

# THE AFRICAN-BORN & THE CHURCH FAMILY IN THE UNITED STATES

Aniedi Okure, OP  
Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies  
The Catholic University of America  
*March 26, 2011*

## **Abstract**

Data gathered from the U.S. Census, the American Community Survey, and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) indicate that about two million African-born people live in the United States; of which number, 53 percent are 44 years and under. They are highly educated, very religiously attuned and have strong family orientation. Increasingly, they are making the transition from legal permanent residents and acquiring status as American citizens. Yet this status does not readily translate into a sense of belonging, due to constraints that are both external and internal to the African community. Many live in the space between: shuttling between two continents and remaining sojourners in American society and the Church, while their American-born or American-raised children struggle to find a niche. They form many national and numerous ethnic-based associations in an effort to maintain an identity within their new environment and as a forum for addressing issues that confront them. Although these organizations provide members a sense of continuity and belonging within their narrow context, they are also a source of dissipation of resources, both human and financial, constituting a hindrance to the African-born quest for visibility within the larger context. The situation calls for a paradigm shift within the African community; for a different pastoral approach to the presence of the African-born and the gifts they bring to the Church. More specifically, it challenges African-born Catholics to see beyond their narrowly-defined context of identity, to pull their resources together, and to identify with and engage the broader society so they can better address issues that affect them, including transmitting their values to their children and provide a forum to inculcate in them a genuine sense of belonging to the Church family in the United States.

## **Introduction**

When I was asked to participate as a speaker at the colloquium, I was hesitant not because I felt I had nothing to contribute, but because I thought I might sound like a broken

record.<sup>1</sup> I suggested it would be better to hear other voices, but the organizers prevailed and here I am. If you find the presentation focusing narrowly on the African-born community with little attention to external social and cultural factors that impinge on the African-born community and individuals, I done so intentionally as an attempt to respond to the specific goals of the colloquium, whose immediate goal is to energize and mobilize the African- and Caribbean-born, challenge them to be more active and visible members of the Church. Also, I believe in the adage that while you cannot control people's perception and reaction to you, it is within your power to control how you respond to their perception of you.

### **Church as Family**

The theme *One with the Family* is appropriate for this gathering. The family is the fundamental unit of belonging, a place which every member calls home, a place where one would normally expect unconditional acceptance and a sense of security. The family is the fundamental unit of identity. Within the family, members stand together shoulder to shoulder, the uniqueness of individuals acknowledged and respected; each is expected to assume responsibilities appropriate to his or her place in the family, both as older members and as newer members.

An important aspect of the family is its role in the socialization of its members. Older members assimilate new members into the family so that they can assume responsibility and carry on the family name and tradition within the larger context of society. The socialization process is crucial for the continuance of the family. It is an important undertaking and requires

---

<sup>1</sup> I have addressed this topic more extensively in another forum. For details see Hoge and Okure (2008) *African and Caribbean Catholics in the United States*, A Study Conducted for the Office for the Pastoral Care of Migrants Refugees and Travelers (PCMRT) Washington, Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church.

patience, dedication, commitment of time, and investment of resources—all in the trust that it will pay off in the long run. We continue living on through the next generation, the generation we leave behind.

Another aspect of the family is that it is place we learn the basic process of relationship. We learn that for the family to function properly, we must understand the principle of give and take. Older members of the family adjust to accommodate the arrival of new members. An important lesson new members learn quickly is that the world does not revolve around them. The family of God is the greatest family any man or woman can ever have.

### **Church as Family of God**

When African Bishops gathered for the 1994 Synod of Bishops, they adopted the theme: *Church as God's Family*<sup>2</sup>. For the Bishops, this was the most appropriate guiding principle for evangelization. Just as it is the fundamental unit of society, the Christian family is the primordial unit of the church—or as the Second Vatican Council puts it, the family is the domestic church.<sup>3</sup> The Bishops noted that the image of the Church as family calls attention to the rich concept of solidarity and complementarity. It emphasizes warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue, trust, and a helping hand when needed.

The bishops pointed out that *building up the Church as Family* avoids all ethnocentrism and excessive particularism. Seeing the Church as a Family tries instead to encourage reconciliation and true communion between different ethnic groups. It favors solidarity and the sharing of personnel and resources among the particular churches, without undue ethnic

---

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II (1995) *Ecclesia in Africa* Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, issue in Yaoundé, Cameroon on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of September, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> *Ecclesia in Africa* #80.

considerations.<sup>4</sup> The Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* points out that "the Church is a sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all mankind."<sup>5</sup>

### **African-Born in the United States**

Permit me to describe who we are talking about. Most of what is said in this section will not be news to you. However, it is important to take a moment and look at the characteristics of the African-born in the United States.

