

***“Culturally based Diplomacy in the British Southern Cameroon:
Contextualizing African Female Body and the Colonial Gaze”***

Presented by,

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Abstract:

Africa has witnessed an increase in cultural diplomacy to resolve specific challenges in society as well as women's history. Indeed, for much of Africa's history, African women, like their counterparts in other cultures, have been defined by their marital status, family positions, and by their sexuality. In particular, the African female body, tagged by colonial rulers for appropriation and regulation, came to represent a fraught realm for political and economic processes, policies, laws, and educational and cultural ideologies as well as a politicized vessel for narratives of culture, nation, tradition, modernity, authenticity, disempowerment, and empowerment. While such socially constructed labeling and politicization has not ceased in contemporary times, developments in education, advocacy, technology, religion, and law have engendered academic discourses on ideas about women's sexualities, positions in the family, rights and roles in the society. This project interrogates the structures of power both colonial and post colonial that exert systematic governance over a selected group of people [especially women] in Cameroon, West Africa. It also explores perspectives on how African women internalize, respond to, and act within localized social structures, both as individuals and as communities, illustrating how the body is used to combat transnational, national, and local images and ideas of African female sexuality, motherhood, and womanhood. In the process the benefits of soft power and smart power are juxtaposed against hard power and its futility in confronting the many challenges that Cameroon and Africa face today.

Introduction:

The long years of colonialism and white colonial rule, (a classic example of hard power used against Africa), nationalism, neocolonialism, and now globalization with its new modes of consumption imported from the West (an example of cultural diplomacy at work) have forever changed traditional identities and have distorted the notion of an African self. The contemporary mass migration to Europe, Asia and the United States further calls into question the meaning of being an African today, and, above all, the location of that identity (Achebe and Teboh, 2007). Is it in our ancestral villages, or where we work, pray, raise our children and establish our social networks (in new communities or locations)? Alternatively, is it in both places one leg here, and another there, part real and part imagined? To better understand cultural diplomacy and its potential for peace-making and peace-keeping, this article aims to understand African communities in the US, the role and impact of female new arrivals, as well as examine social organization and the reproduction of African communities and the implications for African identity and culture. I argue that when we talk of African cultural identity and its spatiality we must conceptualize it in terms of degrees, since African culture and identity emerges and its diversity and transformation persists. As Henry Louis Gates pointed out, the facts of nationality or race “don’t exhaust anybody’s human complexity” (Gates, 1997: 43). Indeed, if it is true that there is not just “one way to be black” (Awkward, 1995:10) it is also true that there is not just one way to be African. Fixing the African identity to some original land and people without acknowledging the connections (cultural, economic, spiritual) of that land and people with its geographically dispersed sons and daughters would bring us back to an essentialist and, I dare say, demagogic,

notion of African consciousness and identity, thus limiting the potential for cultural diplomacy.

Multi-positionality and multi-locality is another way of saying that diversity and transformation are two traits of contemporary African community and identity. However, how, in all its specificity, does this place we call community and that which holds our attention come into being? The pursuing of this puzzle brings us to the concept of place making and, by association, to that of social and cultural practices. And what better practices reveal the sense of community, the sense of belonging and identity maintenance than those employed by Africans living outside of Africa to recreate their sense of place?

I explore the meaning and location of African culture and identity within new communities by analyzing the practices of place making of Africans in the United States, whose experiences send out a warning about essentialist and separatist notions of African identity and consciousness.¹

In the first section, I briefly trace the troubled and complex articulation of Africans especially Cameroonians in the United States. From slave trade and forced migrations, through voluntary immigrants, I highlight struggles to maintain African culture and identity. This tendency continues within discourses on contemporary mass migrations and globalization. I therefore present a bird's eye view of these struggles and the evolution of Africans and their settlement patterns in the US. In the second part, I reconstruct a socio-economic profile of the people born in Africa living in the United

¹ This research was conducted between 2005 and 2007. The University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth generously provided research support through start-up funds during two summers and intersession.

States. This section, evinced from the 2000 US census, provides the necessary background to understanding the structural characteristics of the contemporary Diaspora. In the third section, I describe in some detail some of the practices of community building cultural diplomatic strategies, and (re) creation of identity employed by African immigrants within three major spheres: African foods, annual and monthly meetings (cultural festivals and conventions), and African language use.

Methodology:

This article draws on data collected through archival research, interviews, personal communications/phone calls and observations between 2008 and 2010, to explain where and what constitutes cultural diplomacy at national, international, individual and community level, where African immigrants in the US choose to settle and why. Further discussions of my research outcomes focus on how African immigrants cope in their new communities. My methodology is inter-disciplinary and combines primary sources, secondary sources, archival material, and oral sources. I had the privilege of attending several annual conventions and African festivals. I also participated in many of these meetings, and interviewed 210 people in four major cities across the United States.² Some were interviewed in groups during monthly cultural/ethnic group meetings or at their homes and others as individuals (Table 1). For their

² These cities were chosen because of the high concentration of Cameroonians and Africans currently residing there, or simply as strategic places where annual national conventions are usually held—thus making access to informants easier. Their selection in different parts of the US was meant to capture the socio-economic impact of differences of various immigrants in different communities and how they adapt.

protection, some of my collaborators and informants are “asylum-seekers” or “asylees,” and thus asked me not to use their real names in order to protect their identity.³

Table 1: Interview Locations and Number of Collaborators

<u>Interviews</u>	<u>Number</u>
Boston Area	
Adult Male	10
Adult Female	25
Children	10
<u>Total</u>	<u>45</u>
Los Angeles	
Adult Male	20
Adult Female	20
Children	15
<u>Total</u>	<u>55</u>
Arlington	
Adult Male	12
Adult Female	10
Children	8
<u>Total</u>	<u>30</u>
Washington, DC	
Adult Male	15
Adult Female	10
Children	10
<u>Total</u>	<u>35</u>
New York	
Adult Male	18
Adult Female	15
Children	12
<u>Total</u>	<u>45</u>
<u>Grand Total</u>	<u>210</u>

Source: Teboh, Field Research Data, 2008-2010.

³ It is an open secret that several governments in Africa do not tolerate free speech by their citizens. The possible real and imagined danger that awaits some of my informants if identity is revealed could not be ignored.

