

The Hotel Africa

A growing number of Africans are arriving in the United States in search of a better life. But even as these immigrants learn to negotiate a complex new culture, they cannot forget the beloved and blighted lands that sent them forth, yet call them back.

BY G. PASCAL ZACHARY

I DREAD PHONE CALLS FROM AFRICA.

A sister is having a baby, her fifth, and wants us to send cash before the birth. An aunt calls on Christmas Day, hoping to tap our holiday spirit. Can't we pay for human traffickers to sneak her into the United States? The price is "only" \$5,000, which strikes me as suspiciously low. My father-in-law rings just long enough to ask for a return call. Another aunt calls to announce that, tired of waiting for us to send money, she's changed her name from Patience to Joy. She really has. Then there is the distant relative phoning for the first time, asking us to pay his rent, his children's school fees, anything.

These people telephone because my wife, Chizo, is an African living in America. To be precise, Chizo is a Nigerian living in northern California. The telephoners are Nigerians too. They don't know California from the Carolinas, but they are poor, needy, and, by comparison with Chizo, in dire straits. They want her help, and usually help means sending cash. Chizo is a hair braider, working long hours for low pay and earning nothing when there are no heads to braid.

G. PASCAL ZACHARY, a former foreign correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, often writes on African affairs. His books include *The Diversity Advantage: Multicultural Identity in the New World Economy* (2003), and he is currently working on a memoir of his marriage to an African.

Her mother and father live in Nigeria's second-largest city, where they can afford to rent only a small, windowless room with no running water, bathroom, or kitchen. Chizo regularly sends money to her parents, her six siblings, and her favorite aunts. She also supports a daughter in Togo, whom we are preparing to bring to America.

No matter how much money Chizo sends, her African relatives are never satisfied, and she feels that her obligations to them remain unmet. She is haunted by Africa, haunted by requests for money and her great distance from the motherland. From all of 8,000 miles away, she misses Africa, and the ache in her heart is not diminished by her support of family members.

When Chizo came to California three years ago, she joined an estimated one million African immigrants living in the United States, many of whom have come in recent years because of changes in U.S. immigration laws. Before 1980, African immigrants overwhelmingly moved to Europe, in part because its former colonial powers left more doors open. That year, Congress made it easier to enter the United States as a refugee, and in 1990 it created visa "lotteries" for high school graduates from nations his-

torically underrepresented in the United States, such as Ghana and Nigeria. “This lottery,” notes Salih Omar Eissa, a child of Sudanese parents who has studied immigration law, “quickly became the primary method by which Africans immigrated” to the United States.

As a result of these changes, the African-born population has boomed. More than half of the sub-Saharan, or black, Africans living in the United States today have arrived since 1990. Hailing from Nigeria, my wife is part of the largest single African contingent. More immigrants—an estimated 150,000—have come to the United States from Nigeria than from any other sub-Saharan country. Newcomers from Ghana rank second, Ethiopians third, Liberians fourth, Somalis and Kenyans fifth and sixth. Though these numbers reflect both legal and illegal immigration, they seem to undercount Africans in the United States. No matter what the actual number is, Africans are a tiny part, a mere 2.8 percent, of the foreign-born population legally in the United States,



Two worlds: Despite great success after more than 30 years in America, the Ahonkhai family of suburban Philadelphia still feels the tug of Nigeria. Most African immigrants have fared well. Vincent Ahonkhais is a corporate vice president, Bernadine holds an education doctorate, and their four children hold undergraduate and graduate degrees.

according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Yet the significance of these new African immigrants eclipses their relatively small number, for it highlights the enormous changes in American society over the past 40 years while reminding us that for centuries Africans came to this country in chains. “More Africans Enter U.S. Than in Days of Slavery,” *The New York Times* headlined a front-page article last year. Because of the central role of slavery in American history and the still-vexing problem of black-white relations, African immigrants are worth watching.

To be sure, generalizing about Africans is tricky. Africa south of the Sahara is highly diverse. The term “African” is a construction open to gross misunder-

standings; an astonishing 98 percent reportedly have completed high school. One-third of African women and 38 percent of African men hold professional and managerial jobs. Because of their education and because Africans generally live in the largest American cities, where wages tend to be highest, both sexes earn about 20 percent more than the median pay of all American workers. African immigrants are younger than other immigrants. Only 2.6 percent are over 65, the lowest percentage of any immigrant group; more than 70 percent are between 25 and 54.

