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## Recent African Immigrants' Fatherhood Experiences in America: The Changing Role of Fathers

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# Recent African Immigrants' Fatherhood Experiences in America: The Changing Role of Fathers

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**Zacharia N. Nchinda**

## **Abstract**

This article examines the lived experiences of recent African immigrant fathers in the United States. It focuses specifically on recent African immigrant fathers with African women as wives and children below the age of 18. Its aim is a better understanding of these fathers' involvement in the life of their children and the changes immigration has forced upon the fathers. Information for the study emanates from interviews carried out with African immigrant fathers in the Milwaukee area, supplemented by my knowledge of African immigrant communities. The categorization of the data uses a construct established by the mid-1990s DADS Project initiative to examine the role and importance of fathers in the household, mostly in the areas of child-care responsibilities, division of labor in the household, communicating with the children, moral/ethical guidance, educational responsibilities, and discipline. It finds strong evidence to support the view that immigration and life in America have forced these recent African immigrant fathers to modify the African gendered division of labor structure at home and to be more involved in the lives of their children. Because they have access to two worlds, the fathers do not hesitate to tap the positive aspects of both.

## **Introduction**

As many African countries began achieving independence from colonial rule from the late 1950s into the 1960s, the new citizens focused attention on their governments to fulfill the complex and diverse political, economic, social, and cultural dreams and aspirations nurtured under colonial rule. But fulfilling those lofty promises became a difficult task for the new governments because of internal and external challenges. Internally, the apparent unity of purpose secured during the colonial struggle collapsed after independence, generating widespread distrust and instability. Externally, the gradual incorporation of African societies into the global economic, social, and cultural systems accelerated after independence, facilitated by improvements in transportation and communication systems, neocolonial agreements, capital investments, and technological innovations (Arthur et al., 2012). Many Africans now witnessed not only the shortcomings of their governments' failure to provide for them, but also the possibilities of seeking opportunities for themselves and their families outside the continent. Thus, since the 1960s and above all after the 1980s, more sub-Saharan Africans—such as students, visitors, refugees, labor migrants, or asylum seekers—have chosen to immigrate not only to former colonial powers, but also to the United States (Apraku, 1991; McAdoo et al., 2007; Gordon, 1998).

African immigrants to the United States are dominated by males, some of them fathers and future fathers. In his 1989 survey of “African professional and highly skilled technicians working in the United States,” Apraku observes that men made up 88 percent of the immigrants, 77 percent of them were married, and 78 percent were fathers (Apraku, 1991: 2). In his examination of federal data on gender and marital status from 1980 to 1993, Arthur (2000) points out that 60 percent of African immigrants were men and 65 percent were married. These immigrants came from a continent where gender inequality is still deeply entrenched. The roots of this disproportionate gender disparity in the African immigrant population can be traced in part to colonial and post-independent government policies that favored men (Arthur, 2009). In the execution of their exploitative policies, colonial administrators relied on men in the administrative, educational, economic, and household spheres. The patriarchal system they favored provided opportunities and access to men while



### **Adapting to America**

*A couple listens during a 2005 meeting of African immigrants with Marina Dimitrijevic, a member of Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors, at the county courthouse in Wisconsin's largest city. African immigrant fathers and mothers confront practical issues raising children that call for readjusting the traditional gender roles played in family life. Courtesy of the office of Marina Dimitrijevic. Reprinted under Creative Commons.*

subordinating women to household duties. Missionaries also placed men in positions of higher status and gave them priority in religious and leadership roles, to the detriment of women. Thus, at independence men were better prepared and positioned to move into ruling positions, and the bulk of those went to them. Newly formed African governments propagated the gender inequality, for they still held “a patriarchal ideology, machismo, emphasizing men’s sexual freedom, virility, and aggressiveness and women’s sexual repression and submission,” Maura I. Toro-Morn (1998: 194) points out, citing Acosta-Belen (1986).<sup>1</sup> The postcolonial governments have manifested “the apparent lack of vision, or courage, in the leadership of the postcolonial period...[and by leadership referring] to the entire spectrum of the intellectual, professional, and commercial elites in positions to make vital decisions on behalf of the entire community” to reduce male power (Aidoo, 1992: 22).

