

2006

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Recommended Citation

Darboe, Foday (2006) "Africans and African Americans: Conflicts, Stereotypes and Grudges," *PSU McNair Scholars Online Journal*:
Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 19.
[10.15760/mcnair.2006.48](https://doi.org/10.15760/mcnair.2006.48)

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Portland State University McNair Research Journal 2006-2008

**Africans and African Americans: Conflicts, Stereotypes and
Grudges**

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Citation: Darboe, Foday. Africans and African Americans: Conflicts, Stereotypes and Grudges. Portland State University McNair Scholars Online Journal, Vol. 2, 2006-2008: pages [48-80].

Africans and African Americans: Conflicts, Stereotypes and Grudges

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Abstract

This research focuses critically on the relationship between African immigrants and African Americans in the United States. It examines stereotypes, conflicts and grudges between the two groups and how they impact their co-existence and adaptation to each other.

Most African Americans are descendants of enslaved Africans that were transported to the US during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Since African Americans and Africans are descended from the same root African cultures, it is reasonable to expect that they would adapt and co-exist in harmony; however, there is tension between the two groups.

My objectives are to probe the issues between these two groups and analyze inter-group effects of conflicts, stereotypes, and grudges. I will explore cultural differences and cross-cultural interactions between the two groups. What issues are real, and what are imagined? Can both sides adopt mutual understanding? These are some of the questions that this research addresses

Acknowledgements

My greatest thanks go to the Portland State McNair Scholars program director Dr. Toeutu Faaleava and Jolina Kwong program coordinator for their advice, support and inspiration. I am highly indebted to Dr. E. Kofi Agorsah for being my professor, advisor and mentor for the last two years. Your continuous encouragement and guidance is priceless.

Secondly, I am especially grateful to my friend and former classmate Clare Washington, former Portland State McNair Scholar. Her enduring support and willingness to convince me to apply for this prestigious program is highly appreciated. A list of others who helped would be long if they could all be identified. However, many of those who consented to interviews and surveys have asked to remain anonymous. Without the cooperation and support of all these people, this research would not have seen the light of day. One love!

Introduction and background

What is the relationship between African immigrants and African Americans?

Perhaps the answer to this intriguing question is best described by scholars such as John Arthur, Philippe Wamba and Josephine Moraa Moikobu. In his book, *Invisible sojourners: African immigrant Diaspora in the United States*, John Arthur argues that the “cultural, political, and economic affinity between African immigrants and their black American counterparts is not as strong as it should be considering the historical cord that ties them together.”¹ Arthur concludes that “the cultural barriers and the social and economic differences separating the Africans and the African-Americans is sometimes the cause of a simmering hostility and misunderstanding between them. Sharing the common physical characteristics of skin color has not ensured cultural and economic unity between African immigrants and American-born blacks”² For his part, Philippe Wamba, explains that, “the twin histories of African and African American peoples are brimming with both triumph and tears; similarly, the story of the interaction between them has not always been positive...their associations, and the collision of their true false ideas about one another, have sometimes been problematic.”³

Jennifer Cunningham, for example, described that “some of the more than 4,400 Africans living in Central Harlem have been routinely targeted and singled out for discrimination and abuse, both verbal and physical, according to Africans living in the area. The recent acts have highlighted longstanding tensions between African immigrants and African American residents.”⁴ A similar view is echoed by Kery Murakami and Mary Andom, they established that “leaders in the African American and African immigrant communities say long-simmering tensions between the two groups were reflected in a

¹ John Arthur, *Invisible sojourners: African immigrant Diaspora in the United States*. (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2000), p.77

² Ibid, p. 77-78

³ Philippe Wamba, *Kinship: A family's journey in Africa and America*. (New York: Dutton, 1999) p, 31

⁴ Jennifer Cunningham, *Tension between Africans and African Americans surface again*. (*New York Amsterdam News*. Vol. 96, issue 6,2005),p. 1

shooting July 12 in which an African American woman is suspected of killing an East African immigrant.”⁵

In some of the interviews conducted in this study both African immigrants and African Americans acknowledged that there is indeed a strained relationship between these two groups. An African American participant who is well informed about African and African American history had the following to say: “At the present state, the relationship is not good, worse than the 1950s and 1960s.” He concludes that, “the friction is instigated by outside sources.” Not surprisingly, the interviewee pointed fingers at whites, whom he believed are in the middle of the problem. Josephine Moraa Moikobu’s book, *Blood and flesh: Black American and African identification* points out that:

The fact that these strain-causing elements do not come from Africans or their black American counterparts but are perceived as coming from somewhere outside these two groups; they come from white who are said to have deliberately spawned myths and stereotypes to demean black peoples and keep them deliberately separated and isolated so they can be dominated.⁶

An African immigrant also interviewed expressed his views on the relationship between African immigrants and African Americans by saying that “our relationship is based on suspicions. They blamed Africans for slavery.” He said, “For those who are conscious about history...they want to move on, and their interactions with Africans are fine.” It is quite evident that there is a strained relationship, myths, grudges, ignorance, and stereotypes that keep these two groups apart.

It is widely argued that Africans and African Americans, besides their skin pigmentation and common origin, have little in common. Josephine Moraa Moikobu takes a

⁵ Andom, M & Murakami, K, Shooting puts light on ethnic divide African Americans, Immigrants seek to ease tensions. (*The Seattle Post Intelligencer*, 2006) p.1

⁶ Josephine Moraa Moikobu, *Blood and flesh: Black American and African identification* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 192

closer look at the social identifications between these two groups. Moikobu argues that, “the Eurocentric view maintains that black Americans and Africans have little in common with one another except their ancestry and color.”⁷ Rob Carson reporting on the growing conflict between African immigrants and African Americans in Tacoma, Washington tells us that an African Immigrant draws a conclusion by saying, “we have the same skin color with African Americans, but nothing else together.”⁸ Moikobu in studying this difference among African immigrants and African Americans noted that “most African respondents see that the common bonds that unite them to black Americans are based upon ancestry and color.”⁹ Clarence E. Walker tells us that scholars such as Molefi Kete Asante stresses that “there are some people...who argue that Africans and African Americans have nothing in common but the color of their skin. This is not merely an error, it is nonsense. There exists an emotional, cultural, psychological connection between this people.”¹⁰

