

AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE LAND OF OZ

Garth A. Myers
Associate Professor

Geography
&
African & African-American Studies
University of Kansas

Hall Center Seminar
Fall, 2004

I am a part of a team of scholars and community activists that is beginning to develop a research project investigating the effects of recent eastern African immigration on diversity and multiculturalism in Kansas. Our research targets three specific areas of concern: (1) settlement patterns, institution-building, and community organizing for social services among Kansas eastern African communities; (2) social service agency responses to the immigrant communities; and (3) intercultural relations, both between and among African and host communities as well as relationships with other recent migrants from Asia and Latin America. We have really only begun – in fits and starts – to make this project work, and therefore my presentation is wide open for constructive suggestions.

The team of people directly involved in this project so far includes myself, John Janzen and Khalid El-Hassan of the Kansas African Studies Center, Ken Lohrentz of KU Libraries, and Helen Hartnett of the School of Social Welfare, but we have already felt the influence of other contributors. We have set out with what we are terming a participatory action research approach, working in collaboration with African immigrant community organizations in Kansas. Specifically, we have hosted presentations by Martin Okpareke and Mohamed Badri of Jewish Vocational Services and Steve Weitkamp and Akot Arc from Catholic Charities as the agencies – and agents – dealing directly with adjustment, employment, training, and professional development for new Americans from Africa. We have also initiated a dialogue with – and between – a set of immigrant community institutions in the region: the Somali Foundation, Northern and Southern Sudanese associations, Zanzibari American Association, Sierra Leone United Descendants Association, African Chamber of Commerce of Kansas City, and the African Voice newspaper.

We have a set of both basic and ambitious goals in this project. The first might be termed basic understanding. The resurgence of immigration over the last three decades has led to an increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the population of the United States. Our focus is on African immigrants and their recent settlement in urban Kansas. Kansas, like many Upper Midwest and Great Plains states, has been among the least diverse states in terms of race for over a hundred years, but this is changing. New African migrants are an important part of this changing ethnic map in the North-Central US, with dramatically increasing numbers of these non-traditional migrant groups now living in communities that are often unaccustomed to any sizable non-European origin migrants. Notably, in Minneapolis, Somali has joined Hmong and Spanish as the most widely spoken languages in the public school system. Despite these ongoing changes, scholarly attention to the recent African immigrant experience in the United States has

been scant (Abusharaf 2002; Apraku 1991; Attah-Poku 1996; Butcher 1994; Gordon 1998; Koser 2003; Peil 1995; Takougang 1995; Woldemikael 1996). Almost none of this work has targeted the Midwest (exceptions include Holtzman 2000 and Arthur 2000), and none has examined Kansas at all. This is a crucial gap, and we seek to address it.

The last three decades of the twentieth century witnessed significant immigration of Africans to North America, often due to political crises, civil wars, ethnic conflicts, and economic deterioration. The number of documented immigrants from the continent arriving annually in the United States rose from under 15,000 in 1980 to over 40,000 by the close of the 1990s. Africans comprised more than 5% of the documented immigrants to the US in 2000, up from less than 2% in 1991 (Arthur 2000: 154; see Table 1). In 1997, the US Bureau of the Census estimated that 2.2% of the foreign born population in the US were born in African countries, more than twice the percentage of their estimate a decade earlier. That proportion has continued to increase over the past seven years.

The largest metropolitan areas with the airports of main arrival into the US from Europe or Africa are still the areas with the largest Africa-born populations (New York, Boston, Washington, Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, or Houston). The last decade has brought with it both a substantial diversification of source countries for in-migration and a significant spreading of the population into the northern middle of the US. Of an estimated 558,000 immigrants from Africa living in the US as of 1997, Midwestern states had the second highest proportion, next to the Northeast. Nigeria was the largest source country for Sub-Saharan African migrants and refugees from 1980-2001, but four of the eight largest African source countries are in the Greater Horn of Africa region: Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and Kenya. More than 20% of African immigrants in 2000 came from these four countries alone (US Department of State 2002; US Department of Justice 2002; Arthur 2000). African immigrants from these Horn of Africa states are increasingly settling in the Upper Midwest and Great Plains. Significant Horn of Africa immigrant groups now reside in Minneapolis, Des Moines, Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, Fargo, Omaha, and Denver, as well as Kansas City, Topeka, Lawrence, and Wichita. An estimated 2-300 southern Sudanese Dinka live in Olathe alone; the Somali Foundation represents at least 600 families in the greater Kansas City area; and most of the Zanzibari American Association's 300 or so members live in Wichita.

