrants to the U.S. were brutally conscripted and forced to travel to work as slaves out of their free will. Although this was wrong and inhuman, it is still considered immigration because they migrated from one country to the other. In the 60s, 70s and
80s, African migration to the U.S. took a different form. Then, slavery had ended thus giving Africans the ability to willfully travel to the U.S. in search of a better life. Since colonialism had ended, most African immigrants either came for vacation or were students ready to finish and get back home to join the work of nation building.

Recently, things have changed and African immigrants rather establish permanent residency as a means of escaping from the problems back in the continent. According the immigration and Naturalization Service figures, the number of African immigrants to the United States has more than quadrupled in the last two to three decades from 109,733 between 1961 and 1980 to 531,832 between 1981 and 2000 (Logan and Deane, 2003). These new immigrants settle in major metropolis all over the U.S., small towns and country/farm areas like in North and South Dakota. Statistics even show that South Dakota has experienced an increase in the number of African immigrants from 210 in the 1990s to 1560 in 2000 (Medrano 2002). In the same vein, Tacoma Washington has witnessed an increase of more than 800% in the number of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa from 202 in the 1990’s to 1802 in 2002 (Carson 2003).

What ever is going on, African immigrants are more concerned in knowing what to do to better integrate when they immigrate. Language and education stand central in this struggle and it is our intention to investigate their role more as we continue with the paper.

**Research Problem or Purpose** The purpose of this study is to examine why increasing numbers of African immigrants in the U.S. decide to become permanent residents or citizens instead of returning to their home countries and also to explore coping strategies like language and education and see the extent to which they help in the integration process of immigrants in the U.S. When we mention language and education as coping strategies, what we mean is the level of education one has acquired and one’s ability to speak good English language while in the community. Whatever the case, popular believe is that the faster one learns English and attains good quality education, the easier it becomes for he or she to integrate and succeed.
in the U.S. It would only be when the research is done that we would be able to know for sure if this is true or not.

**Literature Review**

In order to have a detailed and substantive view of what scholars think about this topic, we would in the literature review discuss isolated concepts related to the phenomenon.

**Background Information / Causes for African Migration to the United States**

When colonialism ended and African states were given the mandate to become autonomous nations, a great wind of optimism blew across the continent as independence was seen as a stepping stone to a significant improvement not only in the political life but also in the social, economic, healthcare and educational life. Things started on a positive footing but unfortunately started deteriorating to what we have now. Economically, grinding poverty has stifled development and endemic corruption and high unemployment rates have become the norm. With this downtown salaries were cut to the extent that university professor now earn less than $4,000 in most countries (Sako, S. 2002, p. 28). With this reality, those Africans abroad who hoped to return home swiftly changed their minds, (Macharia, K. 2003, p. 17) while those who had studied abroad and returned home in the 70s and 80s started looking for ways of traveling abroad even if it meant travelling illegally (Takugang, J. 2003).

Although mismanagement and corruption among African leaders have undoubtedly contributed to the continent’s severe economic problems, a lack of democratic governance and lack of political transparency also account for a greater part of the problem. Political repression, human rights abuses and civil wars in places like Cote d’Ivoire, Sierra Leone and the DRC have come to make things worst in the continent. The lack of political pluralism has stifled
economic pluralism thus killing development in the private sector (Apraku, K. 1991, p. 82). Olusegun Obasanjo the former president of Nigeria supports this point and contends that the sad economic reality in Africa is simply a symptom of a failed political system (Obasanjo, O. 1989, pp. 1-11).