From a historical point of view, around 1800s to the late 1960s Africans and African Americans worked hand in hand despite of geographical barriers and some social conditions respectively. Tunde Adeleke eloquently asserts that “advocates of Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism built their ideology and movement, that is, their appeal for black unity across Atlantic space, largely on African considerations shared culture, history, and experience.”¹¹ From Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois to Kwame Nkrumah, these leaders spearheaded Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism. Adeleke posits that “Pan-African ethos

⁷ Ibid, p. 15

⁸ Rob Carson, African immigrants, black Americans poles apart. (*The Columbian*, 2003), p.5

⁹ Blood and flesh: Black American and African identification (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 98

¹⁰ Clarence E. Walker, *We can't go home again* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 61

¹¹ Tunde Adeleke, *Critical perspectives on historical and contemporary issues about Africa and Black America*. (Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), p. 122

urges Black Americans and Africans to revive the old strength-in-unity philosophy that once shaped their mutual struggle, in consequence of shared historical and cultural experiences.”¹²

Rayford W. Logan, for instance, insisted that “no American Negro had so eloquently and so steadfastly proclaimed self-government and independence for Black Africa as had Du Bois. In 1945 he was probably the only American Negro delegate to the Fourth Pan-African Congress in Manchester, England, where he and Kwame Nkrumah drafted the resolutions.”¹³ Not only did these organizations and individuals embark on self-determination for Africans and fundamental human rights for African Americans, but they also exchanged mutual expression of ideas which was intended to increased the overall social, political, and economic issues faced by blacks. As Pearl T. Robinson has observed, “Historically, the pan-African movement was both a symbol and a strategy for consolidating greater unity among black people. Its goals included national independence for colonial subjects and equal citizenship rights for Afro-Americans.”¹⁴ Elliott P. Skinner in *African Americans and U.S. policy toward Africa, 1850-1924: in defense of Black nationality*, gives a detailed account of Booker T. Washington arguments:

There is...a tie which few white men can understand, which binds the American Negro to the African Negro; which unites the black man of Brazil and the black of Liberia; which is constantly drawing into closer relations all the scattered African peoples whether they are in the old world or the new. There is not only the tie of race, which is strong in any case, but there is the bond of [colour], which is [specially] important in the case of the black man. It is this common badge of [colour], for instance, which is responsible for the fact that whatever contributes, in any degree to the progress of the American Negro, contributes to the progress of the African Negro, and to the Negro in South America and the West Indies. When African Negro succeeds, it helps the American Negro. When the African Negro fails, it hurts the reputation and the standing of the Negro in every part of the world.¹⁵

¹² Tunde Adeleke, Black Americans, Africa and History: A Reassessment of the Pan African and identity paradigms. (*The Western Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 22, No. 3,)1998),p. 183

¹³ Rayford W. Logan, The American Negro’s of Africa. Printed in: Africa from the point of view of American Negro scholars.Paris (Présence Africaine, 1958) p. 219

¹⁴ Pearl T. Robinson, Key issues and changing dynamics of the African/ Afro-American connection: (A summary interpretation of Boston University planning workshop, 1987) p. 3

¹⁵ Elliott P. Skinner, African Americans and U.S. policy toward Africa, 1850-1924: in

On much lighter note opponents of these views, particularly Malcolm X, underscore the assumption that black Americans work together with their black counterparts in Africa. Malcolm X argues, “The single greatest mistake of the American black organization and their leaders is that they have failed to establish direct brotherhood lines of communication between the independent nations of Africa and the American black people.¹⁶ To be on the neutral side of this argument, the point of this essay rather is to suggest the connection that Africans and African Americans have a long history of social and political relationship. This is apparent from historians and present scholars that Africans and African Americans worked collectively despite of some setbacks.

However, in contemporary African and African-African-relationship, a lot has been said about these two groups in the United States. It is expected that since both are descendants from the same root culture, they would adapt and co-exist in harmony. However, doubts have been raised on this co-existence and adaptation. The growing stereotypes, misconceptions, ignorance, grudges, and cultural differences are largely responsible for some of these strained relationships. Can anything explain this reality other than these elements? The fundamental question is will this new generation of African immigrants and Africans Americans form social, political, and economic alliances? The present situation poses a challenge in the African Diaspora.

The African Diaspora in the United States

The term, “African Diaspora” has been a remarkable development among scholars in the field of African and African American history and study. From Edward W. Blyden,

defense of Black nationality. (Washington, D.C: Howard University Press, 1992), p. 349

¹⁶ Philippe Wamba, *Kinship: a family's journey in Africa and America*. (New York: Dutton,1999), p. xv

Martin Delany, Paul Hopkins, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, to Tiemako Garan Kouyaté, these intellectuals have engaged and devoted a high purpose for the term and its importance in the study and understanding of Africans, African Americans, Afro-Caribbean blacks, and blacks elsewhere. According to Brent Hayes Edward, the term “African Diaspora” is often used to “express the links and commonalities among groups of African descent throughout the world.”¹⁷

The African Diasporas in the Americas started in the Seventeenth century during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. After the end of the infamous trans-Atlantic slave trade, some freed slaves repatriated to Africa. Many stayed and endured social, political and economic marginalization. Those freed slaves who stayed were given labels from Negro to Black to African American. It is widely believed that African Americans are also part of the African diaspora. As Copeland-Carson noted, “Pan-Africanist scholars as early as Du Bois attempted to define the diaspora as a model for African and African American cultural dynamics. These earlier conceptions of the African diaspora conceived of it as the cultural aggregate of individuals of African descent.”¹⁸

Accordingly, Kwadwo Konadu-Agyemang and Baffour K. Takyi gave a considerable historical explanation to the African diaspora by stressing that “the immigration of African to the North American continent is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, the African presence in this region goes back further, and may predate the era of the infamous slave trade when significant numbers of West African slaves were brought to the colonies of the New

