

BRIDGING THE GAP: MANAGING THE “COLD WAR” BETWEEN AFRICANS AND AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Abstract

There are visible and invisible variance and disagreements in attitudes and behaviors of Africans and African-Americans both on campuses and work places in the United States of America. The difference is due, in part, to the cultural and historical factors that have nurtured the two groups. African-Americans are the derivatives of enslaved Africans who arrived in America in the early seventeenth century. The socio-historical acculturation of a new culture in America introduced them to different languages, customs, traditions and religion. Has this new “civilization” created a change in the attitude and subsequent behaviors of African-Americans towards African immigrants living in the United States or African immigrants claim the undiluted cultural heritage of Black people and arrogate to themselves the originality of the Black race and culture, an assertion which is irritating to African-Americans? The purpose of this paper would be to explore the misunderstanding between African immigrants in the United States and African-Americans who are natives (natural citizens) of the United States of America. The paper will also investigate the consequences of such rift, as another “ism” (ethnocentrism), which militates against America’s march toward tolerance under the umbrella of multicultural education. Specifically the paper will attempt to discuss the mix-up and confusion of error between the two groups, the factors responsible for the confusion and uncertainty, and a meeting point of understanding, tolerance and respect for each other. To answer the research questions above, I used both content analysis and interviews of African immigrants and African-Americans of different persuasions and backgrounds domiciled in different states of the United States of America to ensure a wider perspective on the topic.

Introduction

The question of who an African-American is revolves around confusion between racial designation and culture. In looking for the appropriate description, the guiding questions that have emerged include the following: Does it mean a black person in America? Does it mean an American with African origin or an American with African heritage and cultural background? Could it also be more suitable to for an African who has immigrated to the United States and become naturalized or the children of African immigrants who were born in the United States of America? For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to Africans who have immigrated to the United States as “African Immigrants and the conventional African-Americans as “black Americans”

The terminologies notwithstanding, the bone of contention of this paper remains an exploration into the misunderstanding between African immigrants in the United States and black Americans who are natives (natural citizens) of the United States of America. The Africans who were taken to America and forced into slavery formed a unique culture in the world that is yet to be recognized even by them. Some of them are confused and lost in the Diaspora to the extent that they are baffled in their belief as to whether being Black is a culture, a race or both. Most define themselves by their race rather than culture. Even though those who are classified as racially Black do share some cultural similarities due to common origin; when one examines Black cultures throughout the world one cannot help but notice

cultural differences unique to each group. Therefore, black Americans are one such group and are as unique as any other group of people on earth. A failure to recognize this simple fact is an attempt to steal from black Americans a sense of self and culture.

In America, we often find ourselves trying to define what Black is instead of defining what African-American (black American) is - racial designation or as a culture. The confusion is heightened when African immigrants try to define themselves in the United States. They are uncertain as to whether the term "African- American" fits them better than the black Americans since the latter are Americans who are black. For political and other reasons, black Americans have failed to define themselves by **who** they are and, instead identify themselves by **what** they are. Nevertheless the black American (African American) is more than just the color of skin, they are a way of looking at the world and a set of beliefs. They are a culture. It is by accepting this fact that the sense of self will be strengthened.

Confusion and Misunderstanding

Langmia and Durham (2009) have found that there are noticeable differences and similarities in the communicative [and social] behaviors of African and black American college students on the campuses of historically black colleges and universities. The result of this ethnic difference is a chilly co-existence between the two groups despite their racial similarity. In Johnson's (2008) estimation, it is easy for African immigrants who increasingly call [some parts of America, especially predominantly black communities like] the Bronx home to "just get along" with their American-born black neighbors. But it is a chilly coexistence - a fact both sides acknowledge from across a subtle yet vast cultural divide.

Both African immigrants in the United States and native black Americans agree that there is discrepancy and misunderstanding between them, which produces a thorny relationship between them. African immigrants disclose that coming to America is culturally isolating. Most have experienced that they suddenly find themselves put in a rigidly racial category that does not exist in their home countries. They observe these on application forms, reference to them formally and informally, seriously and frivolously. Initially they are categorized by their appearance, then as Africans by their accent. Then they often stumble on discrimination from the mainstream and, unease or even distrust from black Americans. However, some African immigrants have admitted that they are sometimes surprised to find that their African cultural values are more often aligned with those of White Americans than black Americans.