I talk with Africans regularly in my frequent visits to Africa and in the United States, and so I meet them in Africa dreaming about coming to America and meet them in America dreaming of returning to or saving their motherland. The principal challenge for recently arrived Africans in America is not succeeding in the United States—they are—but realizing their desire to maintain a dynamic relationship

**YEARS ABROAD HAVEN'T diminished
Ike Nwadeyi's sense of identity. “You can't
put a Nigerian in your pocket,” he says.**

standing. (George W. Bush, during his first presidential campaign, compared Africa to Mexico, as if both were countries.) Travel within sub-Saharan Africa is frequently difficult, and people from different parts of the region often do not display any immediate solidarity, racial or otherwise. I was reminded of Africa's great diversity when I attended a private party recently at an Oakland nightclub, not far from where Chizo and I live. The guests were mainly from Cameroon and spoke French. In the same club, in the next room, a group of Ethiopians were also partying. The two groups ate different foods, listened to different music, dressed differently, danced differently—and carried on separately. No wonder. Paris and Moscow are much closer to each other than Lagos and Addis Ababa.

Despite such differences and a tendency to stick close to their own, African immigrants in the United States have much in common. They tend to be highly educated and to come from relatively privileged backgrounds. More than four in 10 hold university

degrees; an astonishing 98 percent reportedly have completed high school. One-third of African women and 38 percent of African men hold professional and managerial jobs. Because of their education and because Africans generally live in the largest American cities, where wages tend to be highest, both sexes earn about 20 percent more than the median pay of all American workers. African immigrants are younger than other immigrants. Only 2.6 percent are over 65, the lowest percentage of any immigrant group; more than 70 percent are between 25 and 54.

I talk with Africans regularly in my frequent visits to Africa and in the United States, and so I meet them in Africa dreaming about coming to America and meet them in America dreaming of returning to or saving their motherland. The principal challenge for recently arrived Africans in America is not succeeding in the United States—they are—but realizing their desire to maintain a dynamic relationship

with Africa. Their attachment to the motherland arises at least partly from a belief that the enormous outflow of talent from Africa, however understandable given the hardships of life there, poses a great developmental handicap. “Africans are doing incredible things in the U.S.,” says Derrick Ashong, a Ghanaian-born Harvard graduate who lives in New York City and is building an African media company. “Would our countries be underdeveloped if our energies were applied back home?” So long as Africa suffers under the burden of poverty and inequity, war and disease, Ashong's question is both a challenge and a reproach to Africans in America.

Ike Nwadeyi is a stickler for manners. He wants his daughter to greet him each day with the words, “Good morning, sir.” When she lived in America with him, she told him, “Hi, Daddy.” He angrily replied, “You don't tell me, ‘Hi, Daddy.’”

This breakfast banter explains why Nwadeyi's

seven-year-old daughter is growing up in Nigeria while he works in Washington, D.C., and obtains his American citizenship. "America will spoil my daughter," he insists. "Children have no manners here. By growing up in Nigeria, she'll know what I mean by respect."

Nwadeyi's daughter lives with his wife, a geologist working for Chevron in oil-rich Nigeria. Her job is too well paying and too interesting for her to abandon. So she stays in Nigeria, while Nwadeyi lives in the United States and drives a taxi. "There's no enjoyment in this country," he says. "Nothing. This country has no life." But working in America affords him the chance to visit Nigeria for long stretches when he wishes. His presence in the United States and his American citizenship give his family an insurance policy against the instability that always threatens Nigeria, but he is typical of the many Africans who leave their young children behind in Africa so they can be raised properly.

Before Nwadeyi came to the United States, he lived in Thessalonica, where he studied business at a Greek university. His many years in Europe and the United States, however, have not diminished his sense of identity. "You can't hide a Nigerian," he says. "We are loud. It is natural. You can't put a Nigerian in your pocket."