¹⁷ Brent Hayes Edward, *African Diasporas in the new and old worlds*, ed. Genevieve Fabre, Klaus Benesch (Rodopi, 2006), p. 3

¹⁸ Jacqueline Copeland Carson, *Creating Africa in America: translocal identity in an emerging world city*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), P. 19

World.”¹⁹ Ronald W. Walters joined Kwadwo Konadu-Agyemang and Baffour K. Takyi to buttress the notion that the diaspora was “created by slavery and slave trade and by the factors within the system of imperialism and colonialism that forced Africans to leave their continent.”²⁰ Arthur has observed that “the new African immigrant diaspora in North America is very dynamic both in form and content. The African who constitute this diaspora are coming to North America from every geographic region of the continent—from Francophone, Anglophone, Spanish and Portuguese Africa.”²¹

With all this mounting evidence of the African diaspora, what we know according to these scholars is that the numbers of Africans in the diaspora are increasing, particularly, in the United States. In a study conducted by Kofi K. Apraku, in regards to African migration to the United States, his finding revealed that “overwhelming majority (66 percent) indicated that economic situation in their home country was either somewhat important or very important in their decision to emigrate.”²² Baffour K. Takyi, explains that “there is no single explanation as to why Africans have been leaving the continent in large numbers in recent years. However, economic, political, historical processes, educational opportunities, and changes in immigration policies in the United States have been alluded to as providing the impetus for these population movements.”²³ Joseph Takougang also argues that, “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

¹⁹ Kwadwo Konadu-Agyemang , Baffour K. Takyi, An overview of African immigration to U.S and Canada. Printed in *The New African Diaspora in North America*, (Lanham, Md: Lexington 2006) p. 2

²⁰ Ronald W. Walters, *Pan Africanism in the African diaspora: an analysis of modern Afrocentric political movements*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), p. 15

²¹ John A. Arthur, *The New African Diaspora in North America: Policy implications*. Printed in *The New African Diaspora in North America*,(Lanham, Md: Lexington, 2006) p. 287

²² Kofi K. Apraku, *African Emigres in the United States: A Missing Link in Africa's Social and Economic Development*. Praeger Publishers,1991) p. 11

²³ Baffour K. Takyi, *The Making of the Second Diaspora: On the Recent African Immigrant Community in the United States*. (*Western Journal of Black Studies*; 2002, Vol. 26 Issue 1) p.33

United States' immigration policy has also been very helpful.”²⁴ This view is coherent with Diana Baird N’Diaye’s. She implies that:

Since the 1960s, several complex circumstances have contributed to attracting increased immigration and transnational activity of Africans to the United States. Some of these factors, both political and economic, including the decline of European colonization and economic influence in Africa, the concurrent growth of United States participation in Africa affairs, changes in U.S. immigration laws, and the existence of an established African American population”²⁵

A similar point is also noted by April Gordon, for instance, she proposes that there are “five major factors that account for the patterns in African migration currently observable. They are: “(1) Globalization and integration of the world economy (2) Economic and political development failures in Africa (3) Immigration and refugee policies in Europe and the United States (4) Anglophone background (5) Historic ties of sending countries to the United States.”²⁶

According to the U.S. Census on black population, census 2000 showed that the United States population on “April 1, 2000 was 281.4 million. Of the total, 36.4 million or 12.9 percent reported Black or African American. This number includes 34.7 million people or 12.3 percent, who reported only black in addition to 1.8 million people, or 0.6 percent, who reported black as well as other races.”²⁷ John Arthur proposes that, “Between 1820 and 1993, the United States admitted a total of 418,425 Africans as permanent residents. An analysis of the INS data for the period 1980 to 1993 reveals that a total of 249,759 Africans

²⁴ Joseph Takougang, J, *Diaspora: African Immigrants in USA*. Contemporary African Immigrants to the United States, (www.aframglobal.org/articles/article/3077802/48646.htm 2006) p.3

²⁵ Diana Baird N’Diaye, *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas*, ed. by Sheila S. Walker. (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc 2001) p. 232

²⁶ April Gordon, *New Diaspora-African immigration to the United States*. (*Journal of Third World Studies*, 1998)p. 1

²⁷ U.S Census Bureau, *Black population 2000*, p.1

immigrants were lawfully admitted to the United States.”²⁸ Rob Carson also provides us with figures of African immigrants living in some parts of Washington. According to Carson, “in Tacoma, the number of people who identified themselves as sub-Saharan Africans increased nearly 800 percent, rising from 202 to 1,802. Seattle’s African populations climbed from about 2,500 to 10,000 during the 1990s.”²⁹ By far the number of African immigrants in the United States is growing compared to previous decades and years. Table 1 and 2 explains the influx of African immigrants to the United States for social, political and economic reasons. These numbers only indicate African immigrants who sought legal residency and asylum. There is no precise number of African immigrants living in the United States but Gerald Lenoir and Nunu Kidane has observed that, “there are approximately 1.8 million people in the United States that claim their birth in Africa, nearly 60 percent of whom arrived in the one decade between 1990 and 2000. This low figure is highly disputed by organizations that work with and represent these communities. Many of them put the figure at four to five million.”³⁰

Table 1

Legal Permanent Resident Flow: Fiscal Years 2004 to 2006

| Year | 2006 | 2005 | 2004 |
|---------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Region | Numbers | Numbers | Numbers |
| Africa | 117,430 | 85,102 | 66,422 |

Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization

Table 2

²⁸ Invisible sojourners: African immigrant Diaspora in the United States. (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2000), p.39

²⁹ African immigrants, black Americans poles apart. (*The Columbian*,2003), p.5

³⁰ Gerald Lenoir & Nunu Kidane, African Americans *and* Immigrants: Shall We Hang Together or Hang Separately? (Black Scholar, Vol. 37 Issue 1, 2007), P.1

Individuals Granted Asylum Defensively by Region: Fiscal Years: 1997 to 2006

| Africa | |
|---------------|----------------|
| Year | Numbers |
| 1997 | 1,872 |
| 1998 | 1,743 |
| 1999 | 1,803 |
| 2000 | 1,842 |
| 2001 | 1,957 |
| 2002 | 1,908 |
| 2003 | 2,264 |
| 2004 | 2,412 |
| 2005 | 2,270 |
| 2006 | 2,802 |

Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization

The point here is to emphasize that with the number of blacks increasing in the United States, whether they are Africans, African Americans, or Afro-Caribbean blacks, their relationship is often strained and outweighed by misconceptions and stereotypes. One would imagine that their common physical characteristics of skin color would constitute a powerful bond between them. But many of them did not hold this belief. For example, Haki R. Madhubuti elaborates more on this uncertainty:

There are over 100 million people of African descent in Western hemisphere, and we all face similar problems. Whether one is in Canada, the United States, or Brazil, the fight for self-determination and self-reliance is like using a shovel to dig a hole in steel enforced concrete. There are over 69 million people of African descent in Brazil who attempt to speak Portuguese, there are 35 million people of African descent in the U.S. who attempts to speak English, and we African don't talk to each

other...over one hundred million Africans moving and working for the same goals in the same hemisphere is a threat to anyone's rule. Our clothes, names, street address, employment, and articulations in their languages have changes, but the basic relationship has remained the same.³¹

If social, political, and economic cooperation is receptive among all blacks whether in Africa, United States or elsewhere, they could easily form perpetual relationship and contend injustices directed towards all blacks. In fact, one of the interviewee in this study cited the Jews in America and around the world as an example. He said, "Blacks around the world should form powerful lobbying forces around the world to influence policies just like the Jews." This idea is both logical and reasonable, but one should be pessimistic about mutual cooperation among African leaders, let alone blacks all over the world. Looking closely at the evidence from the earliest phases of this paper, the present relationship between African immigrants and African Americans is overshadowed by misconception, stereotypes and ignorance.

Misconceptions, stereotypes and Ignorance

One burning issue that seems to pull apart African immigrants and African Americans is ignorance about each others culture and past. Misconceptions, stereotypes and ignorance have overshadowed the strained relationship between these two groups. This issue has been around for decades. Skinner point out, "Like Booker T. Washington, Du Bois was also exposed to the negative images of Africa held by almost all contemporary whites and most blacks in America."³² Some of the known misconceptions and stereotypes that exist between these two groups are nothing but negative and it affects their overall relationship.

³¹ Madhubuti, H. R, Madhubuti, S, African-centered education: its value, importance, and necessity in the development of Black children. (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 1994), p. 3

³² African Americans and U.S. policy toward Africa, 1850-1924: in defense of Black nationality. (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992), p. 171

Both group have entrusted themselves with stereotypical views that are usual and common among African immigrants and Africans Americans. Rosemary Lukens Traore, studying this trend of strain relationship and stereotypes at an inner-city high school went on to say “despite their possessing a common ancestry, it is regrettably an all-too-common fact of life in today’s American schools that African and African American students remain separated by a wide gulf that is sustained by myths, misperceptions, and negative stereotypes.”³³

Copeland-Carson also made a mark from a specific case in a Minneapolis public school, where she finds that, “both groups seemed to have adopted certain mainstream, stereotypic notions of each other. African students were somehow less civilized and African American students were somehow of lower social status.”³⁴ As Rob Carson noted, “Africans tend to think of black Americans as unpredictable and violent, and blacks tend to think of Africans as ignorant and primitive.”³⁵ Traore went into details describing the stereotypes that exist between these two groups. She writes:

Images predominated in the minds of the African American students of Tarzan, wild animals, and the “Dark Continent”, which have made the “African” in African American something to be avoided or reviled. For the African students, the bewildering images of African Americans living on welfare, being violent toward others, and uncommonly rude to their own people, have also contributed to negative reactions to being identified as “African American”. It may seem ironic to the casual observer but, for the most part, the African students wondered why their fellow African American brothers and sisters treated them as second-class citizens, while the African Americans wondered why the African students seem to feel or act so superior to them. From the alternate perspective, neither group seemed to be justified in their unfounded beliefs about the other.³⁶

³³ Rosemary Lukens Traore, African Students in America: reconstructing new meanings of “African American” in urban education. (Intercultural Education, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2003) p. 243

³⁴ Jacqueline, Copeland Carson, Creating Africa in America: translocal identity in an emerging world city. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), P. 61-62

³⁵ African immigrants, black Americans poles apart. (*The Columbian*, 2003), p.5

³⁶ African Students in America: reconstructing new meanings of “African American” in urban education. (Intercultural Education, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2003) p. 2

Traore was not alone in addressing these stereotypical views among both groups.

John Arthur directly quoting the words of Mary Waters and Kasinitz establishes that:

Black immigrants, see black Americans as lazy, disorganized, and obsessed with racial images, and having a laissez-faire attitude toward family life and child raising. On their part, native-born American blacks view black immigrants as arrogant and oblivious to the racial tensions between blacks and whites.³⁷

Moikobu also illustrates the nature of these stereotypes by borrowing Rayford Logan's study of forty African American students from Howard University to render their general concept about Africa. Some of the stereotypes the students came up with were, "the Dark Continent, mysterious continent, Africa was hot; it had no civilization of its own; it was inhabited by cannibals, heathens, and ferocious animals living in impenetrable jungles."³⁸ Oscar Johnson also adds that, "Africans come here and they are under a lot of misconceptions that African Americans are losers and don't take advantage of opportunities."³⁹

Additionally, another key issue that seems to divide African immigrants and African Americans is the question of cultural affinity. The question here is to what extent do Africans and African Americans share cultures? People often assumed that black people have similar cultural background. Pinpointing the cultural heritage among black people as a whole, would be like "finding a needle in a haystack." Arthur argues about the cultural impediments that seem to cause misunderstanding between African immigrants and African Americans. He asserted that "the patterns of socialization and cultural identification are

³⁷ Invisible sojourners: African immigrant Diaspora in the United States. (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2000), p.78

³⁸ Blood and flesh: Black American and African identification (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 21-22