As more African men, older fathers (married in Africa before immigration) and newer fathers (married after residing in the United

States), sought family survival, stability, and togetherness in the United States, their fatherhood roles were challenged and pulled in new directions. As McConatha and Stoller (2006: 260) points out, citing Williams & Berry (1991), “even a limited amount of cross-cultural contact can alter an immigrant’s identity as well as her or his views, attitudes, and behaviours.” They were moving into a new society where, according to Lamb (1995), the roles that fathers play in households were undergoing continuous transformations over time, from economic support and child discipline to direct child care and child rearing.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars interested in the experiences of African immigrants have produced diverse articles, books, and films on the issue. They have examined why they come (Arthur, 2000; Takyi, 2002; Takougang, 2003; Takougang and Tidjani, 2009; Stoller, 2013), transplanted African women (Arthur, 2009; Osirim, 2012), bicultural immigrant blacks (Clark, 2012), African immigrant businesses (Takougang and Tidjani, 2012), relationships with the homeland (Okome, 2012), health challenges (Nwoye, 2009; Vaughn and Holloway, 2010; Kamya, 2007), and migrants who returned home (Johnson, 1999). Few scholars, however, have examined the transformative effects of America on African immigrant fathers or how these fathers see their role in the resettled family. While studies abound on African American families, little is known about recent African immigrant fathers and fatherhood as a subgroup of black families in America. The political imperative to racialize groups in the United States is such that all blacks have been classified as one ethnic/racial group, and by extension, the assumption is made that they exhibit common and homogeneous traits and behavior. What is missing in this broad homogeneous net is the fact that blacks in America have multiple identities, and intra-black differences are evident in various traits, including ethnicity, ideology, class, status, culture, religion, and nationality (Logan, 2007). These diverse black identities “are inconsistent with the homogeneous characterization of African-American racial group identity” (Alex-Assensoh, 2009: 99). As many African immigrants gradually relinquished the sojourner mentality, they have had to reconcile themselves to the fact that America is their second home. One of the defining factors in that transformation is the establishment and maintenance of families. African immigrant fathers are bisected by many challenges

that have reshaped, restructured, and transformed their roles, calling for adjustments in the functioning of their families. The acculturation process, increased female education, dual breadwinners, generational conflict, economic hardship, absence of extended families, conflicts over control, and the stress of child care have all reduced the authority of African immigrant fathers in the household and led to divorce in some families (Ndubuike, 2002).

Ndubuike's article revealed that African immigrant fathers were to find their macho powers in the household diminished in two other areas by virtue of the structure of the American society: women's emancipation and the American rejection of multiple legal wives. First, many African immigrant fathers gradually learned (and it was heartbreaking for some) that women and children in the United States have more powers than do women in any African country. It dawned upon them that in cases of battery, assault, and verbal abuse, their wives could call not only on extended family members back in Africa to intervene and resolve the issue, but also on police officers and a justice system that could easily take sides with their wives. Also, contrary to many African traditions whereby a woman came into marriage with no child and could not take any child out of her husband's household in case of divorce, African men came to realize that in child-custody cases, their powers were limited and many cases were decided in favor of women.

Second, the legalization of polygamy in many African countries gave African men the much-desired authority to "chase more skirts" under the guise of looking for another wife. For those who, for whatever reasons, were not ready to bring home their conquests, they kept "*deuxième bureaux*" (second offices), with or without the consent of their wives. Immigration to America snatched this "right" from African fathers and diminished their possibilities of enjoying such "luxury." To Americans, multiple wives were an anomaly and rejected under the law. Many African fathers realized that though they could still flirt around, there were now many rules regulating this social behavior. They could have "*deuxième bureaux*" and face the challenges of living double family lives, or divorce their wife and remain single. Some of these restrictions forced many African immigrant fathers, more so than back "home," to turn their focus within and become actively involved in various ways in the lives of their children.