We are interested in the diverse causes of migration within this set of communities, and not simply in the refugee segment. Only 100,000 of the documented African migrants to the US since 1980 claimed refugee status. This means that a considerable majority of African-born US residents (more than 80%) are not refugees, but instead are often highly educated and well trained people (US Department of State 2002). Generally, refugee status provides increased priority and access to – but potentially greater need for and much more limited resource bases with which to initiate searches for – social service resources. There is consequently a diverse capacity for community building upon arrival for African migrants, and we seek to examine both ends of that capacity spectrum.

With the exception of anthropologist Jon Holtzman's book on the southern Sudanese Nuer people of Minnesota (2000), John Arthur's (2000) book on the African immigrant diaspora in the United States, and a scattering of graduate student theses or what Ken Lohrenz (2004, p. 15) calls "resources of praxis" (running the gamut from instructional materials to government policy studies), there have been very few attempts to research the dozens of new African migrant groups and their host communities in the Upper Midwest/Great Plains region. For at least a decade, scholarly attention has been directed toward America's new immigrants, and quite a bit of

research has examined Midwestern and even occasionally Kansas contexts, but overwhelmingly concentrating on Asian and Latin American migrant populations. Some research has been directed toward the more general experience of America's new immigrants in the Midwest, for instance in Randy Stocker's action research project in Minneapolis that ties Somali and Oromo (Ethiopian) community groups in with Korean and Vietnamese residents and the host community. As yet, no comprehensive long-term research project has addressed the particular settlement patterns, institution-building, community organizing, social services provision, or intercultural relations for recent African immigrants to the region. No project at all has been initiated of this kind in the state of Kansas, or in Missouri for that matter. The research examining the ways in which social service agencies and communities have responded to immigration is also scant. Lohrentz's bibliography produced for our project shows 156 entries of any kind – from children's books to web sites – dealing with recent Eastern African immigrants to North America in the last fifteen years. Once children's books, newspaper articles, or entries that are actually about Canada or other places besides the US are subtracted, we are left with 88 entries, less than ten of which deal with the Midwest – in all of those cases, meaning Minneapolis or Chicago.

These are especially unfortunate gaps in the literature simply because of the broadening and expansion of the African populace on the ground. The absence of such research also means a failure to connect with the tremendous wealth of burgeoning academic research questions, in geography, sociology, anthropology and the social sciences more generally, related to migration to the US and ethnic identity in this age of increasing globalization (Hannerz 1996). On an applied level, Horn of Africa communities in greater Washington DC, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Chicago, Minneapolis, and Denver have been at the forefront of cross-cultural organizing for social service provision through a number of newly established organizations. We see this in the Kansas City area African organizations, for instance in the collective fund-raising for New York victims of the September 11 attacks spearheaded by the Sierra Leone United Descendants Association: twelve nationality-based organizations raised more than a thousand dollars, calling the fund "Africans for America." The international dimensions of this type of organizing, as a corollary of globalization, have yet to receive either significant scholarly attention or substantive social service agency assistance in our region. For instance, every individual and agency with which we have discussed the research project to date has articulated a program that combines efforts to help "new Americans" with helping people "back home."

We seek to connect our research project to three broad concerns from the literature and from the organizations' experiences. These concerns are as follows: settlement patterns, institution-building, and community organizing for social services among Eastern African communities in particular; social service responses to the immigrant communities; and intercultural relations, both between and among African and host communities as well as relationships with other recent migrants from Asia and Latin America. Our connections with Sudanese, Somali, Ethiopian, Kenyan, and Tanzanian immigrants, and the size and significance of these five groups in our immediate region, lead to our focus on East African communities in the Kansas City, Topeka, Lawrence, and Wichita metropolitan areas. Kansas City, Topeka, Lawrence, and Wichita all have the beginnings of organizational synergies similar to those of the other metropolitan areas discussed above, such as in the four year-old, Kenyan-American *African Voice* newspaper out of Kansas City, and numerous church- and mosque-related organizing activities. Olathe hosts the East African Community Center, while the Zanzibari American Association has its headquarters in Wichita.