³⁹ Oscar Johnson, Chilly Coexistence: Africans and African Americans in the Bronx. P. 2

different. Sometimes, the cultural gap and differences in value and orientation becomes sites of conflict and tension between the two groups.”⁴⁰ Expressing similar view about cultural differences, Moikobu affirms that “cultural differences were mentioned by both black Americans and Africans as a strain-causing element in the relationships.”⁴¹ Let me give you an example of how difficult it would be to determine the cultural links among Africans. With its Fifty-four countries, thousands of languages and ethnic groups, Africans themselves have different cultural practices and beliefs. To validate my assertion, E. Kofi Agorsah, points out, “the identification of the origin of the people and culture of the African diaspora continues to be an increasingly complicated and elusive problem. One difficulty is in identifying the geographical boundaries and the specific origins of groups’ people and their cultural transfer.”⁴² The data from this study tends to buttress the question of shared culture that black people perceive as having in common is represented among the respondents. African immigrants and African Americans were asked do Africans and African Americans share the same culture? For instance, 82 percent of African immigrants and 66 percent of African Americans in this study stated that they have no similar cultures. Only 10 percent of African immigrants and 20 percent of African Americans said they have similar cultures. 8 percent on the African immigrants’ part and 14 percent of African Americans said they are not sure whether Africans and Africans have the same cultures. (See Table 3)

Table 3

Respondents’ asked do Africans and African Americans share the same culture?

⁴⁰ Invisible sojourners: African immigrant Diaspora in the United States. (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2000), p 79

⁴¹ Blood and flesh: Black American and African identification (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 129

⁴² E. Kofi Agorsah (2006) *Reconstructing the African Diaspora: Evidence and interpretation.*, ed. E.Kofi Agorsah, Tucker Childs (AuthorHouse Publishers 2006) p. 58

| <i>Reponses</i> | <i>Africans</i> | | <i>African Americans</i> | |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| | <i>Number</i> | <i>Percentage</i> | <i>Number</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
| Yes | 5 | 10 | 10 | 20 |
| No | 41 | 82 | 33 | 66 |
| Not Sure | 4 | 8 | 7 | 14 |
| <i>Total</i> | 50 | 100 | 50 | 100 |

As long as there's a cultural barrier it's going to breed ignorance. In order to bridge this cultural gap, both groups need to disconnect themselves from the existing stereotypes that seem to divide them.

As I gather information about the stereotypes that exist between African immigrants and African Americans, through surveys and interviews, participants in the interviews were asked to identify stereotypes and participants in the surveys were asked whether they held stereotypes against each other. An African immigrant interviewed said "African American women are drama...I don't associate with them a lot. Is just their behavior and they always withdraw from us" He went on to say, "They are any other person, some are good some are bad, some understand us some don't. They pretend like white folks. He concludes that "higher percentage of African Americans wants to be rapper or athletes and small percentage want to go to school." Additionally, an African American women interviewed had these stereotypes about African men, "I always heard people saying that don't date any Africans because they are violent, bossy and demanding...and they will jump on you." Obviously from the evidence above, it is absolutely clear that the groups do sense the reasons for their strained relationship

In analyzing and interpreting some of this study data, the responses from the participants surveyed are crucial as they shed light upon the nature and extend of the stereotypes that exist between Africans and African Americans. (See Table 4)

Table 4

Respondents' asked; have you ever held false stereotypes against Africans/ Americans Africans?

| <i>Reponses</i> | <i>Africans</i> | | <i>African Americans</i> | |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| | <i>Number</i> | <i>Percentage</i> | <i>Number</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
| Yes | 24 | 48 | 31 | 62 |
| No | 18 | 36 | 13 | 26 |
| Not Sure | 8 | 16 | 6 | 12 |
| <i>Total</i> | 50 | 100 | 50 | 100 |

The results indicated that 48 percent of African immigrants said they held stereotypes against African Americans and 62 percent of African Americans said they also held stereotypes against Africans. Only 36 percent of African immigrants and 26 percent of African Americans said they never held stereotypes against each other. 16 percent of Africans and 12 percent of African Americans said they are not sure whether they held stereotypes against each other.

One could argue that the misconceptions, stereotypes and ignorance between African immigrants and Africans Americans emanates from the lack of historical information communicated from societies. On the one hand, Moikobu states that, “another divergent perception concerning both groups was that black Africans overwhelmingly felt that their relationships with black Americans were marred because of black Americans ignorance concerning Africans and Africa.”⁴³ On the other hand, Arthur points out, “Native-born black react to African immigrants’ allegations mainly by highlighting the

⁴³ Blood and flesh: Black American and African identification (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 127

immigrants” lack of knowledge of the historical conditions (discrimination, exclusion, and violence) associated with being black in America.”⁴⁴ Arthur reinforces this view by mentioning that:

With the exception of the African immigrants from South Africa who suffered from an apartheid system of racial exclusion until a few years ago, Africans in the United States came from countries where blacks are in the majority and have responsibility for shaping their social, cultural, political, economic destinies. As a result, the majority of Africans come to the United States with little or no understanding of the dynamics of discrimination against blacks and people of color in general.⁴⁵

Moikobu reiterated this view of how Africans in their respective countries constitute majority of their populations. Moikobu states, “black Africans come from backgrounds where a traditional African way of life predominates and where Africans were and are in the majority for the most part. On the whole, most black Africans, except in places like South Africa, have been less affected by racial discrimination than black Americans.”⁴⁶ Many African immigrants lack of knowledge on the African Americans historical past could be attributed to this notion. For example, Robinson blamed the colonial period. He argues that, “In colonial times, African’s access to information about Afro-Americans was circumscribed.”⁴⁷

In quest for education, both Africans and African Americans have had their curriculum altered with Eurocentric perspective. In her conclusion, Rosemary Lukens Traore argues:

⁴⁴ Invisible sojourners: African immigrant Diaspora in the United States. (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2000), p 81-82

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 73

⁴⁶ Blood and flesh: Black American and African identification (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 118

⁴⁷ Key issues and changing dynamics of the African/ Afro-American connection: (A summary interpretation of Boston University planning workshop, 1987) p. 4

Schools in America for the most part are not designed to educate Africans or Africans Americans about Africa, their historical and cultural heritage. Schools in Africa, originally set up by the colonial masters, have not been educating the African students about their heritage either. These systems were designed with the same enculturation focus, to civilize the savages by bringing them European history and culture.⁴⁸