This article examines the lived experiences of African immigrant fathers in the Milwaukee area and how they navigate their obligations and challenges as fathers. It focuses specifically on recent immigrants married to African women and with children under 18. I examine various questions: What role do fathers play in child rearing? How do they cope with changing gender roles? What family challenges do they face? What impact has immigration had on them? My interviews suggest that moving from Africa to the United States transformed the roles of African fathers and obligated them to be more children centered than they may have been in Africa. African immigrant fathers who sought to carve a new home in the United States have encountered many family challenges they had not anticipated—for instance, the realities of fatherhood in America, the new roles they have to play, the domestic division of labor, the need of some for stay-at-home parenting, the decision whether to have more children, and the overall challenges of child care. In the United States, far more than in any country in Africa, moral imperatives and legal constraints oblige fathers to play crucial roles at home if their children and family are to succeed in fulfilling their version of the American dream.

### **Methodology**

To arrive at a better understanding of the lived experiences of African immigrant fathers, that is, to investigate and interpret the contents of conscious phenomena, this article takes the form of phenomenological research. It seeks an understanding of how these fathers navigate their obligations and challenges as fathers and to tell their stories in their own words. As Sanders (1982: 354) points out, “Phenomenology seeks to make explicit the implicit structures and meaning of human experience.” It allows us to perceive and feel their experiences through their own eyes. According to Max van Manen (1982: 296), it “ask[s] the simple question, what is it like to have a certain experience?” What is it like to be an African immigrant father in America? What are the perceptions and experiences of their roles?

The data for this manuscript originate from personal interviews I conducted in 2010 and 2011 with recent immigrant African fathers in the Milwaukee area.<sup>3</sup> To identify and locate participants, I relied on leaders of local community organizations and a snowball technique.

As the head of one such organization, I got in touch with my colleagues of others in the area and sought assistance. They volunteered information about and contacts for their members. I then used an informal snowball sampling approach, asking each participant to suggest the names of other African immigrant fathers that might be interested in the study. All interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed-upon time and place, either at the homes of the participants for their convenience or some accepted public location.

I interviewed 20 African fathers for this study. The subjects came from eight sub-Saharan African countries: Nigeria (6), Ghana (2), Gabon (2), Democratic Republic of Congo (1), Cameroon (3), Senegal (2), Kenya (2), and Uganda (2). The plurality, 30 percent, from Nigeria is not surprising, given that the country is not only the largest source of immigrants to the United States, but also the most dynamic and prolific. Though all the participants spoke more than three languages, they had a good command of English, which we used as our means of communication along with Pidgin and/or French. All the participants were college graduates, either from two-year or four-year colleges, and seven had advanced degrees. That characteristic was not surprising, because in conformity with many other research studies, African immigrants have been identified as the group with the highest level of educational attainment in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Participants had diverse social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds, ages (ranging from 32 to 55 at the time of interview), and types of jobs.

To participate in the study, the father had to (a) be a recent African immigrant; (b) be married to an African wife; (c) be the father of a child/children below the age of 18; and (d) reside within the greater Milwaukee area. A survey of African immigrants in the United States shows that a majority of them, 62 percent, are married to African spouses (Arthur, 2000). Though I deliberately sought fathers with African wives (eleven of them were married in Africa, nine in the United States), I was conscious of the fact that the nationality, ethnic background, religious affiliation, number of children, and educational attainment could greatly influence the participant.<sup>5</sup> The fathers completed a quantitative questionnaire that requested demographic information, and after that, they took part in a taped, in-depth interview with me that lasted one to three hours.



All participants were working, except two who were seeking a job. Among the employed, one was self-employed, owning a corner store, and the rest worked in a variety of occupations (e.g., engineer, pastor, registered nurse, instructor, laboratory technician) within the private or public sector.<sup>6</sup> In the American social class structure, their employment could allow them to be classified as middle class and/or white collar. Nineteen of the fathers (95 percent) were married; the unmarried father was divorced and shared custody with the mother of his son. All had biological children, and one had an adopted child in addition.