In Hunt's interview with Wamba (2000), it was revealed that there is the tendency for some black Americans to romanticize Africa, because within the black American imagination it has functioned as this almost heaven-like place - a utopia which was glorified in opposition to the reality of racial oppression in America. So the idea is that we can't acknowledge the shortcomings of Africa, because then it would cease to function as this heaven.

However, the reality is that there is no contradiction between acknowledging that Africa has some serious problems and, identifying with Africa in a positive way. We have to look at the historical causes of those problems and talk about the legacy of colonialism and the slave trade. Thus, we need to tone down the overemphasis on how Africans themselves have often failed and confront whatever failings have resulted in the problems facing the continent and the people.

Even when we acknowledge those problems, it does not mean that Africa ceases to act as a source of pride and a foundation of positive identification. It doesn't invalidate that

experience or sense of kinship and that sense of belonging to many black Americans (Wamba, 2000).

The factors responsible for the confusion and uncertainty

The backgrounds of Africans and black Americans reveal that cultural and historical factors have nurtured the two groups to arrive at their current circumstances and conditions. Black Americans are the derivatives of enslaved Africans who arrived in the New World in 1619. The socio-historical acculturation of a new culture in America introduced them to different languages, customs, traditions and religion. This new civilization has created a change in the attitude and subsequent behaviors of black Americans toward African immigrants who, by and large, became known as Africans in the Diaspora living in the United States in and around the 1960s.

With the introduction of the Diversity Visa lottery in the late 1990s, many immigrants mostly from Africa have immigrated in large numbers into the United States. There has been yearly trend of increase in the winning of the DV lottery. The DV-2010 results announced on July 11th, 2009 ranked Ghana first in the number of winners of the US 2010 Diversity Visa (DV) lottery with 8, 752 winning entries (ghanaweb, 2009). A total of 54, 003 winnings from the fifty four African countries has been announced. As a result of this significant influx of Africans into the United States each year, there is a corresponding increase in the desire for educational advancement among African students residing domestically; as well as those coming directly from Africa with J1 and F1 Visas for educational quests. The struggle for placements in educational institutions (Colleges and Universities) and scholarship awards sometimes cause resentment and bitterness in black Americans. Some black Americans believe that the law of “affirmative action” is their legitimate right and privilege, with a claim that some government educational titles (e.g. title VI), which is extended to African immigrants is an affront and a slight to their singular and lawful opportunity.

In addition, African immigrants are different from their black American counterparts considered to be their predecessors not only culturally, but also in experience and perspective. These differences are rarely discussed but widely understood to be at the root of a great divide. Many African immigrants and black Americans who admit their lack of relationships also confess that while some black Americans or African immigrants are "very nice," others are “very rude” and they believe that the difference is predicated upon the way they have been raised. Some African immigrants believe that some black Americans are still embittered with the past. Some black Americans believe that African immigrants arrogantly claim authenticity and genuineness over the black race and culture.

Method and Design for the study

In addition to content analysis, two different groups of participants were selected for this study. African immigrants living in the United States with diverse backgrounds – factory workers, construction workers, health workers, students, educators and teachers were interviewed. Black Americans with different educational and economic backgrounds and persuasion were also interviewed. They told their stories from which themes emerged. I compared the story themes to that of current literature on the topic. Using face to face and telephone interviews, the subjects in the two groups were given the chance to tell their own stories. The leading questions were centered on the following issues:

1. Is there animosity/conflict/confusion between African immigrants and black Americans?

2. What factors are responsible for the conflict?
3. How surmountable are these problems?

African Immigrants' perspectives

Single-story Misconception

African immigrants get upset when black Americans base their perception about them on a "single story" of poverty, famine, disease, tribal wars, etc. (Adichie 2009). They are troubled and irritated by the assumption that: Africa is a country; there is no possibility of Africans being similar to them; no possibility of feelings more complex than pity; no possibility to have a connection as human equals; turning to them whenever Africa comes up in a discussion but when you ask them about Canada, Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua, Jamaica (all countries in the continent of North America) they have no idea about the people.

African immigrants also get irritated when their black Americans perceive Africa only through popular images as: Africa [only] associated with a place of beautiful landscape; a place of beautiful animals and incomprehensible people fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDs, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind white foreigner. Additionally, when you refer to Africans who are middle class, drive big cars, speak English and dress in modern clothes, they are regarded as being NOT authentically Africans (Adichie, 2009).