Of this number, 43 are children between ages 4 and 17.⁴ Our children are the future. This article presents findings based on interviews conducted in four major US cities between 2008 and 2010. These cities were chosen because of the high concentration of Cameroonians and Africans currently residing there, or simply as strategic places where annual national conventions are usually held—thus making access to informants easier. Their selection in different parts of USA was meant to capture the socio-economic impact of differences of various immigrants in different communities and how they adapt.

AFRICANS IN THE UNITED STATES: THEN AND NOW

The early history of African immigration in the United States is one of exploitation, resistance, and subversion (Diène 2001). From 1619 when the first Africans arrived in Virginia to 1863 when the Emancipation Proclamation ended the formal market for black slaves, slave traders removed over 450,000 people from the coastal areas of West Africa and relocated them in the swampy areas of the Middle and South Atlantic states to fuel the emerging North American agricultural industry (Carney 2001). The literature on the transatlantic trade shows the efforts made by slave owners to prevent them from

⁴ I included younger children that were present at Annual National Conventions in Washington DC and New York, and also because they obviously could speak. Some of them were born in the US and had interesting opinions about African culture and food. The remaining children were interviewed in their homes their parents present and at monthly meetings where their parents brought them (a few kicking and screaming “no pepper!”).

recreating their original communities: mothers were separated from their children and husbands from their wives, people from different regions speaking different languages were thrown together to make the construction of a common consciousness if not impossible, definitely more difficult (Endore 1991). Yet, in the slave villages on the plantations, in the homes of their masters where they worked as servants, and all along the networks of the North American colonial economy Africans found a way to recreate their sense of place and identity amidst terror, illness, starvation, and physical and sexual abuses. At times this emerging, insurgent identity was achieved by violent means (James 1963), other times by bringing animals from home/Africa with them on board of ships and rice grains hidden in their hair to be planted in the new world (Carney 2001). They invented new symbolic languages by wearing dresses and headscarves in ways that denoted their mood and consciousness (Wallace Vernon 1993). What is relevant to this discussion however, is not simply the capacity of Africans to resist the dehumanization project enacted by their English, Dutch, or French masters, their wives, and their salaried thugs, but, rather, the capacity of African ancestors in the new world to envision a common ground for the making of a new consciousness away from home. A consciousness, I suggest, that was eminently inter-tribal, multi-cultural, therefore multi-local and hybrid.

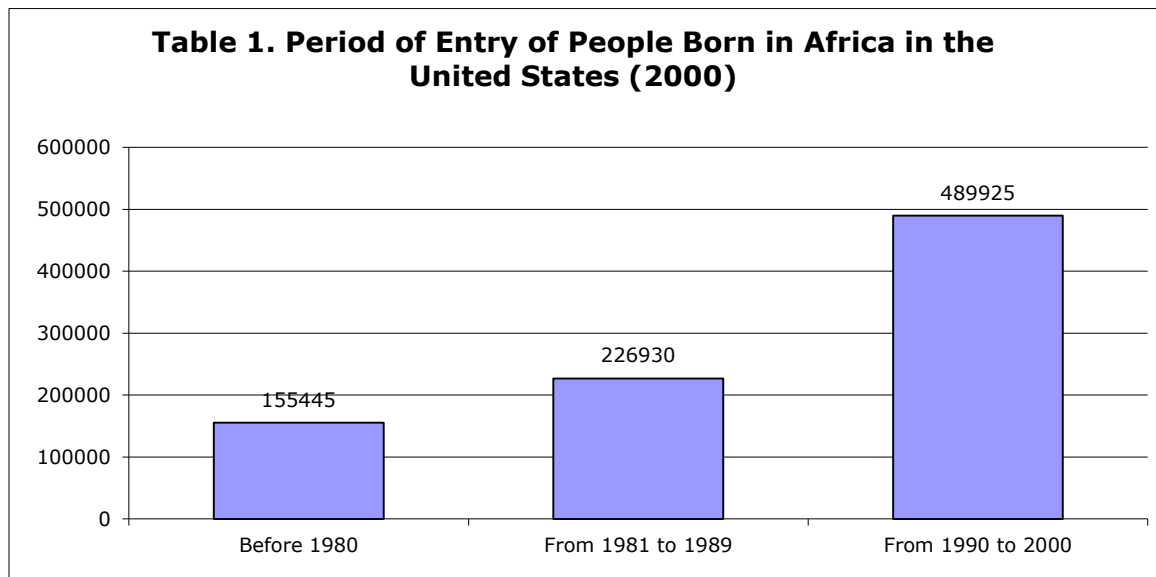
The evolution of the slave economy in the USA provides both the historical canvas from which all other social conquests black people were able to obtain in this country and the background of the contemporary African American consciousness, which, in and of itself is another, important, aspect of the African identity and its multiple location, with enormous potential for cultural diplomacy. African American identity,

although a most important crucible for the forging of a non-essentialist African identity in the 21st century, is not the immediate concern in this chapter. My focus remains on the contemporary migration of people born in Africa and living in the United States, and to this aspect, I now turn my analysis.

Apart from slaves from West Africa, Cape Verdeans form the oldest community of voluntary African immigrants to the United States. They descend from Portuguese, Spanish, and Genoese settlers as well as from other West African groups who were forcibly relocated on these islands to work the sugar cane plantations early in the 15th century. The history of dark skinned Cape Verdean Americans is particularly interesting from a consciousness and/or identity point of view because their identification as “Africans” is a fairly recent phenomenon (.). Throughout their history in fact, they did not perceive themselves as being different from the light skinned Portuguese. Yet, they were black living in a segregated America. Fearing discrimination by association, the Portuguese excluded the Cape Verdeans from Portuguese institutions in the United States, hence the perceived betrayal and the association of Cape Verdeans with Africa in the 1970s. Students spearheaded early immigration from other parts of Africa during the late 1950s. By 1991, 24,000 African students were officially studying in United States colleges. Before the 1960s, most came to the United States from English speaking countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya where they attended predominantly black colleges.

The next wave of immigrants began in earnest after the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act (Graham et al 1995). This act, spawning from the struggle of the Civil rights movements, changed dramatically the methods by which immigrants were granted

residence and work in the United States because it abolished national-origin quotas, a fact that had previously hindered migration from the developing world (Kutler and Stanley 2003; David 1985). The act also entailed a separate quota for refugees. The significance of this bill was that the post 1965 African immigrants came to the US as skilled workers and professionals attracted by the possibility of higher earnings. Table 1 shows the dynamics of African immigration in the United States in the post-1965 Immigration Act.