Data gathered from the U.S. Census, the American Community Survey, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), and African community leaders indicate that about two million African-born live in the United States, of which 53 percent are 44 years and under. More than half reside in seven states: New York, California, Texas, Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. Compared to other immigrants, the African-born are recent arrivals. About 75% arrived beginning in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Between 2000 and 2007, 570,661 African-born gained Legal Permanent Resident status (LPR). In 2007 alone, 94,711 obtained Legal Permanent Residence. Within the same period, 34,640 were admitted on F-1 (student) and J-1 (professional) Visas.<sup>7</sup>

The discrepancies in figures between the Census Bureau and other sources are largely due to who gets counted for what purpose. The first is that many African-born, especially those whose immigration status has expired, do not get counted. The second is that the Census Bureau's use of the term "African-Born" means just that, namely those who were born in Africa and are now legally living in the United States or are naturalized U.S. citizens. However, many

---

<sup>4</sup> Ecclesia in Africa #63.

<sup>5</sup> Lumen Gentium #1.

<sup>6</sup> For details see <http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=719#16>.

<sup>7</sup> Extracted from US Census Bureau, American Community Survey and Migration Policy Institute (MPI). See: Aaron Terrazas, Migration Policy Institute; <http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=719> accessed March 22, 2011. Most of the data presented here come from the 2007 figures.

African-born would generally include their American-born children as part of the package. In other words, while an African-born couple with four children might think they are six people in this categorization, the Census Bureau counts only two.

The African-born are spread out in major metro areas: DC, New York, Atlanta, Houston, Los Angeles, and Boston. Upon arrival, they live primarily in inner cities. When they enter the labor market and feel somewhat secure with an improved economic status, they move into the suburbs. Being widely dispersed into the suburbs has consequences for the African-born community. They are less likely to live in segregated areas so there are no large clusters of African-born communities, a factor contributing to the invisibility of the African-born in the United States.

Census data indicate that African-born in the United States are well educated. Some 48.9% hold a college diploma, while approximately 20% have graduate degrees<sup>8</sup> and 26% indicate they have “less than college diploma” (associate degree, registered nurses, etc.). Regarding their language ability, only 7.6% of African born in the 2010 census indicated they were not fluent in English. I am citing these statistics to make an important point, namely, that African-born Catholics have some common denominators that should serve a base for working together and building a strong community. First, they share the status of being foreign-born. Second, they have a common language – English and/or French. (Even most French speaking Africans also speak English.) The third and most important is that they have a common faith—

---

<sup>8</sup> The high rate of college graduates and graduate school attendees is not indicative of the literacy rate of Africans in Africa. Rather, it is a factor of selective migration. Many African-born in the United States came to study, mostly for graduate school, and stayed on. Other college-educated Africans migrated to the United States because of the inability of the structures in their home country to absorb them or to accommodate their specialization.

Catholicism—and, with the exception of the Ge'ez (Ethiopia & Eritrea), and Coptic (Egypt), they share a common rite—the Latin Rite.

### **Living in Two Homes**

Like other foreign-born groups, the African-born try to keep home traditions alive in many ways, including through food, which is used to maintain social relations. Many Africans come to the United States with the hope of returning within a few years to their home country. However, for most, the “few years” turn into 15, 20, or 30 years and counting. In the meantime, they are invested in the United States in the form of American-born children, homes, and cars they have purchased and are financing, as well as social networks, citizenship, and a job. They have also invested into the US economy for many years by way of taxes and social security contributions. By virtue of their long absences from their home country, they have less social capital in their country of birth and more social capital in the United States. Yet most have not taken the necessary steps to anchor themselves within American society and take advantage of their social location. Rather, they see themselves as “immigrants,” despite their citizenship status and contributions to the American society. This “immigrant” mentality contributes to an acceptance of their position on the fringes of the society and is carried over into their participation in the Church.

As indicated earlier, there are elements within society, culture, and the Church that contribute to this feeling. These elements are beyond the control of the African-born. However, I am interested in things that are internal to the African-born community, things that lie within the control of the African-born and, consequently, things that they can change.