The economic situation across the African territory has exacerbated because of a decline in the prices of primary products which are dictated on them by western buyers. This has greatly affected and reduced money for developmental projects in most African countries like Zambia where the gross per capita GNP has fallen by about 27% between 1974 and 1984, because the price of copper, the countries major export has declined by 60% (Abubakar, A. 1989, p. 27). This decline in prices especially the prices of oil has greatly affected the quality of life in Nigeria as its economy is in shambles (Nigeria, 1993, p. 1760). Such economic mess has ignited mass exodus of Nigerians especially the highly skilled and most educated professional to the U. S. and other parts of the West in search of a better life (Dei, G. and Alireza, A. 2002, p. 32), thus making it possible that one in every four Africans in the United States in 1991 was believed to be a Nigerian (Butty, j. 1991, p. 295). This mass movement of Nigerians prompted the United Nations conduct an investigation and according to its Human Development Report, 21,000 Nigerians practiced medicine as physicians in the U.S. in 1993 despite the fact that the health situation in Nigeria was horrible (Sako, S. 2002, p. 26).

This situation has been described as brain drain and it has resulted to the loss of one-third of the continent’s skilled professionals in recent decades. While these educated and highly skilled African professional are a remarkable asset to the further development of the U.S., and other western countries, the $4 billion cost of what it takes to fill this capacity gap created by this mass exodus from each African country continues to suck the meager resources of each African nation to an alarming rate. This situation can only add injury to the already bleeding wounds. Thus Dei and Asgharzadah contends: “Every African who takes money from Africa and spends it abroad fails to help Africa financially, economically and commercially. Likewise, every Africa who makes money abroad fails to help Africa’s
commercial or economic development” (Dei, G. and Asgharzadah, A. 2002, p. 33)

**Historical background and the Role of Education / language Use**

Before the colonization of Africa which in some instances is described as the civilization of Africa, the communal dimension of life permeated all aspects of human interaction with man being at the center of existence. In traditional society then, man was never construed as an individual but as a member of a community. This communal dimension of life obtained all over the traditional African territory and directed the way education was done. Because of this strong communal influence dictated by African culture and tradition, education took the form of building communities of people directed by one brotherhood. For this reason, mass movement out of the confines of one’s tribe was not practiced as people congregated among themselves and concentrated in building their tribes under the leadership of the king. As a matter of fact, Africans were not interested in adventuring into other parts of the world.

With the advent of colonialism and the encroachment of industry, cities started growing in size and the new form of education rooted in diplomacy and international relations gradually penetrated and corrupted communal African traditional education. The so-called superior language of the colonial masters was introduced and it gradually eliminated traditional African language as it was claimed to be the language of international diplomacy. For this reason, the few leaders and elites at the time were taken to Europe by the colonial masters and they came back rich, successful and better connected. This reality gradually minimized African traditional values as more Africans preferred to go the western way of learning English and French and acquiring western education so as to gain economic prosperity, political connectedness, and international exposure. This mentality has continued to exist even among the Africans abroad.
While African-born immigrants living in the United States make up only about 3% of the total foreign-born population, African population abroad has continued to increase and has in fact quadrupled from the period of 1961-1980 to 1981-2000 (Takougang 2003; Zeleza, P, 2002, p. 14). Although Africans are motivated by the belief that learning English language and acquiring an education leads to success in the U.S., the colonial mentality that those who follow the “white man’s” way of getting western education and learning their language also inspires them to work hard. For this reason, African immigrants in the U.S. have continued to remind each other of the importance of language and education if one wants to succeed in the U.S. This has been taken seriously that in 2000 during the census, it was realized that African immigrants are well educated compared to native-born Americans to the extent that about 90% had high school education or greater, and two out of every five had a college education (Dixon 2006).

It is no news that more African immigrants in the U.S. in recent years now come from non English-speaking parts of Africa including immigrants from former Portuguese, Spanish and French colonies. The NY Department of City planning did a survey in 2002 and realized that there were about 2,000 immigrants from Senegal alone, a former French colony living in New York City (Daff, M. 2002). Although some of these immigrants have very little education, they do what it takes to learn English, get an education and achieve the American dream. The importance of education and language then cannot be overemphasized for if one fails to acquire them, he or she does not only minimize his or her chances of succeeding but alienates his or her self from the greater African community that prefer associating with those who have succeeded.