Source: United States Census 2000, table FBP-1. Profile of Selected Demographic and Social Characteristic. Personal Elaboration.

By 1995, an average of 40,000 (today the number is down to about 14,000) Africans came annually in the US but non-discriminatory immigration laws explain only part of the wave of African immigration on this side of the Atlantic (Hamilton 1997). Indeed a study by Economic Commission for Africa indicates that skilled African workers abandon their countries at a moment when their national economies need their services (ECA 1986). Among the factors internal to Africa cited in the study it is worth

mentioning the decline in real income when prices were constantly rising; lack of merit based promotion practices; political interference; inadequate high education facilities and opportunities; political upheavals and general instability. These factors force professionals and salaried workers to look for gainful employment in countries that pay higher salaries with a certain continuity.

Moving from factors internal to Africa to the articulation of African economies with the wider economic global system, we note the effects of Post-fordism in Europe and the subsequent tightening of immigration laws (Ratnesar 2000; Curtin 1997). If the delocalization and geographical dispersal of the European economy did not slow the *sans papiers*⁵ immigration which indeed continues unchecked as we speak, it nonetheless contributed to change the South to North axis of legal immigration, which took a decisive turn East-West toward North America and Canada.

Another external factor at work in Africa since the early 1970s that fueled migration from the continent was the mounting economic pressures including the infamous “structural adjustments” imposed on many African economies by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These “adjustments,” which theoretically were designed to realign the African economies with the so-called “developed” world, further opened the African market to deregulation and liberalization favoring the final penetration of capitalist relations into the remotest hamlet. Faced with insurmountable competition from more developed countries, African economies reacted in two ways. On the one hand, some countries tried to de-link from the capitalist economy by initiating Marxist oriented programs of rural development like Tanzania (Hyden 1980), while other

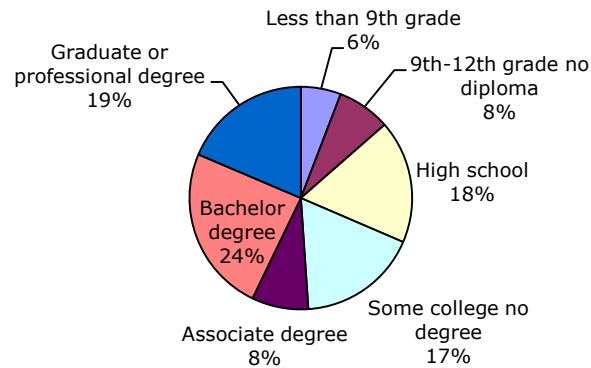
⁵ In Francophone Africa some immigrants enter France and Belgium illegally. They are commonly known as *les sans papiers* or the “undocumented.”

countries in West Africa, for example, preferred to stay linked and devaluated their *franc* in 1994 to gain at least some niches in the global market. Both strategies failed to bring the necessary readjustments, and, while unable to rearticulate the African economy, left the majority of the population with the specter of a life-long unemployment. If to such a dire economic, political, and social climate we add the civil wars that in the early 1980s and 1990s ravaged countries like Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan, Somalia and the Ivory Coast, we have a better understanding as to why Africans with the necessary means sought a better life in the United States.

A SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE DISAPORA IN THE US

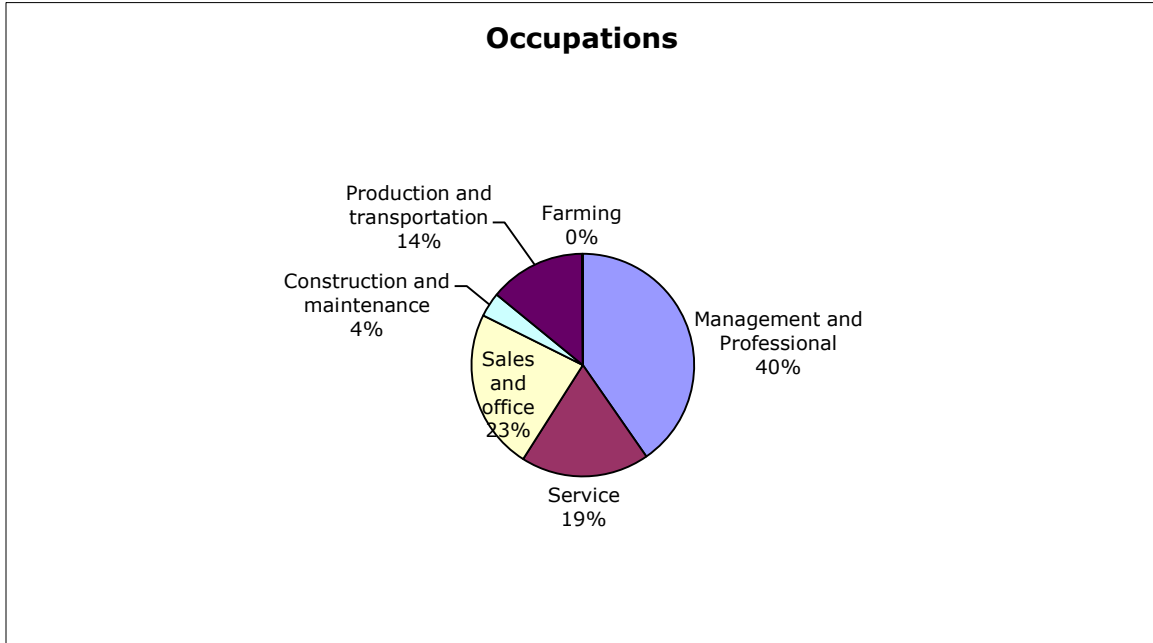
Taking for granted that the official Census underestimates the number of Africans living in the United States of America (Grieco 2004), data shows that there were about 881300 people born in Africa legally living in the United States in the year 2000. Of these, about 55% are male and 45% female. The median age is 36 years and their marital status is overwhelmingly married (57%). Families with own children less than 18 years old represent 45% of the total, while married couples with own children younger than 18 represent 45% of the total. Over 44,000 (11%) are women with own children less than 18 years old living alone. Non-family household represents 11.3 % of the total of which 90,195 (11.9%) live alone. Interestingly enough, there are about 19,585 grandparents living with their families and 5,235 of them (25%) declare that they are responsible for their grandchildren. Of the more than 685,000 people over 25 years old, 592,695 (86%) have a school diploma of which 222, 825 (43%) have a University diploma. These data make the African immigrant the most educated group coming to the United States (Fig.1).