The fatherhood roles that I examine in this article cover six areas: child-care responsibilities (availability, supervision, and protection), division of labor in the household (cooking food, washing dishes, and laundry), communicating with the children, moral/ethical guidance, educational responsibilities, and discipline. The themes are drawn from the constructs established by the Fatherhood Initiative Program that emerged from a federal initiative in the mid-1990s. The DADS Project, as it was called, marked a major recognition by the government and society of the challenges families face when fathers are not active in raising children. The project initiative, launched at the national level, gradually was decentralized to states, metropolitan centers, and localities. It was geared uniquely toward fathers, seeking more ways to bring them back into the family picture, and to better evaluate and study them and their involvement in the lives of children, the possibilities available to fathers to serve as model parents, and also the impact of fatherhood on fathers.<sup>7</sup> According to Mangum (1999: 6), it was “society’s awakening to the fact that a father’s role in his child’s life can and should far surpass the traditional role of breadwinning.”

For this article, I asked the fathers specifically what roles they played in each of the categories. The interviews were semi-structured and the questions open-ended. With the permission of the participants, I taped their responses and took notes. I recognized that the interview process provided the fathers with another opportunity to reflect on their fatherhood responsibilities and challenges. Because I was using already established constructs, I transcribed the interviews following the established themes. The ways the fathers perceive the

themes and explain their father-child relationships provide valuable sources for conveying their experiences of daily life in America.

One major note of caution: Because the interviewees in this study are a small representation of immigrants from various African countries (which provides greater possibilities for in-depth investigation), the work lends itself to one main limitation. It recognizes and describes the unique experiences of this group, and the small number of participants implies that the analysis does not represent the experiences of all African immigrant fathers.

### **Child-Care Responsibilities**

In describing the responsibilities for child care, all the participants acknowledged that in Africa, child care was the task of mothers and women. Mothers of newborn babies often had female members of extended families ready to assist, providing relief from stress. Extended female family members took on responsibilities ranging from bathing babies, washing diapers, and cooking to housecleaning and running errands. In some instances, these services were performed for more than a month. The migration of African fathers to the United States severed such child-care services for many and opened new avenues for them to be more involved. All fathers spoke of their interest in their children's future and active engagement in their lives. Though quantifying the amount of time they spent with their children was not an easy exercise for some, it was not for two participants who were stay-at-home fathers. This role reversal, in which fathers stay at home to take care of children while their wives function as the main breadwinner, is increasingly common in the country. According to Daniels (2007: 231), "The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that the number of fathers who are home with their children increased 224 percent in the last decade and in 2006 such dads cared for 283,000 of the nation's children under age 15." As one of the fathers interviewed, Ashutangtang, put it:

My decision to stay at home was motivated by several factors. First, I did not have the legal papers to work, and thus we, my wife and myself, decided that I stay home with the children while she worked. Second, even when I was finally authorized by the U.S.

immigration service to work, we realized that our children below the age of 5 needed one parent to be there always with them, and I accepted to continue what I had started. Third, I gradually realized that I could do the job and well. It was a huge challenge; hey, I did it. When our third child came, it was just normal for me to continue with my “job.”

Describing his stay-at-home status, the other father, Ndumbe, pointed out that it began with the economic crisis of 2008. While working as a laboratory technician, he was laid off in December 2008, and until our interview in early 2011, he had not yet found a new job. He immediately became a stay-at-home father, taking care of the children while his wife went to work. Thus, as with others—for example, those from the Caribbean—roles were becoming “more egalitarian and less explicitly male dominant” (McAdoo et al., 2007: 104). One of the interviewees, who was then working but had been a stay-at-home father for some time, recalled that he had to step in and fulfill a role that back in Africa he could not have. He puts it this way:

Let me relate to you a challenge that I have rarely voiced outside. My wife had, and still has, a very huge fear of newborn infants. It may sound strange but this is true. For all our children, and I have two, she refused to hold the little babies from when they were born until about a month later. She took them in her arms when she wanted to breastfeed them and thereafter, she handed them to me. I had to bathe, dress, cuddle, play, sing, rock, change their diapers, and you name it. I do not understand really why, but she often tells me that because the infants were very little, she was afraid that she could hurt them. After about a month, she gradually joined me in sharing the responsibilities, and we did so from then on.