## **African-Born Priests and Religious**

Presently, there are about 900 priests and 1000 African sisters in the United States. They, too, are recent arrivals. A majority arrived since 1990 and the number is growing. They are engaged in diverse ministries such as chaplaincies, parish ministry, and education. About 5% serve African-born Catholic communities. Most serve the U.S.-born Catholic communities in parishes, hospital chaplaincies, prison ministries, and military chaplaincies. They are a vibrant part of the Church in the U.S., even in the rural Midwest. A growing number of African-born are in ordination classes, including those joining U.S. based religious communities such as the Josephites. African-born sisters are engaged mainly in primary and secondary education, health care ministry, and social work. They labor for the vulnerable members of the society and are an integral part of the Church family in the United States.

### **Issues that Confront the African-Born**

**Identity:** Recent census data indicates that among the nation's 40 million blacks, more than 8 percent (3.4 million) are foreign-born, almost evenly split between Africa and the Caribbean. The way African-born and indeed all immigrants define their identities affects how they interact with the larger society and with the Church. Prior to arrival in the United States, the African was identified by nationality and ethnicity. Upon arrival in the United States, they are categorized within the American race/color-based mix (Black/African American). They cease to be Nigerian, Tanzanian, Kenyan, Cameroonian, Ethiopian, Congolese, Eritrean, Ghanaian, etc. They ceased to be classified based on native language and ethnicity. Feeling somewhat

threatened by this new and broad identity category (black/African American)<sup>9</sup>—a category that effectively renders their treasured identity reference null and void—, many African-born resort to emphasizing even more their narrower ethnic identity and seek recognition within this comfort zone. This can be counterproductive, especially if such a narrowly circumscribed identity reference generates too many in-group sympathies. These can hamper integration into the broader society and serve to propagate in-group and out-group stereotypes.<sup>10</sup> Social identity theory maintains that strong in-group sympathies can give rise to out-group antipathies, which in turn can fuel intolerance and conflict.<sup>11</sup> While intolerance on the part of a minority group is generally symbolic, the adverse effects on the in-group can be far-reaching.

Regardless of whether or not the African-born choose to identify within the broader category of **black**, they are nonetheless identified as such by the American public and the salience of stereotypes associated with blacks continue to impinge on their lives.<sup>12</sup> Like other

---

<sup>9</sup> For many Africans, **Black** as an identity category is radical shift from their preferred identity. Black does not include their national, cultural, or ethnic identity. For most Africans, **African American** is generally understood as applicable to persons of African descent who were born in the United States. The classification of the African-born in the United States as Black/African American often raise confusion regarding North Africans and white South Africans who naturalize as United States citizens? The African-born is conscious of the nuance in this categorization. This is also the case with Caribbean-born of African descent. For details, see Hoge and Okure (2008), *African and Caribbean Catholics in the United States*, pages 20 & 21. The issue of identity as a form of resistance is a much discussed topic in the social sciences. See for example Monica McDermott (2003), "Black Like Who?: African and Haitian Immigrants and Urban American Concept of Race," a paper presented at the American Sociological Association, Atlanta, GA, August 16, 2003; Accessed online at [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/1/0/6/6/2/p106627\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/0/6/6/2/p106627_index.html) April 5, 2011. Also see: Flore Zephir (2001), *Trends in Ethnic Identification Among Second Generation Haitian Immigrants in New York City*, Bergen & Garvey; Mia Tuan, Jiannbin Lee Shiao (2011), *Choosing Ethnicity, Negotiating Race: Korean Adoptees in America*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>10</sup> See Susan Fiske (2011) *Envy UP, Scorn Down: How Status Divides us*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>11</sup> The 1994 lesson from the Tutsis and the Hutus in Rwanda highlights this problem on a larger scale. However, Gibson study of ethnic Groups in South Africa seem to suggest that this is not necessary the case. See: James L. Gibson (2006) Do Strong Group Identities Fuel Intolerance? Evidence from South African Case; *Political Psychology* Vol. 27 No 5; 665-705.

<sup>12</sup> The issue of identity is often misunderstood by those outside the "black" community and even by those within the "black" community. Negative media images of Africa on the one hand and hip-hop culture and the negative



blacks, African-born people are challenged on a daily basis to find ways to address and negotiate society's assumptions about them.