Figure 1. School Attainment



It is important to note that if 58% of African born residents in the United States are black, over 23% declared themselves white, 4.3% Asian and 11.3% of mixed races. The end of apartheid in South Africa and Zimbabwe appears to count for the presence of white Africans while the “Asian” category underscore that recent.

Taken as a whole, the African subgroups (white, black and “Asian”) have average household incomes of about \$ 41,000, which places them well above the United States average. Notwithstanding the social mobility and their impressive levels of economic achievements, 35,000 African households out of 395,000, live under the poverty level. Of these families, over 13,000 are households headed by women with no husbands and with children between the age of five and seventeen. Therefore, the feminization of poverty, a characteristic of the American society in general is pervasive also among African immigrants, especially refugees from war-torn African nations.



What these figures tell us:

Mostly skilled educated Africans and professionals live in the suburbs, while refugees, poor and less educated live in cities, some in slums due to socio-economic differences. The above data helps show patterns of settlements and confirms my findings as people live where they can afford with no African enclaves compared to Asian and other enclaves.

AFRICAN CULTURE, IDENTITY DIPLOMACY IN THE US

To study the social production of identity and its insertion into a geographically and culturally wider world, the concept of “place-making” is useful for at least two reasons: because it captures the importance of locality to people especially in

the face of global flows, and because it imbues identity with a notion of

performance and creativity (Neill, 2004:111-156). Place-making thus involves the double action of developing a consciousness of place and a feeling of belonging (Healey 1997). Without necessarily idealizing identity but looking at it as a social process and acknowledging that individuals are inserted in extended relational webs, we can identify those practices that enable people to endow places with deep meaning. I argue that some of these practices relate to African foods, language, dress code/style, and meetings/social organizations to celebrate birth, marriage, and even death.

One of the major identifying elements of a people is thus its culture. Yet culture has always been contested. For the well-known 20th C scholars of African culture Frantz Fanon (1961/1967, 166-199) he sees culture as,

”the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence.” (1967,188).

For Bhiku Parekh culture is “a way of understanding, structuring, conducting and talking about human life and encompassing all that is necessary for this purpose.” The individual both on a conscious and sub conscious level constructs cultural images through a complex process of formulation. Central to this process is the concept of identification. At its most basic psychoanalytic usage, culture is the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person—or region or country. Yet it is more than simply an emotional tie. Culture orients the individual’s sense of belonging. According to Akum, “my identity is crucial to me as an individual”; it defines every opinion and colors every single perspective of that individual.”⁶ Wilson-Tagoe advances the discourse by stating that,

⁶ Stephen Akum , President, Moghamo Cultural Group, interview by author, Boston, MA July 08, 2006.

“The problem with the notion of culture in African literature is that it is often embedded in representational narratives of the nation and shaped by the politics of national emergence”.

In such narratives ‘culture’ becomes part of a political process of constructing the distinctive identity of a national collective through representation of its history and the creation of new knowledge of its place in the world.” (Wilson-Tagoe 2007: 225). All these different perspectives on culture and identity demonstrate that there cannot be a single narrative of culture within a national construct. We need a wider interpretive framework not only for reading contemporary texts of culture... but also for exploring productive tensions between social science discourses on culture and the performative narratives that enact contending and liberating forms of cultural identification.” It is precisely within the performative that aspects of repressed everyday culture are uncovered and in the process illuminate the terrain for negotiation of cultural identification and their implications for how African immigrants articulate and create markers and symbols—thus branding self and nation-branding. To better understand this emotional tie that helps orient the African’s sense of belonging, we must take a look at the performance of culture through African foods, monthly meetings (cultural festivals and conventions), and African language use.

Many more Africans because of the reasons discussed earlier, find themselves in the 20th and 21st century living in the United States, and far away from home. For this reason they start organizations like those back home in Africa, that not only help them to stay connected to their homeland, but also help them remember and celebrate their specific, African culture and traditional practices. These organizations foster ethnic and

national unity. For example, in New England, the Asanteman Association crowns one of several democratically elected, regional kings of the Ghanaian Asante ethnic group in North America. Among Nigerian Igbo immigrants in the United States, the Philadelphia-based Ngwa Family Association, Delaware Valley was launched in 1993 with a “cultural festival.” Igbo weddings in the Boston area often feature sacred masquerades. These events showcase the richness of African cultures, the diversity of African nations and traditions. This is cultural diplomacy in practice as well as nation branding as a concept. Culture is not homogenous or fixed (Fanon 1961/1967, 166-199).

Culture is continually transformed and contested and thus allows us to highlight changes and continuities among Africans in the Diaspora. At most of these events Africans, the celebrants and guests wear the traditional formal attire of their home countries, ethnic groups and cultures. Some scholars have cautioned that a focus on ethnicity and cultural festivals is divisive since their activities foster cultural diversity of African nations rather than the ideal pan-African or black unity (Cabral 1980, 138-154). Yet, these practices are the best ways Africans have at their disposal to remain connected to their homeland, as well as serve as cultural ambassadors. During discussions with an elderly Cameroonians, concern over cultural issues and the fear of being “lost” repeatedly came up. Worrying about the demise and disconnection of her grand children and great grand children living in the United States, Cecilia Dassi had this to say: “As mothers and women our children and society depend on us for cultural continuity. Our culture and history are both important and must be transmitted to young people, especially those so

far away. If not, they will be lost in a strange/foreign land with no identity.”⁷ More than 75% of informants confirmed that cultural unity was important for their survival in the US. They needed their community and identified with kin.

Africa is one of the continent’s hit the most by political projects such as colonialism, neo-colonialism and now globalization. Africa is also one of the richest continents on earth, yet the continent suffers from extreme poverty with 60% of the population living below the poverty level.⁸ Africans today live in very uncertain times and their livelihood is in jeopardy partly because of the triple crisis (political, economic and social crisis) that has plagued the continent since the mid 1980s. Little wonder therefore that in the last two decades more and more Africans have sought solace elsewhere or “overseas.”⁹ A growing body of work attests to this new migratory pattern by Africans.¹⁰ Many have voluntarily left the continent as self-exiles, asylum seekers, or Diversity Visa lottery winners in the hopes of making fortunes or earning enough income abroad to take care of themselves and their families at home (in Africa). As a result of such movements, Africans have to not only adapt to their new environment, but also find ways to stay and feel connected to their original home base.