Nwadeyi's straddle of two worlds is typical of recent African immigrants. "Africans represent a new type of immigrant," writes Sylviane A. Diouf, a scholar of African migration who is a researcher at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City. "They are transnationals, people who choose to maintain their separateness in the host country and retain tight links to their community of origin." Drawing strength from migration, Diouf observes, "they generally view their American experience as transitory, the most effective way to construct a better future at home for themselves and their relatives."

Of course, Diouf's description of Africans might be applied to many immigrant groups. Filipinos, Koreans, Central Americans, Mexicans, Russians, Chinese, and Indians maintain strong ties to their countries of origin. What sets Africans apart is the undeniable marginalization of their homeland. Sub-

Saharan Africa is the only major region of the world that has grown poorer over the past several decades and that has seen a dramatic decline in the job market for highly skilled workers. The development arcs of Mexico, China, India, South Korea, and most other countries exporting people to the United States are traveling in the opposite direction. These countries are increasingly sophisticated, wealthy, and accommodative of the needs of talented people. Indeed, in some parts of India and China and elsewhere, job opportunities are now far better than in the United States.

Only in black Africa, among the world's regions, have conditions deteriorated, and not just for the elite. Because of the plights of their home countries, Africans are forced to create a distinctive relationship with both America and Africa. In short, no other immigrant group carries anything like the baggage that Africans carry—a homeland that is a source of embarrassment but also offers an unparalleled opportunity to give back.

Africans feel that the quickest route to becoming "super-empowered" individuals capable of giving back to the motherland is success in the United States. The pull of their homeland paradoxically drives them to greater heights in America. "They are fast learning how to live the American dream," wrote Joseph Takougang, a professor of African history at the University of Cincinnati, in a recent survey. "They are becoming involved in their communities, starting small businesses, and participating in local politics."

As people of African origin have gained visibility in America in recent years, their sometimes-troubled relations with African Americans have belied Americans' monolithic views of race. Many white Americans as well as African Americans have assumed that African immigrants are natural allies of African Americans, and are surprised when tensions surface.

One figure who has put the spotlight on Africa is Illinois senator Barack Obama, son of a Kenyan. In his 2004 senatorial campaign, he had to establish his "blackness" in the eyes of the African-American elec-



Chizo, the author's wife, shares a light moment with her husband at a Ugandan fruit market. Cheap air transportation makes it relatively easy for today's immigrants from even very distant places to maintain close ties to home.

torate because he had been raised by a white mother. Even his Africanness was considered attenuated. In his memoir, *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995), Obama symbolically reclaims his Africanness by traveling to Kenya. None of these gymnastics in the establishment of identity makes sense in an African context. In the United States, Obama's carefully constructed identity is critical to his public career.

Diallo, an unarmed New York street vendor from Guinea who was shot by police in 1999. Events such as the Diallo killing promote a common understanding of what it means to be black in America by reminding Africans that black people still face sometimes-fatal racial prejudice. Mallet, who grew up in Africa with a white mother and a black father, feels obliged to sympathetically hear out African-American objections to mainstream American society.

The friction between African immigrants and African Americans is perhaps starkest in applications of affirmative action policies. Often, hiring preferences work to the advantage of people who have just arrived in the United States. Because many African immigrants are highly educated, they can compete for jobs that might otherwise go to African Americans. Tensions between the two groups are exacerbated by African insensitivity. "Too many Africans are dismissive of African Americans in a general way," says Victor Mallet, a Ghanaian who works with black small-business owners in Philadelphia. He notes that Africans fear being lumped together with African Americans as second-class citizens. They also harbor some of the same stereotypes of African Americans held by many whites.

To be sure, Africans in America experience racism and outrages, such as the death of Amadou

“More Africans need to look past the appealing notion that America is a meritocracy and that there is equal opportunity for all,” says Mallet, who first came to the United States to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the 1990s. “While Africans are right not to hide behind the excuse of racial bias, they also must comprehend the history of African-American exclusion—and how racial awareness continues to distort American life today.”

The core division between Africans and African Americans is rooted in radically different notions of identity, and is therefore unlikely to vanish anytime soon. For Africans, ethnic identification—what was once known as tribe—trumps race. When my wife first came to California, she did not view black people as natural allies, but sought help from West Africans, people reared close to her home turf. She visited braiding shops, looking for casual work and new friends, and joined a shop managed by two Cameroonian women and staffed by braiders from Senegal and Gabon. The braiders became Chizo’s best friends and the shop a virtual Africa that helped ease her transition to a new and alien country.