The participatory action research approach we are working with provides a framework

for community connection. We want to give explicit attention to and respect for diversity, working with people affected by changes in an active collaboration with diverse methodologies, and seeking to develop change strategies for improving the quality of life in all four of the metropolitan areas involved. We initially submitted a proposal two years ago for funding from the Russell Sage Foundation, but received a rather unhelpful rejection. We are regrouping this semester, with a series of seminar talks from community leaders in the four metropolitan areas. From that point onward, the shape of the project will re-form in response to the shaping influence of the community representatives.

Ideally, this Spring a newly expanded team of researchers will work through the theoretical, methodological, and empirical aspects of recent African immigration to these four urban areas as they relate to diversity and multiculturalism in Kansas. At present, what we have for you is a set of questions. We aim at understanding the basic social organization of these communities and efforts at organizing in new locations, as well as links to existing services and communities. We will study both community feelings about outside help, and the experience of existing agencies that serve recent Horn of Africa migrants. The intent is to identify particular challenges, problems encountered, and creative solutions that lend themselves to transfer across communities in the migration experience. We seek an understanding of the immigrants' social welfare experiences and community organizing strategies. This focus comes about from a concern with how new African immigrant communities cope with displacement, particularly in areas historically lacking in ethnic diversity, or as diversity takes on distinctly different colors, as in Kansas, with its significant Native American, Southeast Asian, and Central American communities (Bammer 1994). What issues and problems have these immigrants encountered and what efforts have been made to overcome them? Specifically, what community development and community organizing efforts are being undertaken by and for these populations? What kinds of African organizations are working with community development and who are the leaders? Can they speak out on their efforts and could it be useful to newer arrivals if they exchange their experiences with others?

Finally, there is an interest in the relationships and inter-cultural linkages that develop between African migrants and both Latin American and Asian immigrant groups as well as overwhelmingly white host communities and African-American or Native American minorities, and how these relationships influence community-organizing outcomes, and community quality of life. There is a growing understanding in the academic literature of communication gaps between Africans and African Americans in the US (Apraku 1991; Waters 1996; Takougang 1996). We want to understand the dimensions of relations between African and African-Americans in our part of the US Midwest, particularly because skin color is an increasingly confused marker of identity in the region as new migrants change the color composite. We want to broaden this intercultural question, to examine African communities' engagements with other immigrant groups (particularly Hispanics and Asians) and with communities in the host culture other than African-Americans. We are interested in intercultural relations with Native Americans, who comprise higher percentages of the host culture in urban Kansas in comparison to most US states. Intercultural relations with the demographically dominant white majority form a final element of our interests. Studies indicate that the majority of social interactions by African migrants in Kansas outside of their communities are with whites, but that these interactions result in a wide range of outcomes emotionally and practically (Gitau 2000). Academic research has identified and even championed the hybrid, ambivalent disjunctures that have come with the increased inter-mixing of peoples in this phase of cultural globalization

(Massey 1994; Bhabha 1994; Appadurai 1990; Said 2000). To what degree have issues of cultural hybridity become problematic or enriching for the new African migrants to the US as they seek to organize? How do the new communities cope with the disjunctures between cultural conventions, family and gender dynamics, and religious practice common to home countries in Africa and the freewheeling, individualistic, and consumer-oriented culture of the US? How do social service agencies respond to the needs of new Horn of Africa migrants? Finally, how are host cultures affected by these new immigrants?

Kansas has long been caricatured in the popular media as white, mainstream Americana (consider L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*). The reality of Kansas today includes demographic changes that are both subtle and grand. The expanding role of Kansas as a destination for Africa migrants to the US can be located among these transformative processes, and yet no scholarly research has sought to understand the effects and implications of this migration outcome, spatially or socially. We believe it is high time to begin to develop this understanding, and to do so by starting from the beginning in concert with the immigrants themselves.