In this third section, I describe in some detail some of the practices of community building and (re) creation of identity employed by African immigrants within three contested spheres: African foods, social organization (annual and monthly meetings;

⁷ Cecilia Dassi (henceforth Ma Wumunjong). Princess of Batibo, Wife, Mother, Grand Mother, Great Grand Mother. Interview by author, Batibo, North West Province, Cameroon, 08 January 1999;

Phone interviews by author, July-August 2005.

⁸ UN Report 2005

⁹ Overseas was the term popularly used by Anglophone Africans in the past to designate USA and Europe. Today overseas is another word for all places across the seas or oceans including Asia and Australia.

¹⁰ See, *African migrants in Europe*, (2005).

cultural festivals and conventions), and African language use. I thus explore the meaning and location of African culture and identity within new communities by analyzing the practices of place making of Africans in the United States. Since culture or the “body of efforts” can never be stable and fixed, then it is from the “instability of cultural signification that the national culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities—modern, colonial, postcolonial, native.”(Bhabha 1994, 152). The reason for Fanon’s caution regarding culture comes from his sense of culture’s contemporariness and its continually transforming and contested aspects (Wilson-Tagoe 2007, 223-4). In spite of their sense of culture’s fluidity and presentness, neither Fanon nor Cabral pursues the implications of cultural fluidity in relation to African foodways. It is precisely the conceptual challenge offered by the performative that problematizes Cabral’s discourse and opens avenues for rethinking culture in terms of foodways or gendered knowledge in a post colonial context. My research follows the work of critics such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie 1994 to relate transformative possibilities to the complexities, contradictions and ambiguities of women’s histories and illustrate how women may be located differently within nationalist struggles.

Food as a form of Identity and Cultural Diplomacy

This section begins with an examination of African foods, cultural continuities and discontinuities among new African immigrants in the Diaspora (by this I mean those who by choice or forces beyond their control during the last two decades--from the mid 1980s to 2008--now live outside continental Africa). It focuses especially on Africans in Los Angeles, Washington DC, Boston, Texas, and New York where most of the new immigrants live. It also brings to the forefront of our discourse the question of national

identities. How do Africans recreate home, community and identity abroad or outside Africa? What are the tools at their disposal to recreate such communities and identities in different social contexts? What challenges do they face?

In the last two decades, demand for African foods in the US has doubled following an increase not only in the numbers of adult new arrivals but also an increased awareness of African identity and culture among African immigrants. Migration and food are two areas of study which are commanding increasing interest and analysis in contemporary society. Ongoing public and academic debate about the causes and consequences of migration is matched by growing speculation into food related practices and their social, economic and cultural outcomes, complicated by globalization. Most research on food and Africa by scholars has been undertaken in the context of famine or food (in)security in Africa. (Downs, et al.1991; Watson and Caldwell 2005; Hess. 2007). A few exceptions (Timberlake 1986: 42; James C. McCann. 2009) point to the complex and intimate relationship that Africans have with food. Yet the intimate, and multidimensional, relationship between Africans in the Diaspora and food remains not only under researched but under theorized as well.

Cultural continuity is expressed through traditional outlets and practices among Africans such as food, traditional dances, *njanggis*, traditional/African dresses, annual conventions,¹¹ African language use, African churches, etc, and are thus replicated wherever Africans find themselves in the US and elsewhere. A quick examination of

¹¹ Among Cameroonians, ethnic groups schedule annual conventions every summer such as, the Moghamo Convention, Bali Convention, Mankon Convention, Manyu Convention, Meta Cultural Association, Nso Annual Convention, Bakweri Cultural Association, the Bamilike Cultural Association, to name just these few. These annual meetings are meant to bring sons and daughters of the soil together, and showcase their cultural heritage as well as raise funds for development projects in Cameroon and Africa.

some of these practices and activities will shed light on African communities in the Diaspora and will add to the ever expanding body of work on the subject. In the process, we catch glimpses of some of the discontinuities that have become apparent, as a result of the struggle to forge a new life away from home. Of interest here is the realization by many that life could have served the African continent better if skilled and educated Africans did not have to leave.¹² Let us turn now to three concrete examples that have taken on a broader cultural meaning for Cameroonians and other Africans in the Diaspora.

Food in Africa is life. In the Grassfields of Cameroon among the Moghamo for example food, is synonymous with life and the lack of food signifies death.¹³ Food is an integral part of all family celebrations and is thus used to create family bonds between parents and their children. That bond is still strong among Cameroonians and other Africans as my interviews with various groups of Africans revealed. In the Diaspora African food is used to create that connection and to identify with ethnic groups and nationalities. In Los Angeles, California, I asked informants how often they cooked or ate African food. Overwhelmingly 90% said they cooked or ate African food at least thrice a week. They all said it was more expensive than American food, but they still spent the money on African food. To quote Mami Cathy, “Part of the reason for the high cost of food is that everything is imported from Africa--spices, dried vegetables, stockfish, egusi, etc. all have to be shipped here. What can we do? We

¹² Ali Mazrui has argued in favor of “brain gain” since most African immigrants who enter the United States of America have skills and contribute to the development of this host country. Therefore the USA is gaining skills and knowledge and he sees no reason for the persistent talk about brain drain.

¹³ Ma Wumunjong, phone interview by author, August 10, 2005, Batibo, Northwest Province, Cameroon.

love our food and must eat it always. That is who we are.”¹⁴ As for George Usongo, he lamented the fact that younger African children love fast food/McDonalds. But added,

“It is remarkable to see new arrivals get excited about the burger or big mac for a few weeks. Then when they’ve eaten it to their heart’s content, they go back to *foofoo* and/or *achu*. As a tool of community creation, our food becomes important. It takes on new meaning as it defines us.”¹⁵

Culture therefore expresses itself through food. Another respondent, a more recent arrival (she came to the USA in 2005) emphasized the need to continue to feed her children with African food to keep them grounded in their culture. To quote Anna Njei:

“I buy palm oil and crayfish from Madam Obichie every time...I make sure my children continue to eat Cameroonian food before they get lost in the American fast food system.. I do this every time so that we do not forget these rituals and traditions.”¹⁶

Since the 1990s in major cities in the United States of America, there has been an increase in the number of African markets, African food stores¹⁷ and African restaurants.¹⁸ According to the *Star Telegram*, Arlington’s Saturday paper, there are approximately 25 African restaurants in the Dallas-Fort Worth area of Texas

Food is thus not just lunch or dinner; it is a conduit for cultural expression, history, and nationalism in the Diaspora among African immigrants. In every African country there are special dishes that have become the symbol of the nation. They feature on the menu of all national celebrations and festivals, and for non-Africans these foods

¹⁴ Mami Cathy, mother of three, interview by author, July 10, 2007, Los Angeles, California.