### **Belonging to American Society**

The Africa-born population struggles to belong, and even naturalized citizens have constant reminders: (a) they cannot be president, although this is applicable to all foreign-born (b) their accents distinguish them from the crowd, (c) they are constantly asked the questions: "Where are you from?", "How long will you be here?", and "When are you going back?". These elements continue to place them outside the inner circle of society. While these questions are normally asked of the foreign-born, the foreign-born of African descent seem to bear the brunt of this distinction. He or she is asked more frequently than the other foreign-born living in the United States.<sup>13</sup> The dynamics described in the context of the general society also apply to the African-born within the church community. They participate in liturgical celebrations and feel the oneness of being Catholic. Yet, in regard to other activities, there are "reminders" that reinforce their "outsider" status, making them feel like guests.<sup>14</sup>

### **Response by the African-Born**

---

depiction of images of African America youth, especially the depiction of young women by rap music video generate mutual caution in regard to "belonging" within the community. See Fiske, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> This statement is grounded in many years of observing the interaction (at seminars, conferences, and informal meetings) between American-born and foreign-born. On numerous occasions, when foreign-born colleagues from diverse regions of the world are present together and interact with their American-born colleagues, the foreign-born of African descent is asked these questions more often than other foreign-born who are not of African descent.

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note here that the Catholic Church is arguably the number one champion for immigrants in the United States, not only in practical ways through various associated hand-on organizations such as Catholic Charities, but also through policy advocacy. See for example Donald Kerwin (2006), Immigration Reform and the Catholic Church at <http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=395>, accessed March 20, 2011. Migration and Refugee Services is the largest unit at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. In addition, numerous dioceses have established offices for the pastoral care of migrants to address the pastoral care needs of immigrants and newcomers. Despite these efforts, some challenges remain at the local level.

In light of this “alienating” atmosphere, the African-born resurrect and cling to home culture and seek out a “welcoming” environment, including other non-Catholic Christian churches, even if this implies being an occasional participant. They resort to traditional associations. Again, this recourse to reinforce one’s identity is not exclusive to the African-born; it applies generally to uprooted people. In all, the African-born find that although they are members of the family and are permanent residents or even citizens of the United States, their entitlements and rights can only go so far. There is a glass ceiling.

### **Reinforcement of Culture**

The African-born tend to retain their culture once in the United States. They find ways to reproduce the familiar and reinvent themselves.<sup>15</sup> There is no single African identity. One finds various national and ethnic-based organizations across the country, including numerous non-profit organizations started by African-born groups or individuals. There is a multiplication and, consequently, a dissipation of energy and resources among African-born. It would be a misinterpretation to consider this advocacy for the melting pot theory or the call by some for the annulment of immigrant identity. Even in a true melting pot with a symphony of taste, the unique flavor of individual ingredients can still be identified.

### **Religion and Social Networks**

African-born people are very religiously attuned. Their church attendance is much higher than American-born, generally. Churches are not only viewed as religious institutions; they also serve as civic centers. They serve as central networks providing services such as

---

<sup>15</sup>Jacob K. Olupona & Regina Gemignani (2007), *African Immigrant Religion in America*, New York, New York University Press.

counseling, shelter, employment, financial assistance, health services, real estate tips, etc...<sup>16</sup>

The lack of these elements within the American church contributes to the quest for the desire of the African-born for a “home-style” church. As a forum for preserving ethnic identity, some Africans have started to create their own congregation where Africans can worship with other Africans. Some, like the Bethel Church in Silver Spring, Maryland, have a Pan-African congregation that includes services in English and French, while others consist only of nationals from the country of origin. This allows for worship in the languages of the congregation.<sup>17</sup>

### **Implications of Identity Re-Enforcement**

The energy vested by the African-born to create and invest in their micro-identity marker often seems counterproductive. Despite their effort at retaining their narrower identity, the American society sees and identifies them in the context of “black” identity and attributes to them the general identity markers associated with this group. Yet the social arrangements within the African community tend to ignore this categorization. Instead, one sees a continuous emphasis on, and engagement in, the narrower identity circle. Consequently, (1) they spread thin the meager resources which otherwise could have been pulled together for a higher cause and better service to the community, and (2) a fragmentation of the group results, because of resorting to close-knit organizations which are often limited to a very small geographic region. While these close-knit kindred groups are important safety anchors and do give a shot in the arm in regard to a sense of belonging, they can often isolate the African-born from the larger context. The longer they isolate themselves, the harder it is to eventually integrate with others.

---

<sup>16</sup> Olupona & Gemignani, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> Olupona & Gemignani, op. cit.

Sometimes, the resistance to integration is driven by concerns about “the officials of the group” and their place in the merger.