Theoretical Premise for the Study

Before we analyze theories relevant to this topic, we must remember to do so under the foundation that mastering language and acquiring an educational creates better opportunities and is socially advantageous to immigrants. For this reason, language does not only build confidence but creates better opportunities for an immigrant (Irvine, 1996).
Language then is not only a vehicle of social interaction but a pointer to the inner realities that build a person and helps us understand one better as it gives us a clue of how he or she understands social interaction (Ritzer 1997). Language then is important as it facilitates communication especially when one is new terrain. From the above foundation two theories of language and learning are discernable.

The first theory is the Systematic Functional Linguistics Theory developed by Michael Halliday through his work on language development. According to Halliday, language development begins naturally with every child long before the child gets to the age where formal education starts (Halliday 1980, p.1). Language is part of everyday interaction and through the child’s close relations with parents, siblings and other constant figures; the child learns to communicate through three main stages: Learning language, Learning through language and Learning about language. Although Halliday says nothing about the language and age, I would assume that learning a language is easier for a teenager than it is for an older person. This explains why young African immigrants in the U.S. adapt faster. Notwithstanding, if one is serious in learning and interacting with people, and sticks to halliday’s three stages of learning a language, he or she should be able to improve his or her language ability greatly.

The second theory of language and learning is the socio-cultural theory developed by Lev Semenovich Vygotsky circa1896-1934. This theory emphasizes developmental analysis, the role of language and social relations of language (Santroch 2001, p. 3). Here, Vygotsky believes that children are born with a range of perceptual, intentional and memory capacities which are substantially transformed when surrounded by culture, socialization and education. To better learn a language then; one must be open minded, socialize with the people of that environment, and also try to immerse his or herself to their culture. Vygotsky developed what is called the Zone of Proximal Development which he defined to be the “distance between the actual development level (of the learner) as determined by independent problem
solving and the level of potential development as determined by the level of problem solving under adult supervision or in collaboration with more capable peers.” (Vygotsky 1978:86, Hammond 2001, p.9).

To conclude, Halliday’s Systematic Functional Linguistic theory not only demonstrates the learning of language in an educational surrounding, but emphasizes that learning language begins prior to the formal education of a child and continues throughout their life. Lev Vygotsky’s Socio-Cultural Theory on the other has a major influence on educational practices. By initiating the zone of proximal development and scaffolding into teaching teachers have developed an understanding of what level to teach that would match an individual’s needs.

### Research Question/Problem

Although is it true that when one goes to Rome he/she should do as the Romans do to succeed, it does not mean that doing what the Romans do necessarily translates to success because not all the Romans are successful in life. Answers to the following questions are necessary as they would help us understand the bigger picture of the research. What reasons account for African immigration to the U.S and the west and what could be done about it? What role does language and education play in ones integration capacity in the U.S.? Does language and education automatically integrate one into new environment? Is integrating the same thing as succeeding? Is language and education the only tools one needs for integration? If not, which other ones exists? What is the importance of the study to Africans, their host countries and knowledge in general? Although these questions may not be fully answered in this proposal, attempting to answer them would ignite more research for our benefit.

### Methodology, Design, and Instrumentation

The research will utilize the ethnographic approach since it focuses on a cultural group and their adaptation mechanisms in foreign land. Ethnography is also perfect in
this study because it gives the researcher the ability to describe and interpret shared values of a particular culture-sharing group, their behavior, language and interaction among members of that culture-sharing group (Harris 1968). For this reason, the unit of analysis will involve many people so as to get a more grounded picture of what obtains among Africans in the United States. Therefore, about 40 to 50 subjects will be drawn from a cross section of Africans living in different parts of the country. Among the participants, the researcher will make sure that all the age groups are represented and all the academic levels represented as this will act as a window for the researcher to understand what obtains in different groups. In this study, data collection will take the form of extended observation of the group, mostly through participant observation. In doing so, the researcher will be able to immerse himself to the daily activities of the people under study and then gather information through open-ended interviewing (Creswell 2007, p. 68).