These fathers were going beyond the underlying assumption that the role of the man was mainly to provide financial support. They were taking full control of child care, doing what in Africa traditionally was reserved for women. Sixteen of the fathers pointed out that they did not

have family members in Milwaukee or the means to bring one from Africa for an extended stay. Consequently, they had to rely on themselves and their wives for child care. As one of them, Nkumbe, put it:

As time went by and for some reason, I really wanted to be there. I understood how frustrating it was for a mother alone to take care of the child; so I did participate a lot just to make sure that they were comfortable. I will intervene and take more active role in the house, asking my wife to let me do more work. Except at night, when I am sleeping, and the baby was awake, I found it hard to keep up. My wife had to take care of the child then.

Most of the participants had mixed opinions about the use of child-care centers. While some were against, others were in favor. Seven of the participants resented sending their children to any child-care center and preferred to do the best they could so that one parent could stay at home to look after the children. Epie pointed out that he was not brought up that way and did not want to take any risk by placing his children in the care of non-family members. Nassako added that he could not send his children to day-care centers because none of them had an Afro-centered culture. Umaru, father of one boy and two girls, stressed that he did not want his children below the age of 4 to be out of sight of one parent at any time. He said he was open to trying day-care centers when his children were older than 4 because they could talk and relay to him whatever went on there.

Lyonga had tried child-care centers before rejecting the experiment. He said he had tried using a child-care center for his son when he was 3 years old, but the experience lasted only a day. He recounted:

My wife was at work, and I had an appointment to see a college counselor to discuss admission requirements in the graduate school. So, I took my son, then 3, to a day-care center a friend recommended. I wanted him to stay there until after my appointment. The experience was not a good one for both of us. When I took him there, he began crying, and I thought, as the administrator assured me, that he would stop when

I left. It was not true. When I got back four hours later, they told me the child did not cease crying, he recoiled into a corner, refused letting anyone touch him, and cried himself to sleep. I wept internally when I heard that. He got up when he heard my voice, and I will never forget the way he clung to me.

This dissatisfaction of some African immigrant parents with child-care centers was also motivated by another factor: trust. In a strange land, where many of the African immigrants knew and trusted only very few people, they had to rely on themselves. For example, as Daniels (2007: 233) notes:

It was dissatisfaction with the day care available to them that finally convinced [Anthony and Valarie Williams] one parent needed to stay home with their two young sons. One day-care provider didn't keep the boys clean. Another never used all the bottles of milk that Valarie would pack, making her worry that her sons weren't being fed properly. A third raised her fee, putting her services out of reach. "But even the best day care could not have given my boys what their father has," Valarie says.

But shunning child-care services was not the case with other fathers. For example, when Njoh and his wife had their first daughter, now 14, he decided they needed a child-care center because his wife had to go back to work. They searched and did some research homework on centers in their neighborhood before settling on one. The selected center was operated by a friend they had known for a long time. Though they visited the center, did a thorough inspection, got and cross-checked the necessary references, and arrived at a consensus that the place was secure, comfortable, and friendly enough, they still hesitated to place their first child there. With time and assurances from the administrators of the center, however, they let go and registered their baby. Since then, for the next twelve years, all their four children have used the same child-care center. In their study of African immigrant families and their child-care preferences in Indiana and Virginia, Obeng (2005) concluded that despite the high cost of day care and the

preference of African immigrants for having a family member at home taking care of the kids, many of the immigrants were still pleased to make use of these centers because of their busy schedules.

Some of the fathers actively sought ways to provide child care, not at public centers but at home. Ngolle succeeded in bringing his mother-in-law from Africa to take care of the family's infant. She arrived two months before his wife gave birth to their first child and stayed for a year before going back home. The tasks of increased involvement with their children were challenging, yet all study participants acknowledged that they gained much from their child-care responsibilities. They had some moral satisfaction, social connection, and the contentment with life that comes with taking care of their own children. As Eggebeen and Knoester (2001: 389) point out in their examination of whether fatherhood matters for men, the more fathers engaged with their children, "the more satisfied they were with their lives, the more socializing they did, the more involved they were in their communities, the more connected they were to their families."