¹⁵ George Usongo, former civil servant, father of five, Interview by author, July 10, 2007, Los Angeles, California.

¹⁶ Anna Njei, mother of three, Interview by author, July 12, 2007, Los Angeles, California.

¹⁷ See for example, Asafo Market, Africana, Safari African Markets (Arlington, Texas); Madam Obichie (Los Angeles).

¹⁸ See for instance, Lagos Cafe (Los Angeles), African Kitchen, African Village restaurant, Wazobia restaurant, (Arlington, Texas). For fabric stores and African wear, see, Angelyes International (Arlington, Texas).

represent the nations and therefore transcend ethnic differences as they are eaten by all citizens of the said nations in the Diaspora. For Cameroon, *Achu*, *ndole*, *eru*, roasted fish and *miyondo or dodo* have attained that status.¹⁹ Through food, changes and continuities can be depicted. According to Edith Takere, parents have a great task because:

“they have the burden of finding the balance and helping their children maintain their culture and identity out here, while making sure they adapt properly to their new environment—new schools, new food, new accent.”²⁰

Hence, at national and provincial level (or ethnic group level), food, *njanggis*, traditional dances, African dresses, annual conventions, monthly meetings, travel back and forth between “overseas, African churches, etc. are all part of that umbilical cord that connects Africans in the Diaspora to continental Africa. They perform those activities diligently and make sure that at each event, meeting or gathering, they have traditional dishes or African food, which women usually are experts at preparing. They also dress African for most events. At annual conventions and meetings African food and African wear are mandatory for all even children. We thus see culture albeit in a modified form—modified by the context, by conditions impacted by living elsewhere other than Africa. As time goes by, the art of cooking and eating within African immigrant groups sometimes become altered through contact with other groups, as well as in the context of the availability of different foodstuffs. As these processes play themselves out, they create through foodways the potential for deliberate statements, of continuity or change. For example a popular, time consuming Cameroonian (Bamenda) dish, *Achu*, which

¹⁹ *Achu* is made of taro tuber, *ndole* is a bitter vegetable (bitterleaf) cooked with fresh peanuts, *miyondo* is fermented cassava (yuca), and *dodo* is common name for fried ripe plantains (Americans call them bananas).

²⁰ Edith Takere, single mother of two, Interview by author, July 14, 2007, Los Angeles, California.

cocoyams are first boiled, peeled, and then pounded into a smooth, seedless dough in Cameroon, is now a “flour” blended in the USA, and thus takes less time to prepare.²¹ For African migrants, food therefore has a major role in maintaining kin, social and cultural linkages brought from other villages and cities in Africa. It has a role in building new communities/groups conceived of as based on cultural or social identity brought from Africa/Cameroon or based on new ties forged in one’s new home. Food also can create divisions, both among immigrants themselves and between migrants and ‘host’ groups. The diverse tastes of African cuisine in the US comprise a body of historically gendered knowledge practiced and perfected in households across the continent/Africa. Apparently, immigrants are not alone in this matter. Talking about Columbus’s 16th century journey eastwards in search of spices and gold, the cultural revolutions that ensued and their far-reaching effects worldwide, Schwartz had this to say: “The changes in the global menu don’t simply mean better eating—the new foods altered the fates of nations and strengthened a growing sense of national identity”. Schwartz 1991: 59. My research reveals that culinary practices are integral to the understanding of history and more generally to the new literature on food as social history, not as fixed ahistorical documents, but as lively and living records of historical change in women's knowledge and farmers’ experiments. Cameroon women practice culinary diplomacy. Sharing these foods with others is ‘branding’ and cultural diplomacy. As the saying goes, “a hungry man is an angry man.” Women try to keep the peace through food.

African Social Organization in the Diaspora

²¹ Grace Ndam, single mother of one, Restaurant Owner/Manager, Interview by author, January 08, 2007.

Social organization in the Diaspora is dependent on ‘familiar’ practices from the homeland-Africa as discussed above. These practices include but are not limited to monthly and annual meetings/festivals. I focus here on *njanggis*.²² In Africa, the *njanggi* popularly known as money-go-rounds because of their unique rotating feature is a widespread self-help social and economic group that often meets once a month. They are called by different names in different places, but they all have to same simple self help and rotating feature. They are *tontines* in Francophone West Africa, and *Osusu* in Ghana and Sierra Leone.²³ Emerging literature on *njanggis* now distinguish between the rotating clubs –ROSCAS and the non rotating clubs-ASCRA. Ardener in her pioneer work on ROSCAs in Africa defines them as follows (Ardener 1964):

“ROSCAs are associations in which members regularly contribute to a fund that is given in whole or in part to each contributor in turn.”

When compared to ROSCAs, ASCRAs are microcredit clubs which do not rotate. Sometimes known as Accumulating Savings and Credit Associations, these tend to be more businesslike. The majority get their startup funds and help from NGOs which

²² These are indigenous rotating savings and credit clubs or associations found all over Africa. For a discussion of *njanggis* see, Bridget Teboh, 2007, “*Money-Go-Rounds: Navigating a Hostile Gendered Economic Environment in the Grassfields [Cameroon]*.” “Gendering African History: In Honor of E.A. Alpers and Christopher Ehret” paper presented at African Studies Association (ASA)’s 50th Annual Meeting, on *21st Century Africa: Evolving Conceptions of Human Rights* at The Sheraton Hotel and Towers, New York, NY, October 18-21, 2007.