Black American lackadaisical attitude

African immigrants wonder why black Americans do not take advantage of the many widespread opportunities in the United States. In the opinion of African immigrants black Americans have taken for granted the golden opportunity that the coincidence of history has given them. African immigrants believe that black Americans do not notice the opportunities they have! Whilst African immigrants struggle to secure work permit and to regularize their stay in the United States to be able to work and go to school, brilliant black American college-bound boys and girls loiter in the streets and engage in deviant acts in the corners of streets, not to talk about the many school drop outs at the high school level.

Black American misplaced priority

African immigrants have observed that Black Americans are so much into sports. They believe black people; especially black Americans can go higher; they can make education their priority and that, the lone concentration toward sports will never guarantee an entry into the corridors of power and control in a country where different minority groups seek to seize political power. African immigrants declare, to the irritation of black Americans, a clarion call on black Americans to seek first the academic kingdom and all other things, including political power, would emerge as a matter of corollary.

Black on black crime

African immigrants condemn the way it appears that black Americans treat one another: black on black crime - especially the youth killing one another. It has been observed that more often than not, when a cop comes under scrutiny for shooting a young black man, blacks are only angry because a cop killed one of their own. But they don't care about black on black crime, which is way more common. To support the observation Sullivan (2009) analyzed black on black crime as follows:

“... I also wonder what the ratio is of police shooting black men in Oakland to black men shooting black men in Oakland. My guess it's *less* than 1 police shooting to 100 other shootings.”

It always amazes me how much anger there is in the black community regarding police involved shootings. You can get a dozen reverends and "community leaders" to show up to protest ANY police involved shooting whether it is justified or clearly unjustified. Yet, hold a protest for some dead innocent kid killed by a gang-banger and few show up. Partly it's because other types of shootings are so common I guess. Partly it's because it's easier to focus on the police as being the main problem in the black community and not the fucked up standards that exist among elements in the black community. I recall Michelle Obama being asked if she feared for Barack's safety. She said something to the effect of "he's a black man; he might get shot at the gas station" (Sullivan, 2009:2).

Rejection from Black Americans

African immigrants have also experienced that some aspects of African culture "embarrass" black Americans because the practices appear primitive to them after being more familiar with European standards. The embarrassment causes some black Americans to distance themselves from anything (or anyone) who is explicitly African. In schools, African immigrants claim that white Americans receive them more warmly than black Americans. They make friends and sincerely seek to learn from them, their African culture. This act of companionship leads black Americans to consider African immigrants as acting "uncle Tom" and sell-outs when seen in the company of white students. Black Americans thus mock and tease African immigrants who associate themselves with Caucasians as being "bootlickers" and "brown-noses".

Divide and rule tactics

Some African immigrants who have become naturalized US citizens claim that they have, and continue to live the animosity between Africans and black Americans. These African born naturalized Americans believe that employers like to hire Africans over black Americans not because of the assumption that they can pay the Africans lower wages. They believe that, at work places, black American performance is below expectation whereas Africans diligently and devotedly work to the height of their capabilities. Consequently, employers try to meet the Affirmative Action quota by hiring African immigrants instead of black Americans. Also, when African immigrants are treated in a way that commensurate their efforts by employers, it is misconstrued as favoritism. This situation leads black Americans to consider African immigrants as having snatched from them what is naturally theirs, hence the animosity between them at work places.

Clash of cultures

Another issue that brings about misunderstanding is clash of cultures. When African immigrants marry black Americans, a conflict ensues in the upbringing of their children. While the African parent strives to inculcate into the children some African values (e.g. total obedience to adult rules, no talking back, remain children so long as they live in the same house, parents having a greater say in their choices, etc), the black American parent insists on pure American culture (e.g. total independence and rights of the children, total openness in all discussion with the children, children's right to leave the parents' home on the attainment of eighteen years, etc.). Also, the children between Africans and black Americans tend to deviate from their African parenthood and root. Sometimes, they are shy to identify

themselves with the African parent as a result of the portrayal of Africans based on the Tarzan movie. The children therefore get embarrassed to identify themselves with Africa, a notion that has existed up to almost a decade into the 21st century. Also, some black American women detest Ethiopians because the former (black American women) assert that the latter (Ethiopian women) portray themselves with a sense of superiority over other black women for the reason that they have hair texture that is closer to that of Caucasians.