My wife is the only Nigerian in the braiding shop, but she found many nearby, even members of her own ethnic group, the Igbo. A local grocery store, run by an Igbo man, sells her favorite foods from home: *gari* (cassava), dried fish, fresh yams, plantains, and an exotic spice called *ugba*. A community of Igbo Catholics holds a monthly Mass in her native language. In our living room, she hangs a Nigerian flag (and the flags of the United States and Ghana, where she and I first met).

Too great an attachment to one’s community of origin can encourage provincial thinking, of course. Chizo’s own fellow Igbos are quite clannish, and of the scores I have met in America, not one is married to a non-Igbo, and certainly not a white American. To the Igbos I meet, my wife is somewhat suspect. They question why she would marry, not outside

her race, but outside her ethnic group. Possessing pride born partly from their communal suffering during the Biafran war, Igbos have the kind of ethnic solidarity found in Armenian, Jewish, and Kosovar communities.

Africans have no monopoly on ethnic narcissism. More striking, actually, is their openness to wide currents and their willingness to draw on materials not indigenous to Africa. A young African writer, Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu, a Yale graduate living in New York, has coined the term “Afropolitan” to highlight the benefits of blending a cosmopolitan outlook with continuing participation in one’s African community. “Perhaps what most typifies the Afropolitan consciousness is this . . . effort to understand what is ailing Africa alongside

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, and technological forces are driving Africans in America toward playing a larger role in their home countries.

the desire to honor what is uniquely wonderful,” Tuakli-Wosornu writes.

The Afropolitans must succeed in America, but in a manner that pushes them toward Africa, not away from it. The emergence of a new generation of African writers, who succeed first in the United States and then gain an audience in Africa, illustrates this pattern. In his short-story collection *The Prophet of Zongo Street* (2005), Mohammed Naseehu Ali, who lives in Brooklyn and has spent 17 years in the United States since arriving at the age of 18 to attend university, rescues the rich folk stories of his Hausa forebears in Ghana and Nigeria. Ensnared in America, by day he works at the database company Lexis-Nexis, and at night he emerges in Brooklyn as a troubadour of the wisdom of his ancestors. “I have great hope for Africa,” he says.

Like a number of African writers, Ali published



Lobbying on issues of concern back home is a time-honored practice of immigrants, and now Africans are adding their voices. Here, Ethiopian immigrants call for U.S. pressure on longtime Ethiopian ruler Meles Zenawi.

first in the United States and is preoccupied with the African experience, home and away. Uzodinma Iweala, who last year published a celebrated short novel, *Beasts of No Nation*, also draws on African sources in his tale about child soldiers. Shuttling between D.C. and Lagos, he is now building a literary reputation in Nigeria on the strength of his American success. “You can’t ever escape being a Nigerian,” he told an interviewer in the United States recently, adding:

If you try to say, ‘No, I am not Nigerian,’ people say, ‘What are you talking about? I know where your father is from. I know the village. There is no way that you can tell me you are not Nigerian.’ In fact, if you don’t come back and maintain the ties, people start asking questions. It’s not as if when you leave you are looked down upon for leaving your country. Most Nigerians that you speak to here expect to return to Nigeria at some point in time—whether or not that will actually happen is not important. It’s the mentality.

In the past, many new immigrants to America said they would maintain tight links to their countries of origin, but over time they—and their children and grandchildren—have not. Fidelity to Africa, so intensely felt by most immigrants, may also fade over time. “Are they [African immigrants] going to melt into the African-American population?” historian Eric Foner asked in an article in *The New York Times* last year. “Most likely yes.”

The opposite could well happen. Economic, social, and technological forces are driving Africans in America toward playing a larger role in their home countries in the years ahead. The spread of cell phones in Africa and the rise of Internet telephony in the United States make calling back to Africa—once an expensive and tedious task often requiring many connection attempts—inexpensive and easy. Flights to all parts of sub-Saharan Africa, while not cheap, are more frequent than ever. And private companies operating in Africa are beginning to see the pool of skilled Africans working in the United States as a source of managerial and professional talent. Though Africa’s brain drain continues, a small but significant number of people are returning to the continent to take jobs or start businesses.