REFERENCES

- Abusharaf, Rogaria Mustafa. 2002. *Wanderings: Sudanese Migrants and Exiles in North America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1990. Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. *Public Culture* 2(2): 1-23.
- Apraku, Kofi (1991). *African Emigres in the United States*. New York: Praeger.
- Arthur, John. (2000). *Invisible Sojourners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Attah-Poku, Agyemang (1996). *The Socio-Cultural Adjustment Question: The Role of Ghanaian Immigrant Associations in America*. Brookfield, VT: Ashgate.
- Bhabha, Homi (1994). Frontlines/Borderposts. In: *Displacements Cultural Identities in Question*, Angelika Bammer, ed., Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gitau, Peter. 2001. *Between Africans and African-Americans: Bonding or Social Distance?* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas.
- Gordon, April (1998). The New Diaspora – African Immigration to the United States. *Journal of Third World Studies* 15(1): 79-103.
- Hannerz, Ulf. 1996. *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places*. New York: Routledge.
- Holtzman, John D. (2000) *Nuer Journeys, Nuer Lives: Sudanese Refugees in Minnesota*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Koser, Khalid. 2003. *New African Diasporas*. London: Routledge.
- Lohrentz, Kenneth. 2004. Peoples of The Horn in the New African Diaspora: Eritrean, Ethiopian, Somali, and Sudanese Émigrés in the United States and Canada, a Bibliographic Survey. Presented to the Kansas African Studies Center seminar series, September 14, 2004.
- Massey, Doreen. 1994. Double Articulation: A Place in the World. In *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, Angelika Bammer, ed., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 269-299.
- Peil, Margaret (1995). Ghanaians Abroad. *African Affairs* 94(376): 345-368.

Said, E.W (2000). *Reflections on exile and other essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Takougang, Joseph (1995). Black Immigrants to the United States. *Western Journal of Black Studies* 19(1): 50-57.

US Bureau of the Census (1999a). *March 1997 Current Population Survey*. Table 3-3 Country or Area of Birth of the Foreign-Born Population from Africa and Oceania, 1997.

US Bureau of the Census (1999b). *March 1997 Current Population Survey*. Table 4-ID Region of Birth of the Foreign-Born Population for Regions and Selected States, 1997, Washington, DC: US Bureau of the Census.

US Census Bureau, 2000 Census data, at: <http://www.census.gov/main/www/srchtool.html>.

Waters, Mary. 1996. Ethnic and Racial Identities of Second-Generation Black Immigrants in New York City. In: *The New Second Generation*, A. Portes, ed. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, pp. 171-196.

Woldemikael, Tekle (1996). Ethiopians and Eritreans. In: *Refugees in America in the 1990s*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, pp. 147-169.

TABLE 1. IMMIGRANTS ADMITTED BY REGION AND COUNTRY OF BIRTH

Region &country of birth	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
All African Immigrants	25,166	35,893	36,179	27,086	27,783	26,712	42,456	52,889	47,791	40,660	36,700	44,731
Nigeria	5,213	8,843	7,912	4,551	4,448	3,950	6,818	10,221	7,038	7,746	6,769	7,853
Ethiopia	3,389	4,336	5,127	4,602	5,191	3,887	5,960	6,086	5,904	4,205	4,272	4,061
Ghana	2,045	4,466	3,330	1,867	1,604	1,458	3,152	6,606	5,105	4,458	3,714	4,344
South Africa	1,899	1,990	1,854	2,516	2,197	2,144	2,560	2,966	2,093	1,904	1,580	2,833
Somalia	228	277	458	500	1,088	1,737	3,487	2,170	4,005	2,629	1,710	2,465
Liberia	1,175	2,004	1,292	999	1,050	1,762	1,929	2,206	2,216	1,617	1,358	1,575
Kenya	910	1,297	1,185	953	1,065	1,017	1,419	1,666	1,387	1,696	1,412	2,210
Sudan	272	306	679	675	714	651	1,645	2,172	2,030	1,161	1,354	1,538
Sierra Leone	939	1,290	951	693	690	698	919	1,918	1,884	955	976	1,590
Cape Verde	1,118	907	973	757	936	810	968	1,012	920	814	909	1,083