### **New Paradigm for Building the Church as the Family of God**

The United States bishops have noted that “*The Church of the twenty-first century will be, as it has always been, a Church of many cultures, languages, and traditions, yet simultaneously one, as God is one—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—unity in diversity.*”<sup>18</sup> We live in a world that is shrinking and calls for a paradigm shift in how we define and operate as a family of God. The accelerated phenomenon of globalization has spurred the intermingling of peoples and calls into question previously established boundaries and categorizations such as nation-state, race, citizenship, and nationality. There are growing numbers of multi-heritage and multi-racial individuals challenge the traditional understanding of race and ethnicity. Recently, I met a young lady from Mexico who is married to a Nigerian. Her mother is Chinese and her father Mexican. Her paternal grandmother is from Portugal. Their children will have ancestry from Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Europe. How would we classify the racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage of these children? While this may not be the norm, the future will certainly be seeing more of such families.<sup>19</sup>

Within the corporate world, unlikely partners often merge together to maximize their presence. It seems that the corporate world is living out the gospel of unity for the sake of the dollar, while the family of God, whose vocation is specifically to cultivate oneness in Christ, is falling behind. Jesus prayed that we may be one, just as he and the Father are one (John 17:22).

---

<sup>18</sup> “Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity In Diversity.” A statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, issued November 15, 2000, by the NCCB/USCC.

<sup>19</sup> Data from the 2010 U.S. census show that 32% of Americans identify themselves as multi-racial, while 15% of marriages are multi-ethnic. This is a significant increase from the past.

The apostle Paul reminds us that in Christ Jesus, there is no slave or free born, Jew or Greek, male or female (Romans 10:12). How can we live out this vocation within the Church family in the United States? How can Africans, African-Americans, and Caribbean-born people unite together in the larger context of the Church family in the United States? The Second Vatican Council proclaims that the Church can learn from the world. The Vatican has taken the lead in learning from the world—modern communications, reaching out to the Society of Pius X, building coalition with Anglicans, creating websites, etc... How can we achieve this in our context?

### **Borrowing from St. Dominic Parish**

St. Dominic Parish in Lagos, Nigeria, has about twenty thousand (20,000) parishioners. Many are not located within the geographic boundaries of the parish; they come from all over Lagos. The parish community is a mosaic of Nigeria's cultural and ethnic diversity. People from the east and west, north and south come together as a family. They have a common focus; seeing themselves first and foremost as Catholics belonging to St. Dominic Parish. They take pride in belonging. Such a disposition pushes ethnic and linguistic differences into the background. Does this mean they have forgotten about or annulled their ethnic identities? Certainly not! Rather, they have brought together their respective identities to fashion a much larger identity that is inclusive and richer.

It is vital that we learn how to work together. We need to see the family in the larger context: a context that transcends individual national and ethnic boundaries. The world is becoming more complex, with, among other things, increasing numbers of multi-racial

individuals and dual citizens. We need to learn to read the signs of the times. The challenge is how to redefine one's self in a given environment.

### **Conclusion: A Way Forward**

What can the African-born do for themselves? Perhaps we can paraphrase President John Kennedy's famous inaugural statement and proclaim, "Ask not what the Church can do for you; rather ask what you can do for the Church family." African-born Catholics retain a strong fidelity to the Church. They identify strongly with the Church's teachings, especially the teachings on marriage and family. Their rate of church attendance is much higher than that of American-born Catholics. However, the participation of Africans in parish life is generally limited to attendance at sacramental celebrations. For reasons indicated earlier—reasons that are not of their own making, but which nonetheless limit their participation—many do not identify as an integral part of the ecclesial community in the United States, and thus few play a visible role within the Church. There are cases where some have offered to be of service within the Church, but were politely denied. These are obstacles to full participation. However, while Africans cannot change how others perceive them, it is within their power to "manage" how they respond. African-born Catholics need to work harder at becoming an integral part of the Church. Despite a difference in nationality of origin, they have a lot in common. They need to realize that they are here for the long term, and to say that their children are part of the American society. The African-born need to "bloom where they are planted" and find ways to help their children manage the struggle of being bicultural. They need to address the outsider mentality, feel a sense of ownership, and expand their comfort zone. They need to recognize and reach out to the minority groups within the African community. The African-born need to

ask and address the question: What foundation are we going to lay for our children who might cross ethnic boundaries in regard to their relationships? They need to stand out and be counted as members of the church family in the U.S. There is strength in numbers. Besides, if the African-born do not come together to say “Here we are,” it is unlikely that others will say “There you are.” I believe that this is a necessary first step in addressing some of the challenges that face the African-born community. It pays to build a coalition beyond one’s ethnic and national communities so as to create a larger forum for addressing common challenges. In doing so, the Church family in the United States will be deeply enriched by their gifts and talents, which ultimately benefit all.