I take a number of issues with Eurocentric perspectives, which according to Moikobu, “is predominantly white and European.”⁴⁹ And “Eurocentric perspective provides a biased, distorted, mythical, and stereotyped image of blacks.”⁵⁰ Charles Jackson, a critic of Eurocentric puts it, “the content of the public school curriculum are teaching and perpetuation of the stereotypes regarding the true nature of Africa and its place in the development of world civilization.”⁵¹ For example, Asante has attacked Eurocentric bias by saying, “Eurocentric consciousness...excludes the historical and cultural perspective of Africa.”⁵² Adeleke, make reference to Charles Jackson’s study of “the pedagogical front of the African American struggle. Education, he contends, was and remains an effective arm of the black struggle. This struggle is now waged largely in the domain of Black studies, a discipline born of the struggle for elevation. He highlights the Eurocentric underpinnings of scholarship, demonstrating how stereotypes were developed to denigrate Africans and blacks in Diaspora.”⁵³ James H. Meriwether also shares this view. He writes, “With negative stereotypes of Africans permeating the broader culture, not surprising such images reached

⁴⁸ African Students in America: reconstructing new meanings of “African American” in urban education. (Intercultural Education, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2003) p. 252

⁴⁹ Blood and flesh: Black American and African identification (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 15

⁵⁰ Ibid, P. 198

⁵¹ Charles C. Jackson, Africa, African Americans and Eurocentric Diffusion (Critical perspectives on historical and contemporary issues about Africa and Black America. (Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), p. 80

⁵² Molefi Kete Asante, the Afrocentric Idea. (Temple University Press: Philadelphia 1998), p. 5

⁵³ Tunde Adeleke, Critical perspectives on historical and contemporary issues about Africa and Black America. (Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), p. 7

into the nation's classrooms. Educational experiences taught children from an early age about the primitiveness of Africans, with textbooks for schoolchildren buttressing ideas of African inferiority."⁵⁴ Traore reiterated this point by asserting that scholars such as:

Akbar (1998), Asante (1991), Dei (1994), Hilliard (1998), Madhubuti and Madhubuti (1994), Shujaa (1994), Tedla (1995) have all argued strongly for the importance of the Afrocentric perspective in studying the schooling of children of African descent, because this perspective derives from communal values, shared myths, and a sense of community that differs significantly from the Eurocentric view.⁵⁵

It is not surprising that many scholars conclude as do Carter G. Woodson. In the *Mis-Education of the Negro*, Woodson argues that, "the educated negroes have attitude of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as in their mixed schools Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton and to despise the African."⁵⁶ This position is consistent with one of the participants interviewed in this study. She stresses that "in school people often say Asians and whites are smart but never for Africans." It is imperative to note that Africans are taught about slavery, African history and their culture. But African Americans are rarely taught about their past. Bernard Makhosezwe Magubane adds, "The African past is not clear and easily accessible to the American black without extensive learning; it is not part of his daily folklore. The black child only comes in contact with the negative aspect of it in school."⁵⁷ This is largely due to the dominant Eurocentric perspective in American curriculum. An Afrocentric perspective

⁵⁴ James H. Meriwether, proudly we can be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p.18

⁵⁵ African Students in America: reconstructing new meanings of "African American" in urban education. (Intercultural Education, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2003) p. 246

⁵⁶ Carter G. Woodson, the mis-education of the Negro; (Chicago, Ill 2000), p. 1

⁵⁷ Bernard Makhosezwe Magubane, the ties that bind: African-American consciousness of Africa. (Trenton, N.J: Africa World Press,1987), p. 2

should also be considered in United States institutional pedagogy in order to get a more balance learning environment. Adeleke has extended this argument by proposing that:

The objective is to instill in black Americans as awareness of their African identity and culture as a defensive weapon against a pervasive and domineering Eurocentric world view. Afrocentricity is projected as a process of re-education and re-socialization designed to rid Black American consciousness of the tragic conception of their history, culture and heritage, imbibed from Eurocentrism.⁵⁸

Role of the media

Before we can grapple satisfactory with the misconceptions, stereotypes and ignorance that exist between African immigrants and African Americans, it is indeed important to ask what role does the mainstream media plays in the stereotypes and misconceptions that exist between the two groups. It is clear that the media plays an important role in our day-to-day activities and it helps us in shaping some of our decisions. Misconception and negative images of Africa and Africans are common in mainstream media. It is utmost important and necessary for mainstream media to inform their viewers about the positive side of Africa and Africans and not only to concentrate on negative aspects. John Arthur argues that, “Stereotypical media representations of the peoples and cultures of Africa have not helped advance the cause of Africa and Africans in the United States.”⁵⁹ Fola Adeshina gave a detailed account of his encounter with an African American women who revealed that she had a “bad feeling about Africans as a whole because the television tell me that they are very uncivilized and nothing but savage living in the jungle, and so on; and how would I challenge myself with a bunch of savage.”⁶⁰ The mainstream

⁵⁸ Black Americans, Africa and History: A Reassessment of the Pan African and identity paradigms. (*The Western Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 22, No. 3,)1998),p. 183

⁵⁹ Invisible sojourners: African immigrant Diaspora in the United States. (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2000), p. 85

⁶⁰ Fola Adeshina, my survival as an African in America: a story of my struggle. (Baltimore: R.F.A Publications 1995), p.110

media can be outright bias on what they want people to see. In most cases the media is at the forefront as it always does of showing images of African civil wars, diseases, malnourished children, naked children and people living in absolute poor conditions. Virtually all the participants interviewed in this study partially blamed the media for reinforcing some of the stereotypes and misconceptions of Africa and Africans as, “primitive people, Dark continent, bush people, wars, naked babies, and AIDS.” Like the participants interview in this study, Traore also provides us with a data about some of the stereotypes that students in her study pointed out where they get information about the other group. (See Table 5)

Table 5

Responses from the students regarding where they got their information about the other group.

| School | Home | Media |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Stereotypes | Neighbors | Amistad Languages/accent |
| Parents | Roots | |
| Curriculum | Stereotypes | Shaka Zulu |
| Fights | Prior education experience | Discovery channel |
| School behavior | | National Geographic |
| Group work | | Commercials of starving babies |
| Crowded hallways | | AIDS |
| Attitude towards education | | American TV shows and Movies/Tarzan |
| Jealousy | | |

Source: Rosemary Lukens Traore

It is quite apparent that the mainstream media portrays Africans and Africa in a very negative way and this has increased the stereotypical views on the African Americans part. For African Americans to have positive views about Africa and Africans, it solely depends

on their ability to learn more about the continent and its people without information from the mainstream media.