### **Division of Labor in the Household**

In describing the nature of the division of labor in their households, most of the interviewees acknowledged that they came from a background where the household division of labor was marked by gender. In black Africa, most of the household responsibilities, such as cooking, cleaning after meals, cleaning the house, laundry, and shopping, were reserved for women. But in the United States, it was difficult to live by that model. As Lyonga put it:

The topic of household responsibility was controversial for the African man because culturally speaking, the man is not supposed to go into the kitchen. They have no idea about the road to the kitchen and perhaps need a GPS to get there. The men do not go into the kitchen partly because there are more women to do so. But here you cannot have that. The reality is that you have to adjust and help in the kitchen as much as you can....As they say "when you go to Rome, do what the Romans do." So we grasp the culture here and try to combine it with what we have brought

from Africa; it's a kind of mix and match, and we take what is good in this culture and what is better in the African culture and blend it. We then form what we can live by and pass it along to our children.

All the African immigrant fathers were involved in various ways in performing household duties. The idea of a marked household division of labor, with "a woman's place is in the kitchen," was gradually being transformed. The reasons for the changes varied from the lessons they learned from their own parents to the pragmatism of survival in the United States. For example, Ashutangtang explains that his deep involvement in the domestic science areas can be traced to his father, who was both a "clean freak" and loved cooking. He made sure the house and surroundings were clean even though they lived in a house with a dirt floor. He would often sprinkle water on the floor (in order to reduce the quantity of rising dust) and, with an African broom made from palm or coconut leaves, sweep the area. He hardly told his wife that it was her duty to sweep the floor of the house. In addition, the father enjoyed cooking, which he did on weekends. Thus Ashutangtang, now a father, found it easier to do some cooking and cleaning in the kitchen and was now transmitting the lessons to his daughter. Njoh's father died when he was 8, and he was raised by his mother, grandparents, and other members of the extended family. He learned early the art of cleaning, cooking, and taking care of the compound. As he put it, "I do not draw boundaries that this is what my wife should be doing and this is what I should be doing. Whatever it takes to solve an issue and put the house in order, I will do it. I want my children to be comfortable."

The idea of sharing responsibilities, as a way of keeping the family together, was echoed by Ngolle, who stressed that it was imperative for the household's smooth functioning. For Nkumbe, because he loved his children, he wanted to facilitate things for them, and one of the easiest ways to do so was by relieving stress on their mother. According to him, "Because my children were always watching me and what I was doing, I had no choice but to set the example, mostly for my two boys." There were few boundaries on what many of the fathers could do in the household. For instance, Nguesse pointed out that he was the one who mended the children's clothes when they were torn.

Having more children meant having more clothes, and knowing how children play often, it was obvious that the threads in their clothes have to give way. Though contrary to African children's clothes, most of those here have re-enforced or stronger threads. Yet I bought a Singer sewing machine and, with it, I have been able to mend the small holes in their clothes ever since. You may not know how it feels; the joy of stitching that small hole in my little boy's shorts or trousers pocket where his little stone treasure often fell off and disappeared.

In the areas of household planning and finance, some fathers were deeply involved, while others relegated the responsibility to their wives. Eight of the participants said they did the financial planning for the household. For example, Tambe expressed that he took the lead in financial planning, balancing the financial accounts and budgeting for big-ticket items such as a television, washer and dryer, stove, and refrigerator. He provided the general financial vision for the family—for instance, what should be done in five or ten years. But assuming this role was not the case with Mwem, who pointed out that in his household, his wife took the lead role in financial planning.

### **Communication**

The Bill of Rights guarantees citizens freedom of speech, religion, press, assembly, and the power to petition their government to redress grievances. Over the centuries, the spirit, intent, and the application of this principle has given the United States a unique place in the world and made Americans wear the “shield of defenders of freedom.” In both their private and public spheres, American citizens have claimed ownership of the Bill of Rights to freely express what is on their mind, and most have exploited it as the “meta-word” that inoculates them from whatever flows out of their thought process. Because the Bill of Rights’ guarantee of free expression has no age limits, it allows children below the ages of 18 to have the same rights to freely express themselves.

All my participants were caught off guard and perplexed by such a system where the First Amendment constrains what the government



can do to squash speech and thus seems to some to allow children to speak their minds freely to their parents. No country in Africa granted such freedom. In Africa, children did not often freely walk up to their parents and elders and voice their opinions. In the presence of adults, they could talk mostly when called upon and with a respectful tone. Their voices were heard more among their peers or friends. This situation was not the case in many American homes, where the opinions of children were sought in many instances. The interviewees confessed that they had to catch up to these new demands and a divergent culture through reading lots of books and papers, listening to friends, watching the television, listening to newscasts, and learning also from their children.