In-depth interviewing with 40-50 participants will enable the researcher see the challenges of African immigrants as they struggle to integrate into the U.S. way of life. During interviewing, 10 open-ended questions will be asked the interviewee and in answering more will be expounded on the technical linguistic difficulties encountered as they struggle to learn and study in a foreign language. During interviewing, the researcher will want to know the cultural differences experienced and what impact that has on the transitioning effort. In order to get access to the research participants, the researcher will first create rapport through gatekeepers who will in turn introduce the researcher to the participants. This eradicates fear since the participants know the gatekeepers as members of their community. Participants will freely sign consent forms and confidentiality issues will be addressed before the study begins. For discretion purposes, interview material written, taped or videoed will either be destroyed at the end or locked in save environment. All agreements would be respected and bridges litigated.
In order to make data analysis easy, the researcher will make sure notes are taken during interviewing in the field and also during participant observation. In order to have a more organized and systematic understanding of what went on in the field, the researcher will later analyze these field note, and code or transcribe information if need be. Since some of the notes will be taken on tape and video, transcribing and some cases translating will be done. All these things will help the researcher be able to come up with themes that describe particular experiences and some of those themes would be later developed to theories (Creswell, 2007).

**Ethical Issues Related to the Study and the Contribution of this Study to Knowledge**

This study is aimed at conducting thorough research on the experience of African immigrants in the U.S. so as to generate objective findings beneficial not only to African immigrants but to the world and knowledge. For this to happen ethics must be followed and the intentions of the researcher scrutinized and hidden agendas erased. Research then must not be a political tool used to strategically sway people to a particular ideology (Mauthner, 2002, p. 32). Ethics concerns the morality of human conduct and in this case the morality of the researcher. Ethics in research means that the researcher must “see research entirely in ethical terms, as if its aim were to achieve ethical goals or to exemplify ethical ideals....” (Hammersley, 1999, p. 18).

The whole foundation of research is data collection and this is possible only when there is respect and understanding between the researcher and the participants. This relationship is facilitated by the gate keepers. The power dynamics that can operate around access and consent especially where issues of gender and ethnicity are concerned most be taken seriously and the researcher must constantly reflect on ways in which decisions around routes of access can affect the data collected and the final product. For this reason, respect, transparency and agreements must be followed and gender/ethnicity discriminations should be taken seriously (Mauthner et al, 2002). This is important because in some African traditions women are not respected
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As much as men and that might affect the way data is collected. The researcher must guard against any form of discrimination and like ‘action research’ generates insight, confidence and mutual support for research participants (Paulo Friere, 1972).

Also since this topic concerns people from the less developed world living in the developed world, the tendency might be for the researcher who could be a westerner to feel superior and then make judgments or draw conclusions that might not be true. The researcher must be open to African culture and deepen awareness on the socio-cultural identity of Africans to transform their lives based on their own values (Taylor, 1994, p. 109) and not hastily draw conclusions or castigate behavior that is not familiar to western ideology. Objectivity means that the researcher must be able to deconstruct information and avoid assumptions that may be damaging to the whole research endeavor. Being critical to one’s own practice involves reflecting fully on the material collected and thinking forward as well as backward so as to be able to related the material to the bigger picture of the research. (Mauthner, 2002, p. 47). While the researchers aim is to respect the objective of the research, the researcher must never in doing so forget that “the creation of a transparent and equal relation between researcher and researched where each is equally involved and each gets something from the process does sometimes appear to become the objective of the research” (Glucksman, 1994, P 151)

Conclusion and the Significance of the Study

By way of conclusion this study is particularly a proposal or a preliminary qualitative study that explores reasons why Africans immigrate to the United States and the role that English language and education has on their integration capacity. Although we have explored some of the causes of this phenomenon and connected them to the central role played by language and education, this only doe’s scant justice to the entire work as this is only a
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proposal. Therefore, it would be our wish that the final project would be able to explore in detail the variables involved in this topic and not only help African immigrants integrate easily and faster into the U.S. system, but also help African regimes see their problem and be able to solve it. It is then our wish that this would be a coordinated endeavor between the authorities back in Africa, the Africans in the Diaspora and their host governments. If this is tackled this way, understanding would be created which would then facilitate the acquisition of a sustainable solution. History and knowledge can only benefit from such an endeavor.

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