To boost the image of Africa and Africans in abroad, Gilbert da Costa asserts that Adrienne Diouf the spokesperson for the Economic Community of West African States at a media summit in Nigeria argues that:

The ultimate objective is to draw attention to happenings on the continent that hardly gets a mention elsewhere. Our prime responsibility as African citizens is to do as much as we can to show the best of our world. It does not mean we should forget about the negative things, no. Reporting is reporting, the truth must be said. If there are wars, if there is famine, if there is corruption, it must be told and people must know it, so that the people, who have to address it, take measures to address it. But on the other hand, we have positive stories, we have success stories.”⁶¹

Conflicts and grudges

Much of the preceding discussion in this study carries the implicit issues that divide African immigrants and African Americans. However, another significant impediment that seems to separate and leave a mark between their relationship is the growing grudges and conflicts which appear to be on the rise. But does the grudges and conflict necessarily explains or contributes to the fragile relationships? In the view of Josephine Moraa Moikobu, John Arthur, and Rob Carson, all expressed similar perspectives on the growing conflict and grudges. On his part, Carson argues that the conflict and grudges “dates back to the days of slavery.”⁶² On the issue of slavery, some African Americans have blamed Africans for slavery. Joseph Takougang, in his article, *Diaspora: African Immigrants in USA Contemporary African Immigrants to the United States* argues that “another problem faced by African immigrants is the lack of acceptance by some of their African American

⁶¹ Gilbert da Costa, *Africa's Media Summit Opens in Nigeria* (2007), p.1

⁶² African immigrants, black Americans poles apart. (The Columbian,2003), p.5

counterparts. African immigrants are perceived by some African Americans as responsible for the fact that their ancestors were sold into slavery.”⁶³ Clarence Walker went on to say: Tribalism did not prevent Africans from selling members of their own tribes in order to satisfy the demand for slaves in the Americas.”⁶⁴ John Arthur also has emphasize that “the form of statements, allegedly made to African blacks by black American youths, that the African did nothing to stop the slave trade and that the Africans are partly blame for selling the African Americans’ ancestors to the white man hundreds of years ago.”⁶⁵ Rosemary Lukens Traoré in her article, *Voices of African Students in America: “We’re Not From the Jungle”* shed light on the issue of slavery. She interviewed an African American studies teacher who told her that “he doesn’t cover the subjects of Africa or Africans much in his classes because they sold us into slavery.”⁶⁶ African immigrants and African Americans in this study were asked similar question: Are Africans to be blamed for Slavery? (See Table 6)

Table 6

Respondents’ asked Are Africans to be blamed for Slavery?

| <i>Reponses</i> | <i>Africans</i> | | <i>African Americans</i> | |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| | <i>Number</i> | <i>Percentage</i> | <i>Number</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
| Yes | 3 | 6 | 16 | 32 |
| No | 44 | 88 | 30 | 60 |
| Not Sure | 3 | 6 | 4 | 8 |
| <i>Total</i> | 50 | 100 | 50 | 100 |

⁶³ Joseph Takougang, *Diaspora: African Immigrants in USA Contemporary African Immigrants to the United States*, (www.aframglobal.org/articles/article/3077802/48646.htm 2006) p. 4

⁶⁴ Clarence E. Walker, *We can’t go home again* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 61

⁶⁵ *Invisible sojourners: African immigrant Diaspora in the United States*. (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2000), p. 83

⁶⁶ Rosemary Lukens Traore, *Voices of African Students in America: “We’re Not From the Jungle”*. (Multicultural perspective Vol. 8, No. 2, 2006)

Overwhelming majority of African immigrants disagree on the issue of slavery. Here 88 percent of African immigrants said Africans should not be blamed for slavery and 6 percent said Africans should be blamed. On the African American part, 60 percent answered no and 32 percent said Africans should be blamed for slavery, while 8 percent said they are not sure. The data from this study indicated that majority in both groups did not hold the belief that Africans sold their decedents to slavery. To borrow the words of one African immigrant interviewee again who puts it: "They blamed Africans for slavery." He said, "For those who are conscious about history...they want to move on, and their interactions with Africans are fine." From this study, it seems like a number of African Americans still dwelled on the notion that Africans sold their decedents to slavery.

Another issue that attests to the conflict and grudges between African immigrants and African Americans is that African immigrants interacts more with whites than African Americans. This view was also brought up in one of the interviews conducted. The interviewee claims that "Africans are for white people. They associate with whites than African Americans." Moikobu, probing the social interactions of blacks in general found out that African Americans accused Africans for socializing more with whites people. Moikobu asserted that several African Americans said this about Africans: "They, Africans, don't want to bother with us. Or, if the whites are around, for instance, or if the African somehow has been brainwashed. A third remarked: "because I see what they do and not what they say." A fourth indicated: "they socialize with whites."⁶⁷ Mohammed Naseehu Ali also has similar view on this issue. He writes, "I was reminded once again how prejudiced Blacks can be toward one another. It all started when an African-American schoolmate vehemently reproached me for having too many White friends and accused me of selling out to the

⁶⁷ Blood and flesh: Black American and African identification (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 127

Man.”⁶⁸ Surprisingly, African Americans in South Africa faced similar sentiments from black South Africans. Judith Matloff tells us that “Nokwanda Sithole, deputy editor of *Enterprise*, a Johannesburg-based black business magazine says many readers of the magazine say they sense that black Americans arrive acting as if local talent is inferior. Some, they claim, prefer to deal with whites rather than with them.”⁶⁹