Though they sometimes found open communication with their children challenging, the fathers realized the need to keep the communication line open and to share their thoughts with them. They used various occurrences, such as the rampant cases of shootings, drunk driving, kidnapping, and child molestation broadcast on television, as teaching moments to remind their children that it was not very safe outside for boys and girls. With an open line of communication, they listened and followed up with the children, explained their thought process, and provided emotional support.

There were many instances in which African children taught their fathers how to listen and pay attention to what they were saying. For example, Ashutantang recalls that at first, when his daughter was talking to him, he would ask her to wait for him to finish whatever activity he was doing before attending to her. But before he knew it, the daughter forced him to change. This is how he explained what happened:

When my daughter was talking to me, and just to make sure I was listening, she will walk up to me, grab me by my ears, look right into my face and talk. You know, then I started realizing, when she wanted to talk, even if I had a very good line of communication, I had to stop whatever I was doing, put it away and listen to her....Sometimes when I realized the general idea of what she wanted to say and I am in the middle of something, I will tell her to give me a minute or so to finish, and then attend to her.

For the father, his desire to know what was going on in the mind of his child meant listening to her, and for the child, her desire to seek attention and tell her story as taught in school meant requesting that the father provide her with undivided attention.

Common among all of these parents as they recounted their experiences is the sense of confidence and trust they tried to instill in their children, such that the children could inform them of anything they found, heard, or saw that was uncomfortable, even the most trivial. As Tabe put it:

I wanted to make sure that I hear everything, anything. Either the mother or I should be aware of that. Anything that happens, anything that she can say wait a minute, is this the right thing to do or the wrong thing? She will come and say, hi daddy, this is what happened in class today. Every time that happened I always tell her that in life when you are not sure, make sure you have someone you can talk to. For now, we are your parents, and I think we know more than you do, so I think you can come to us.

Ndumbe stressed that he wanted to inculcate in his children the notion that the family was there for them. Even if what they had to say was not a big deal, he wanted to know, make comments about it, and in that way reassure them that he was present. The other motive for such availability was the fear that if he adopted a dismissive attitude, did not open himself up to listen to trivial stuff or assure his sons that he was ready to listen, they may feel disturbed, discouraged, get the wrong message, and not tell him other things (that may be more serious) in the future. He wanted his daughter to look up and come to him before going anywhere else with her questions.

Umaru observed that his oldest daughter, age 7, identified physicians as men. She believed that only men could be doctors, mainly because from birth her primary physician had always been a man. After some discussions with the wife, he decided to switch to consulting a female doctor. He did this first because he wanted his daughter to know that there were capable female doctors out there. Second, he wanted a female doctor to be the primary physician as his daughter grew older.

Both parents kept this as a surprise. So when their daughter came back from her annual health checkup and told the father, “Wow, that was a woman doctor,” he was pleased she could see that women were doctors as well. Epie expressed the same openness in dealing with his children. He elaborated:

My children just come to me, not because they want something, but simply because they just want to talk or ask a question. I may be watching television or working on the table, and they are there, asking questions. This is a big contrast with what I had at home. When my father was watching television in the sitting room or parlor, you could not go in there. On the contrary, here when they join me in watching TV programs, I ask some questions to find out where they are in terms of what they know and that helps me to help them in their schoolwork or understanding of the society.

In addition, many of the African immigrant fathers acknowledged that they welcome their children’s involvement in the decision-making process and want them to follow their thought process. The approach they adopted varied. Njoh explained that his children were occasionally allowed to express their views on some major decisions. For instance:

We just went through a situation when I had to bring my mother here for treatment. She was sick and, irrespective of the fact that I have other brothers, I had to explain to the children grandma’s condition. I had to explain to them that by virtue of the fact that I was the first son, there was a lot of responsibility expected of me. Since my mother could not say that for herself, I had to do some explanations and clarifications to the children. So [when] things like that that are not so clear, I will take some time to explain them.