²³ Bridget Teboh, 1995, “Women and the *Njanggi* Phenomenon in Cameroon.” Paper presented at the (AAA), African Activist Association, 3rd Annual Young Scholars Conference at UCLA, April 7-8, 1995.

expect loans to be made and repaid. They are often too involved with banks and these NGOs and thus end up distancing themselves from their members.²⁴

The above definition of ROSCAs captures the essence of *njanggis* or money-go-round. The premise is simple – and in particular its rotating feature – has made it an incredibly resilient and flexible tool of empowerment for people across all classes and genders. Several hundreds of thousands of African immigrants have benefitted from *njanggis*. They really are life-savers for most people. To quote Epo,

“More than ever, today I depend on my *njanggi* groups for support and networking. When I first arrived from Germany to New York I knew few people. The group members became close friends. The money from the three *njanggis* is the main source of funding for my LVN training.”²⁵

Just how do *njanggis* function? How important are they for African immigrants? Why are they so popular? Findings from my research reveal that 95% of all adults that I interviewed in the US belonged to one or more *njanggis*. Picks rotate among members in turn. It sounds simple. First, the members (say 10 in all) form a group and elect officials. Then, they choose an amount of the monthly dues-say \$10, and select numbers which determine the order of their pick. Each month for ten months, these 10 people meet and contribute \$10 each. The total of \$100 is given to the first person and later to each in turn every month. Members feel a sense of belonging with the community or group. They eat, work and play together. The larger group of Cameroonian friends form an important social network for them, and really are their “social capital”.

²⁴ Shirley Ardener and Sandra Burman, eds. 1995. *Money-Go-Rounds: The Importance of ROSCAs for Women*. Berg: Oxford/Washington, DC.

²⁵ Epo K. student and husband, interview by author, August 10, 2007, New York

They provide money to its members for all kinds of necessities: medical bills, start-up funds for small income-generating projects, school fees, books, construction of homes and purchase of building materials, etc. Today, *njanggis* are very important in the context of immigration as they constitute local forms of self-help and credit which have been transported to the Diaspora by immigrants.²⁶ Africans living in the USA and Europe reproduce these forms of self-help cooperatives. Most newcomers face challenges and have to struggle before settling in their new environment. *Njanggis* are the first places that new African immigrants go to for help in a new places. An asylum seeker, recounted how he came to New York in winter and was rescued by the *njanggi* group:

I left Bafut in the Northwest Province of Cameroon in November 2001. It was my first time to venture out of the country. I had no idea that it was winter in New York. When the plane finally landed after what seems to be an endless flight, I was confronted by harsh reality. There I was, waiting for my cousin's husband to pick me up, in the snow, without a winter coat! I had on my nice suit, but it was nothing compared to the biting cold outside. He arrived, took me home and the next day, we went to the Mankon monthly meeting where I was introduced to everyone. I got help and advice from members. I felt at home. I joined the group and later took money from the *njanggi* to buy a winter coat.²⁷

On arrival, the first thing immigrants do is to seek and join existing national or ethnic social groups and *njanggi* groups in their city, or create one with other Africans. These groups are important loan providers for such necessary things as winter jacket and boots purchase, car purchase, rental deposit, and education fees. Group members also help by explaining cultural differences and proper behavior. Additionally, *njanggis* provide a space for members to network, eat African/Cameroonian food and assert themselves and their identity. They are the mainstay of Africans' social organization in the United States and the Diaspora.

²⁶ Bridget Teboh, "Women and the *Njanggi* Phenomenon in Cameroon," Unpublished Paper.

²⁷ Che Benedict, Retired teacher, interview by author, July 19, 2007, New York, NY.

The preferred languages used in such village and ethnic groups are African languages, to maintain unity, a sense of belonging and foster identity.

African Languages in the Diaspora: An Expression of Identity

Africa is host to 2000 of the 6000 world languages. Lupke notes (Lupke 2008) that in this context “it seems paradoxical that African linguistics has not assumed a leading role in establishing the research agenda for documentation of endangered languages... and that there is almost no activism in favor of their maintenance by speakers.”

During the colonial era in Africa, European languages were imposed on Africans. As a result Africans now have to juggle constantly between their indigenous languages and western languages.²⁸ This situation left indigenous languages at a disadvantage since they were not used in public schools and colleges or in the workplace. Gudun, et al. argues that “the contrast between language and social institutions is most obvious in colonial and post colonial world of Africa, characterized as it was by the import of European institutions which were of qualitatively new nature and which led to the establishment of a hierarchy of African languages in Africa.”²⁹ This study focuses on the effects of globalization processes on the vitality of languages in two West African cities-Maiduguri in Nigeria and Banfora in Burkina Faso.

In Cameroon for instance, a country that was colonized by the Germans, the British and the French at one time, English and French became the official languages at independence in 1960. Cameroonian languages were relegated to individual homes and ethnic groups. The 21st

²⁸ English, French, German, Portuguese, were imposed during colonization and at independence the new nation-states decided to keep these languages as medium of instruction in schools as well as the workplace.

²⁹ Gudun, et al (Eds.) 2007 *Language in African Urban Contexts: A Contribution to the Study of Indirect Globalization*. 2007. Germany: Lit Verlag.

century Cameroon saw an upsurge in globalization³⁰ “the process of closer interaction of human activities across a range of spheres, including the economic, social, political and cultural, experienced along three dimensions: spatial, temporal and cognitive.”³¹ Integral to this process is the movement of Cameroonians and other Africans out of Africa and into a new social context, overseas. With that movement across the oceans came a re-engagement with issues of African consciousness and a war against cultural imperialism³² waged at various levels, in different immigrant communities.

African languages reflect the diversity that is an integral part of Africa and its people. While most scholars and researchers have recently engaged in African languages discourse their voices are varied. Some see African languages as endangered languages due to the impact of European languages on Africa (Webb and Kembo-Sure 2000; Lupke 2008); others have looked at the syntax and grammar as a way to incorporate these languages in the mainstream European mode of use (Heine and Nurse 2002, Konig 2008). Many others have taken up the challenge of introducing African languages and linguistics covering typology, structure and sociolinguistics to a non-African audience, (Nurse and Philippsen 2006). (Makoni 2003) examines the range of similarity and difference between Black speech communities in Africa and the Diaspora and the impact of imperialism and enslavement on language. Others embrace the main discourses in the field of African languages and linguistics and argue for the absolute necessity of developing African languages as a condition of socio-economic development (Chia 2006;

³⁰ Globalization is probably best defined in terms of easy access to movement of trade items and people between nations and world regions.

³¹ Lee, K. “Globalization and Health Policy: A Review of the Literature and Proposed Research Agenda,” in *Health Development in the New Global Economy*. PAHO: Washington (2000).

³² See, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, 1986 (Heinemann); Ngugi, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993); Edward Said (1985).

