

# In Motion

## The New African Immigration

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**M**ore Africans have come voluntarily to this country in the past thirty years than came during the entire era of the slave trade, which transported to these shores an estimated half million men, women, and children between the 1600s and 1860, the year the last known slave ship landed in Alabama. . . .

Sub-Saharan Africans are a very small percentage of a total population that has multiplied about ninety times since the first census in 1790, and they represent about 3 percent of the people who identify as blacks. Nevertheless, as small as it still is today, the African community has been steadily and rapidly increasing. Close-knit, attached to their cultures, and quick to seize the educational and professional opportunities of their host country, Africans have established themselves as one of the most dynamic, entrepreneurial, and upwardly mobile groups in the nation.

Voluntary immigration from sub-Saharan Africa dates back to the 1860s, when men from Cape Verde—then Portuguese-controlled islands off the coast of Senegal—made their way to Massachusetts. They were seamen, and most were employed as whalers. The movement accelerated at the turn of the century; between 1911 and 1920, about 10,000 Cape Verdeans made their way to New Bedford, Massachusetts. For several decades, Cape Verdeans were the largest African community—other than Egyptians and white South Africans—in the United States.

A small number of African students were also present at the end of the nineteenth century. They were sent by Christian missions to historically black colleges and universities. The trend continued in the early twentieth century. [But the community] residing permanently in the United States was kept small.

Starting in the early 1960s, with the independence of most African nations from colonial rule, students and by then newly appointed diplomats formed the bulk of the continental sub-Saharan African presence in the United States. However, the composition and size of the African community started to change in the 1970s. Between 1961 and 1970, 29,000 Africans (including North Africans) were admitted, but the numbers increased to almost 81,000 from 1971 to 1980.

In 1980, a new Refugee Act was passed: it placed less emphasis on the Cold War policies that had favored refugees from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, increased the ceilings of refugees by region, and offered them the option of permanent residence after one year. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 legalized eligible illegal aliens who resided in the country, and more than 31,000 Africans applied. This amnesty not only allowed many to regularize their situation, but also enabled their spouses and children to join them. Additionally, the Immigration Act of

“Migration has been central in the making of African American history and culture,” declares the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The transatlantic slave trade is usually considered the defining element in the making of the African diaspora, “but it is centuries of additional movements that have given shape to the nation we know today. This is the story that has not been told.”

The New York–based Schomburg Center has begun to document this history through an extensive research project, *In Motion: The African–American Migration Experience*. It traces 13 discrete migrations of African Americans, Caribbeans, and Africans, to, within, and out of the United States. The project Web site (<http://www.inmotionaame.org/>) presents more than 16,500 pages of texts, 8,300 illustrations, and 60 maps, as well as lesson plans.

The last of the migrations documented there is the new, voluntary immigration from Africa to the United States. Immigration and census statistics are inconsistent, and both are generally agreed to greatly underestimate the actual numbers of African immigrants. But even the lowest estimates point to close to a million African-born United States residents by the year 2000, with many more if the U.S.-born children of immigrants are included. This steadily increasing influx, all too often overlooked, has contributed to the growing diversity of the U.S. black population.

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1990 established a lottery system that favors underrepresented nations, a category that includes all the African countries. In 2002, more than 50,000 sub-Saharan Africans entered the country as legal immigrants. . . .

Africans are highly urban: 95 percent reside in a metropolitan area, and like most immigrants, they tend to establish themselves where other countrymen have preceded them and established the basis of a community. West Africans are mostly found in New York (17 percent) and Maryland (11 percent), while 15 percent of East Africans have chosen California and 10 percent Minnesota. Sixteen percent of Central Africans live in Maryland and 9.5 percent in California. The largest number of Nigerians (21,000 or 15.5 percent of the community) reside in oil-rich Texas—their homeland is a major oil producer and they have experience in that industry. The Twin Cities, Minneapolis and St. Paul, have America's largest Somali population, estimated at between 15,000 and 30,000.

Besides their “migration experience,” the most significant characteristic of the African immigrants is that they are the most educated group in the nation. Almost half (49 percent) have bachelor's or advanced degrees, compared to 23 percent of native-born Americans. Studies show that black Africans, on the whole, have a higher educational level than white Africans (from North Africa and South Africa).

According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and to the International Organization for Migration, 27,000 [highly educated] Africans left the continent for industrialized nations between 1960 and 1975. While 40,000 followed them from 1975 to 1984, between 1985 and 1990 the number skyrocketed to 60,000, and has averaged 20,000 annually ever since. At least 60 percent of physicians trained in Ghana during the 1980s have left their country, and half of all Zimbabwe social workers trained in the past ten years are now working in Great Britain.