Black American perspectives

Misconception and lack of empathy

On the part of black Americans, most of them believe that some perception of African immigrants about black Americans is the result of misconception and lack of empathy of the Black American life and lifestyle. For example, some black Americans believe that Africans immigrants come here (United States) and they are under a lot of misconceptions that African Americans are “losers”, don’t take advantage of opportunities, engage in violent acts, they are ignorant, they have ‘I don’t care’ attitude, they are not progressive, they are “settled” without a sense of future etc. Black Americans respond to this misconception in the phrase that, not everything here (in the United States) is a bed of roses and that, as long as there is a cultural barrier, it is going to breed ignorance. African immigrants therefore need to be empathetic to understand their Black counterparts; else the cold war will rage on.

In response to Black on Black crime, Reed (2009) has stated that:

“The idea that blacks are indifferent to black on black crime is just another media hoax designed to sell white moral superiority to those whom they regard as their average consumer. Oaklanders have participated in candle light vigils, rallies, forums, conferences, panels, church meetings, secular meetings, poetry readings, etc. to protest the murders of young black men. The shootouts that have occurred in my neighborhood are turf wars over the distribution of drugs. The drastic rise in black on black crime began in 1984 when several agencies on the government looked the other way as their death squad allies brought crack into the inner city. It's hard to get a word in at the New York Times where this entertainment began. Since the Jason Blair scandal the editors favor black opinion that leans to the right. What I call tough love entrepreneurs.”

Rejection from African immigrants

Black Americans also claim to have experienced rejection from African immigrants and therefore, admit a cold “cold war” between them. One black American professors stated: “I wouldn’t say the relation is cold but I wouldn’t say it’s warm either,”. He said one reason relations are tepid is because many African Americans feel the African immigrants "are so clannish that they’re not going to let you in...It’s almost like arrogance and a put down."

Black American claim of superiority

Even though some black Americans have their own misconceptions about Africans and put the blame on African immigrants, the professor referenced above and others also admit that some black Americans see Africans as "stupid" because of their accents and Third World origins, or deemed "annoying".

History of betrayal

Some African Americans also believe that Africans have betrayed them historically and that has resulted in this estrangement between black Americans and Africans. There is this idea that Africans sold black Americans into slavery and that basically, they didn't really care about African Americans.

A meeting point of understanding, tolerance and respect for each other

Negative images and impressions of both Black Americans and developing African countries in mainstream media help perpetuate the rift. For example, Nnamdi Azikiwe, who became the prime minister of Nigeria, once spoke about a Black American he met on the subway who said to him that he had expected that Africans wouldn't have any clothes on or that he would be a cannibal. Azikiwe didn't give up on it at that moment. Instead, he went on to have some very meaningful relationship. This might have helped to shape him into the leader he would eventually become in the Nigerian independence movement.

Again, there has always been a powerful sense of these Pan-African alliances - a sense of common cause between black Americans and Africans. This fueled the independence movement in Ghana. Kwame Nkrumah was obviously influenced by his ties to black Americans, which developed while he was a student in the United States. Nkrumah led Ghana to become the first black African country to attain political independence for the British colonial rule. No wonder a black American senator, Bill Perkins of District 30 in the New York Senate sponsored a LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTION (#3068) requesting a recognition and celebration of the 100th Birthday of the late Kwame Nkrumah, paying tribute to his many contributions to Pan-Africanism on Monday, September 21, 2009 (Perkins, 2009).

Over the past twenty years, millions of Africans have emigrated to the U.S. from fifty four countries in Africa. Today, Americans know very little about this growing and vibrant population. The overarching questions for Africans living in America include how they view black Americans? Do they consider themselves African-American? What are the unique struggles they face being black and African in America? As Johnson (2008) found, most African immigrants believe that a certain kinship exists between them. "We see them as the same; we used to have the same culture." Indeed, the new immigrants and the descendents of those once imported by force share African origins. They both fit into America's "black" racial category, and often scrape by on low incomes.