Demographic forces are at play too. As the first big wave of African immigrants from the 1980s approaches retirement, some look homeward. No statistics are kept on Africans who move back for good. But some members of all immigrant groups do return home and always have, even before the days of easy travel, telephone calls, and money transfers. Roughly half of all Italian immigrants to the United States before World War I returned home permanently. Today, because documentation is essential for crossing borders, legal immigrants must first acquire a green card and then, usually, a U.S. passport. Once in possession of papers, an African who leaves the United States invariably will come back to it, if only to work. As they age, some Africans are retiring to their home countries, funding an African lifestyle with American dollars. So many Ghanaians are repatriating, for instance, that a Texas homebuilder has an operation in Ghana that has constructed hundreds of houses for returnees.

Africans commonly travel back and forth, moti-

vated as much by opportunity and nostalgia as by a kind of survivor's guilt. My wife often expresses nagging doubts about the fairness of living affluently in America while her family lives in deprivation back home. "Why did I escape the poverty of Africa," she asks. "What kind of God chooses paradise for me and misery for my loved ones?"

The cries of Africans left behind are difficult to drown out, and they shape the aspirations of Africans in America. Consider the choices made by my friend Guy Kamgaing, an engineer from Cameroon who arrived in the United States to attend graduate school 11 years ago. Now 35, he has built a successful career in Los Angeles in the burgeoning field of mobile telephony. He holds a green card, is married (to another Cameroonian, an accountant), and has two children. He is living, in short, the American dream, and the corruption and difficulty of doing business in Cameroon make him reluctant to return full time. Yet Kamgaing maintains a big African dream. He is renovating a hotel in the Cameroon port city of Douala that his father, now 72 and still living in the city, built and ran through good times and bad. The 160-room hotel is a relic—sprawling, decrepit, a nuisance, and, until recently, shuttered.

One morning, I met Kamgaing on the roof of the hotel. He has opened a café there, and the waiter served us café au lait and croissants. I could see for miles: the Atlantic Ocean, the forests ringing the city, the crowded streets. It was the rainy season, the air was heavy, and I could feel the two of us moving back in time, to 40 years ago, soon after independence, when Cameroon was wealthy thanks to abundant timber, oil, and agricultural production; it was home to tens of thousands of French people; and the future looked bright. The hotel, called the Beausejour Mirabel, is a means by which Kamgaing can honor his father and revive his country.

The task is difficult. He has renovated the lobby

and is repairing rooms floor by floor. Soon he will reopen the long-empty pool on the roof. He knows that the project is a drain, robbing him of capital he might invest in his American life, but he finds it irresistible. "Sometimes when I think about this hotel, it brings tears to my eyes," he says. "I am resurrecting my father's pride and joy." The hotel even boasts wireless Internet access, which not even its poshest competitors in Douala offer. Kamgaing wants to establish a mid-priced hotel, but the odds are against him because

THE CRIES OF AFRICANS left behind are difficult to drown out, and they shape the aspirations of Africans in America.

the city's few foreign visitors usually want luxury, not nostalgia and value.

Back in northern California recently, Kamgaing visited my house for dinner. While he spooned up my wife's goat meat and pepper soup, he admitted that perhaps he has gone slightly mad in reviving the old hotel. But he's proving that he hasn't forsaken the land of his birth.

My wife has yet to find her Hotel Africa. I was reminded of the delicacy of her search one night not long ago, when she and I dined with a Jewish friend and his father, approaching 85, who was visiting from Long Island. As a child living near the home of Anne Frank in Amsterdam, the father had been snatched by the Nazis and sent to a death camp. Chizo told him that his ordeal and that of the Jewish people in Europe reminded her of the suffering of her own people, the Igbo, who tried to secede from Nigeria some 35 years ago and form their own nation, Biafra. Her older brother and sister, then infants, died during the war that followed—along with a million other Nigerians. "Every people suffer," she said. The old survivor smiled.

The persistence of suffering in Africa may bind African immigrants to their homeland in unexpected ways. Perhaps Africans will never forget, and will be defined by memory, just as Jews have been. ■