Moreover, education and economic competition among African immigrants and African Americans also creates grudges and conflicts. That is African immigrants are believed to acquire higher education and have higher earnings than African Americans. To authenticate this point, Dodoo, F. Nii-Amoo argues that:

African, Caribbean, and native-born blacks present a descending hierarchy also observed with hours worked. African immigrants have considerably higher levels of education compared to the others. This is best exemplified in the distribution of respondents who have college degrees; while 13.1% and 14.6% of African Americans and Caribbean immigrants, respectively, have obtained college degrees a substantial 58 percent of Africans are thus endowed.⁷⁰

In a study conducted by Augustine J. Kposowa on earning gap between African immigrants and African Americans, Kposowa argues that “by 1990, African immigrants had achieved earnings parity with their native-born Black counterparts, and even appear to have surpassed the latter.”⁷¹ He went further asserting that “according to the result, at the same level of education, Africans made slightly more than native born Blacks.”⁷²

⁶⁸ Mohammed Naseehu Ali, Blacks can be racist, too. (*Essence*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, 1994.) P. 1

⁶⁹ Judith Matloff, South African blacks wary of US kin (*Christian Science Monitor*; Vol. 87 Issue 237, 1995), p. 1

⁷⁰ Dodoo, F. Nii-Amoo, Assimilation Differences among Africans in America. (*Social Forces*; Vol. 76 Issue 2. 1997), p.4

⁷¹ Augustine J. Kposowa Human Capital and the Performance of African Immigrants in the U.S. Labor Market. (*Western Journal of Black Studies*; Vol. 26 Issue 3, 2002)p. 178

⁷² *Ibid*, p.179

Furthermore, John Arthur adds that an “Ethiopian immigrant, reflecting on his experiences with American blacks, said they [African-Americans] tell us [African] that we come to their country and take their jobs.”⁷³ This view is consistent with one of the participant interviewed in this study. She said, “I often hear that they Africans come here and get the jobs” Judith Matloff tells us again that Nokwanda Sithole deputy editor of Enterprise, a Johannesburg-based black business magazine argues that black South Africans “fear the African-Americans are coming to take jobs from local professionals. That is a widespread view”⁷⁴ Indeed, for some, the so-called grudges and conflicts are clearly not a matter of African immigrants or African American taking jobs away from each other as some had asserted. In reality, it is rather, a dedication to hard work and qualifications based on merits. If all these theories are right, the grudges and conflicts that exist between them had implanted the seeds of misunderstandings between African immigrants and African Americans.

Analysis and interpretation of data

The data presented in this study are obtained from three different sources: interviews, surveys and extensive library research. My own experiences with both African immigrants and African Americans are not included in any of the data or information presented. A total of hundred participants were surveyed and eight were interviewed. Fifty African immigrants were surveyed and four were interviewed. Fifty African Americans were surveyed and four were interviewed. Participants in this study mainly constitutes male. (See Table 7)

⁷³ Invisible sojourners: African immigrant Diaspora in the United States. (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2000), p.81-82

⁷⁴ South African blacks wary of US kin (Christian Science Monitor; Vol. 87 Issue 237, 1995), p. 1

Table 7

Gender distribution for both African immigrants and African Americans surveyed.

| Gender | Number | Percentage |
|---------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Male | 73 | 73 |
| Female | 27 | 27 |
| <i>Total</i> | 100 | 100 |

Participants came from Portland State University, and the African immigrants and African American communities in Metro-Portland areas in Portland, Oregon. African Immigrants who took part in the surveys and interviews came from eleven Sub-Saharan African countries. They are: Chad, the Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. They range from ages 18-to-75. (See Table 8)

Age distribution for both African immigrants and African Americans surveyed

| Age | Africans | African Americans |
|---------------------|------------|-------------------|
| | Percentage | Percentage |
| 18-35 | 84 | 68 |
| 36-50 | 12 | 16 |
| 51-65 | 4 | 12 |
| 66-75 | 0 | 4 |
| <i>Total</i> | 100 | 100 |

Conclusion

The theme of this research was to probe and analyze the relationships between African immigrants and African Americans and whether or not both groups can adapt to each other despite of mounting stereotypes, ignorance, misconceptions and grudges that exist between them. This study has provided a more balanced look at the overall relationship between the two groups. That is by thoroughly examining both the positive and negative aspect of their strained relationship and emphasizing on the issues that seems to keep them apart even though they share common origin and skin color.

Specifically, the stereotypes, ignorance, misconceptions and grudges have overshadowed the strained relationship between these two groups. Whatever beliefs both group hold against each other, come from the larger American society, predominantly the mainstream media, and United States educational institution, which is dominated by Eurocentric perspective. On the part of the mainstream media, it has not helped in bridging the gap between these two camps. Instead, it is at the forefront of the commotion by bombarding Americans, particularly African Americans with negative images of Africa and Africans, which many African Americans don't want to associate with. The United States institutional pedagogy is mainly dominated by Eurocentric perspective, which fails to include or acknowledge the cultural and historical perspective of Africa. African Americans are rarely taught about African history, culture and the contribution Africa and Africans has given to the New World, especially to the United States.

Also cultural differences have to be accounted in the strained relationship between these two groups. As I mentioned earlier in this study, as long as there is cultural barriers it's going to breed ignorance. African Americans have to take it to themselves to learn about the African continent, its people and their respective cultures. Likewise, African immigrants also have to learn about the African American past—discrimination and exclusion from the

social, political, economic and arena. Both groups should refrain from judging one another without direct or actual experience of the problem that seems to divide them.

In order to achieve an amicable relationship and understanding between African immigrants and African Americans, both groups need to reject negative stereotypes and develop communication skills. Given the quality of evidence in this study, both African immigrants and African Americans who were interviewed and surveyed accept the fact that there are indeed reasonable suspicions between these two groups, but both groups acknowledged that cooperation is attainable, citing the exemplary role of the pan-African movement and Black Nationalism and their leaders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

And last but not least, it is hoped that this research will provoke interest in the social interaction of blacks all over the world and rekindle their historical connection that existed in earlier centuries.

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