Neither African immigrants nor black Americans seem to harbor any intentional ill-will toward each other. But both speak of distinctions, assumptions and *de facto* segregation. It therefore appears that the main barrier between the two groups is ignorance on both sides. "If the people [Africans and Black Americans] know anything at all [about each other] it is very little, and it is much skewed." (Wamba, 2000). On the issue of misconception, Wamba (2000) believes that misconceptions definitely existed and continue to exist. He thinks that the only remedy is to understand that even though these misconceptions exist, there are ways to move beyond them and come into a more realistic understanding of each other and at the same time build a sort of working unity. As much as we don't want to admit it, both Africans and Black Americans still have misconceptions. This notwithstanding, we still maintain there is a sense of kinship, a sense of affinity and, the idea of kinship is a driving force in of all of this creation, thought and expression.

Also, there is a flood of information and misinformation from our experience of colonialism, which still keeps us from understanding one another. The divide and rule tactics, which was applied by the colonial masters centuries ago, still remains with us and it continues to suppresses our relationship.

Some action that could be taken to address the ignorance and misconception problems include a special rites-of-passage where a program would be developed to encourage black American youth to take a trip to an African country to mark the youths' transition to adulthood. As Wamba (1999) has opined, "it is awakening to many Africans that, to many white people, they are indistinguishable from black Americans." Similar histories of colonialism and slavery, or current experiences of discrimination in the United States and abroad can often serve as a bridge between the two groups because racial inequality "seems to be a problem that all black people face. In order to improve the relations between Africans and black Americans develop a positive world view and, to help erase the social agony associated with such emaciating identification, they should not see themselves so much as a minority. Each group has the duty to expand their circle of friends to help refute the stereotypical thinking, ignorance and misconception of the other group.

Africans and black Americans have had intellectual and creative exchanges, be they literary, political, and musical, an idea that seem to help each other as a people to develop. Even though the legacy of colonialism and slavery might have thwarted a lot of these exchanges, the idea of kinship motivates people, moves people, and inspires people. It is not surprising that some African musicians wrote some of their songs because they were trying to bridge the gap between themselves and their brothers across the ocean. In his interview, Wamba admitted to Hunt (2000) that Fela Anikulapo-Kuti of Nigeria talked about how he was imitating James Brown. Also, Manu Dibango's song "Soul Makossa," which was well-received by black Americans and seen as quintessential African expression, was in fact Dibango's response to the music of Louis Armstrong.

What is really inspiring is that there are Africans and African leaders who have a sense of passionate identification with black Americans. Often they look at black Americans as occupying some kind of big-brother role, as though they could be the saviors of Africa. Black Americans are inspirational to so many Africans. They look at them as the pinnacle of what black people could achieve. Hopefully, this hope and identification of passion would bring them closer together because their histories are so deep and so intertwined.

We must admit that there are both positive and negative stories about the interactions between Africans and black Americans. However, the fact of the complicated relationship is not an excuse that they cannot really overcome these differences. The truth is that they are different, but the truth is also that throughout history they have come together in these very powerful, positive ways and that there is nothing to stop them from doing that in the future.

African immigrants and black Americans are the same people and need to understand each other. Black Americans should not think Africans consider them to be inferior because they came to America involuntarily. Africans look up to them and emulate them in many ways, especially dressing like Michael Jackson, Fifty-Cent, Snoop Dog, James Brown (and not Elvis Parsley) back home in Africa. Africans also name their children after African American celebrities. Therefore any thought that Africans feel a sense of lowliness toward black Americans is a misconstruction and should be rejected and discarded.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I agree with Adichie (2009) about the dangers of “single stories”. In Adichie’s judgment, our lives and our cultures are composed of overlapping stories and that, if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding. The truth is that single stories create stereotypes and make the account become the norm and the definitive story of that person. It robs people of dignity and makes our recognition of equality of humanity difficult and, emphasizes difference rather than similarity.

Although the catastrophes in the African continent cannot be overlooked, there is the need for a balance of the stories. For example, there is the need to talk about poor but hardworking Africans; insufficient medical care but heart procedures performed in Nigerian, Ghanaian, South African and other African hospitals; traditional and contemporary music composed and sang in English, French and other African languages; polygamy but female lawyers challenging some laws in their respective countries; and many other positive developments.

By and large, using single stories, stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination that come from mis-education, misunderstanding, misinformation, and ignorance dispossess, malign, break the dignity, disempower, and disrespect other people. We should instead use plural stories to repair the broken dignity, empower and humanize the people we so detest and struggle with because of lack of knowledge, mis-education and misunderstanding, misconstruction, and misinterpretation.

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