Djite 2008). However, few have taken on the transnational uses of African languages and their impact on Africans in the Diaspora. (Vigouroux and Mufwere, 2008) discuss the effects of globalization on languages in Africa. In contrast to previous studies, these authors examine whether or not globalization is affecting African languages in the same ways and at the same rate in different countries. The marginality of African languages has received very little attention to date despite the fact that many of them are spoken by millions as a first or second language. Exceptions include Swahili, Hausa, and a handful of other *linguae francae*.

My research affirms the findings of these scholars who are concerned about language marginalization and the nature of this inquiry (Chia 2006; Vigoureux and Mufwere 2008). Of importance for me in this section therefore is how globalization is affecting African languages in the Diaspora, and how Africans use African languages to strengthen national identity in new settlements.

In Cameroon as in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, there has been an upsurge of efforts to preserve their cultural heritage and to cater to the growing tourist industry as a means to solving the poverty crisis.³³ Among Cameroonians in the Diaspora efforts by many ethnic groups are being made to preserve their cultural legacy through an emphasis on Cameroonian local languages. Case in point, Moghamo, Mungaka, Nso, Bayangi, Bawkeri, Douala, Ewondo, Bassa, etc. are actively used at home, at monthly meetings and during annual conventions. Parents are encouraged to teach these languages to their children, as there is evidence that most children could not speak the Cameroonian languages. This is becoming a major concern among

³³ Countries in Eastern Africa such as Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, and Western Africa such as Ghana, Senegal, Benin, Nigeria have all seen an upsurge in their tourism activities.

Africans living outside Africa.³⁴ How should African cultural heritage be preserved? Batibo 2005 has examined the nature and extent of the problem of languages decline in Africa.³⁵ In his work he traces the aims, causes and circumstances of language endangerment, the processes and extent of language shift and extinction, and consequences of language loss to the continents rich linguistic and cultural heritage. Representing African heritage therefore among Africans is an innovative approach to the study of immigration from Africa and other developing regions to the United States and Europe, and this deserves the attention of further research, because the implications for cultural diplomacy as a linchpin for public diplomacy is enormous.

Conclusion

“The fact that we now live outside Africa does not stop us from maintaining our culture, speaking our African languages, and holding fast onto our identity. We dance and sing and dress up. Who are we without our culture?”³⁶ Usongo, 2005.

My research makes clear the relationship between food and the culture, history, and national identity of Africans at home and in the Diaspora and soft power. Place making and cultural (re)creation and performance are crucial to African immigrants’ sense of belonging and identity, and is integral part of the practice of cultural diplomacy. Immigrants go where they have friends and relatives. Later they find jobs. The concept of identification is central to this process. Thus, from a seemingly fractured and multiple identities in multiple places (due to the different countries and ethnic groups in Africa), and from globalization of African culture, an identity emerges and its diversity and transformation persists. Ultimately we get glimpses of

³⁴ For more information see, Kenji Yoshida and John Mack, *Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Africa: Crisis or Renaissance?* (James Currey Publishers: March 2007).

³⁵ Batibo, H.M. *Languages Decline and Death in Africa: Causes, Consequences and Challenges*. 2005. UK. MultilingualMatters.

³⁶ George Usongo. President, Ngje Cultural and Development Association, Southern California, Los Angeles, Interview by author, Los Angeles, California, 15 January 2005.

cultural creation and survival strategies in African communities in the Diaspora. African immigrants settled in diverse locales across the United States, and employed in various fields, still hold fast onto their cultural heritage. Although highly urban as a whole, African immigrants have not clustered only in select metropolises. The community has its highest representations in Washington, D.C. and New York, there are a far more geographically dispersed community than, for example, their West Indian counterparts who really have enclaves. Between 1990 and 2000, the largest influx of African immigrants was reported in Minneapolis/St. Paul, where the population increased 629 percent. Overall, migration from Africa increased 170 percent during that period, with Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Ghana, in that order, having the largest communities in the United States. With such high numbers of Africans removed from “home”, the need for cultural connectivity is more urgent, and is closely linked to identity formation. They all are unofficial representatives of their countries, and unofficial ambassadors.

In this article, I have explored the meaning and location of African culture and identity within new communities by analyzing the practices of place- making of Africans in the United States. I highlighted how certain foods and practices constitute ‘identity markers’ taking on a symbolic roles. I described the *njanggis* in some detail and some of the practices of community building and (re) creation of identity employed by African immigrants. African foods, annual and monthly meetings , cultural festivals, music and conventions and African language use make up those identity markers.

Using Neill’s (2004) concept of “place-making” to examine the social production of identity and its insertion into a geographically and culturally wider world to show it captures the importance of locality to people especially in the Diaspora, and because it

imbues identity with a notion of performance and creativity. I also demonstrated that place-making involves the double action of developing a consciousness of place and a feeling of belonging.

As I conclude a few recurring concerns put forth by different informants come to mind. For example, is it true that African culture in the Diaspora is dwindling? What factors can lead to such “dwindling”? Given the urgency and importance of mass migration from Africa these questions merit future research. If Cameroonians like other Africans in the Diaspora (America, Europe and recently Asia) must survive away from “home,” how do they deal with loneliness or handle being on the fringe of two cultures? What do they eat to comfort and heal their soul? Firstly, they must adapt to their new environment (learn new ways of doing things, new styles of living, sometimes learn a new language-English). My research findings also demonstrate that a corollary of this process for most people has been to recreate in such new social contexts practices (cultural and traditional) that are deemed indigenous to Africa, while a few people have abandoned all African ways in their attempt to fully Americanize or master the new environment and to be accepted. Secondly, the majority of people replicate such cultural and traditional practices and processes regularly as a survival strategy, as well as an attempt at maintaining a national identity once that initial settlement phase is over.

I affirm the findings of other scholars who have argued that African immigrants do not have enclaves *per se*. Inevitably in the US Africans must first move to places where they have connections, friends and relatives. They settle where jobs are in these places also due to the socio-economic impact. Those who have made it buy homes in the suburbs, and still attend meetings. African immigrants have found ways to cope in their

new communities. By using performative strategies they recreate home in the Diaspora through foodways, social organizations and language. In major cities in the USA and Europe, Africans from almost all countries and ethnic groups use the similar coping mechanisms: annual conventions, African languages, monthly get-togethers/meetings, and African food and music. In doing so, they participate in the maintenance and the construction of cultural identity. African culture is important in the Diaspora. What is challenging is how to keep it alive in a foreign land or in a new community, transform it into soft power or smart power, while adapting to the host nation or new environment.

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