Sub-Saharan nations bear the great cost of educating students who will continue their education in the West and may not return home during their most productive years. As renowned Nigerian computer scientist Philippe Emeagwali puts it: “In essence, Africa is giving developmental assistance to the wealthier western nations which makes the rich nations richer and the poor nations poorer.” This substantial brain drain is a significant obstacle to development, but African expatriates stress that it is economic and political conditions beyond their control, and human rights abuses, that are generally responsible for their leaving. They also point out that low salaries, lack of adequate equipment and research facilities, and the need to provide for their extended families are the reasons for their emigration, not individualistic motivations.

The African presence has become very visible on the streets of several U.S. cities. The prime example is Harlem. On and around 116th Street, in a neighborhood known as Little Africa, Africans—mostly from francophone West Africa—own several restaurants, a tax and computer center, grocery stores, a butcher shop, photocopy shops, a hardware store, tailor shops, wholesale stores, braiding salons, and telecommunication centers. Other businesses sell electronic equipment, cosmetics, household goods, and Islamic items. Little Africa is a microcosm of what African immigrants

represent and create: they are attached to their cultural and religious values; are quick to take advantage of what modernity can offer; and play a major role in familial, communal, and national development at home.

Whatever their circumstances in America, [African immigrants] maintain a very high level of financial support for their extended families. “The main reason I came here was to support my family,” stresses a Ghanaian nurse. “I send \$250 every month, which is more than I used to make. I am nothing without my family and I would never think of not providing for them, even when it gets difficult here.” Collectively, Africans in the United States send hundreds of millions of dollars home every year. In 1999, Nigerians abroad sent \$1.3 billion home from all corners of the world. The sum was equivalent to 3.7 percent of their country’s Gross Domestic Product, while the total development aid to Nigeria was only \$152 million. Senegalese emigrants contributed close to 2 percent of their country’s GDP. It is estimated that African émigrés the world over send more than \$3 billion home every year through official channels and another \$3 billion through informal channels, mostly person to person.

The number of African organizations and associations throughout the country is astonishing. Every nationality has national, regional, professional, gender, political, and sometimes ethnic organizations. In many areas, pan-African organizations, which bring together Africans from various nationalities, have also been established. People often belong to several organizations, and the multiplicity of groups shows the many layers of identity that Africans bring with them and are eager to maintain.

Like individual Africans, most associations are involved in development efforts in Africa. The Association of Nigerian Physicians in the Americas, which counts more than 2,000 members in the United States and Canada, sends doctors on medical missions to Nigeria to provide services and other support to people in underserved rural areas. Thousands of projects throughout the continent are being funded by the emigrants and are directly managed by the locals. The economic impact of the émigrés on their countries of origin, whether at the familial, local, regional, or national level, is extremely high.

Africans count on [the immigrants] and on information technology to counterbalance some of the effects of the brain drain. Nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, and African universities and associations are eager to capitalize on “the ‘Diaspora option’ which advocates making use of the resources of [African] nationals abroad, without necessarily having them relocate to their countries of origin.” Thanks to the Internet, the expatriates’ skills, expertise, and the networks they build in the United States and other countries of immigration are becoming increasingly available to colleagues and users in their countries of origin. This, they stress, transforms a problem into a potential asset. The digital divide is still enormous, but it is getting smaller. Major cities and many small towns on the Continent have telecommunication centers that provide telephone and fax services. Cyber cafes have sprung up at an amazingly rapid pace, and the Internet is thus available to a wide spectrum of urbanites, who can keep abreast of the expatriates’ activities through their online magazines, or send e-mail to their kin and friends in the United States.

The flow of information also goes from Africa to America. Today, Africans from Los Angeles to Cincinnati can watch television programs and listen to radio broadcasts from their various countries of origin on their computers. They can read their national newspapers online, the same day they are published in Dakar, Nairobi, or Accra.

African expatriates are deeply conscious of the negative image of Africa projected in the United States. “Even in academia and the media Americans continue to use derogatory terms such as tribe for ethnic group and dialect instead of language,” complains a Nigerian physician, “and even though in many countries more than half the population is urban, the only images you see on TV are national parks, which makes it look as if Africans lived in the forest!” Although they readily acknowledge the political, economic and social problems that mark the continent, most Africans do not recognize themselves or their countries in the stereotypical and pessimistic images with which Americans are presented. The often astonishing nature of the derogatory clichés coming from a wide spectrum of American society that is ignorant of African realities is a common subject of conversation and irritation.

Although there are many who wish to remain in America, Africans overwhelmingly express the desire to return to their home countries. As children are born or grow up in this country, issues of identity, continuity, change, and integration will become more pressing. Future developments, at home or in the United States, may change their plans; but for now their life strategies—savings, education, and strong links to home—are geared toward achieving the objective of returning to their home countries. In the meantime, they bring to the United States their robust work ethic, dynamism, and strong attachment to family, culture, and religion, just as other Africans did several centuries ago.



Liberians in Boston march in support of peace in their country, June 2003. AP/World Wide Photos. Photo by Michael Dwyer.