Ashutangang recalls that when the daughter was 8 years old, one day she asked him a simple question: Daddy, why is it that you are the only one who comes to pick me up from school? Why does mom not do the same? He took time to inform her that the mother loved her but she was working and going to school, which meant that she

had little or no time to come to her daughter's school. They wanted to do better in life, and it was only a matter of time before the mother finished her schooling and would be able to spend all the time she needed with her. He cited another practical example:

You see, you want the Wii game and also the other accessories that come with it. All the accessories cost money, you know. Your mother is going back to school so that we can have more money to buy more of them for you. You see if we have more money, at least, we are not going to take your college money, and again when your money is done, we shall have more money to put there for your college.

Nassako pointed out that open communication with his children began early because he was afraid its absence could have lasting impact on their development. He believed he was now facing the consequence of that with one of his sons. He recounted:

I will honestly say I have two sets of relationships with my children. The reason being that being away for five years from my first child has had an effect. I wasn't there for him as he grew up. I love him, and he responds to me as a father. We have that relationship, but there is some slight something, reservation. For example, he is closer to the mother and will prefer to first tell her whatever he wants to say or ask. I came to this country first, and they joined me when he was 10 years old, and that has affected our attachment period. The younger one walks up to me anytime and asks whatever he wants freely. I have to rather go to my first son to talk to him and ask questions, than he coming to me. I have to remind him constantly to feel free to inform me about issues because if he didn't tell me, I will not be able to know.

When it came to emotional communication, the participants had divergent ideas. According to Nassako:

It was better to be open with the children, to allow them to see you express your emotions, your sadness,

your fears, and your joy, whatever they are, to allow them to follow how you are thinking, how you arrived at the decision you made. Because if you do that, the children are going to empathize with you, and they know that, tomorrow you will empathize with them. But if you tighten up, they will also tighten up.

He went on to say:

I think it is necessary for fathers to talk freely. Even if it means crying, they should not be afraid to cry if something hurts them deeply. They should express these emotions, to let the children see that you are only human. Fathers are not super human...as if nothing touches them...They are not just machos... and they cannot keep going.

You could feel the joy, the sense of fulfillment, and air of accomplishment in the voices of some of the fathers as they shared their interest in their children or as they adopted various strategies and maneuvers to make their children participate in various activities. Yet Lyonga, Nguesse, and Umaru pointed out that they grew up with fathers who did not allow them to show lots of emotions. The sense of self-pride or self-restraint was such that children had to be shielded from all problems. For example, Lyonga recounts that when he lost his job in the 2008 recession, he did not want his children to know, nor did he tell them what was happening. He did not use that as a teaching moment to let them understand the difficulties that parents were facing due to economic hardship. According to him, the American system was such that “the lack of a job was equal to the lack of status or dignity and, with the loss of my job, my status went down the drain.”

### **Moral and Ethical Guidance**

All the participants emphasized that they were deeply involved with the moral and ethical development of their children. They provided guidance in various areas and ways, including acting as a role model, respect for adults, father-child bonding moments, watching television, and the value of religious services. In some cases, they relied on their African community associations to complement their efforts.

In their endeavors to act as role models, all the interviewees agreed that this goal was either implicit or explicit in their day-to-day conduct. For instance, Njoh remarked that “I go ahead doing my daily activities, not as a role model, but as a parent, a father, and a person, treating my children in the same way I will like to be treated.” He showed respect to his friends and was conscious of the words he used around his children, because he knew they could easily pick them up. “I am more concerned with how I act and how they act without the thought of role model bordering my mind...I try also to see things from their own perspective or eyes before correcting them...I am just more concerned about them growing up as good, honorable people.”

Umaru, recalling his own parents, pointed out that he could not recall any time when his family went hungry. That fact motivated him to work hard and prevent any hunger in his own home. He noted that his parents were constantly present, made sure he attended school, and provided his basic necessities. “Now was my turn to do the same for my children. But being a role model did not demand too much of me. All that is needed is for me to do the basic little things or just being there for my children to be satisfied.” Lyonga explicitly tried to apply moral lessons by acting as a role model. As he puts it, “Monkey see, monkey do,” and he tried not to do in front of his children what he did not want them to do, even right down to drinking alcohol, smoking, or showing signs of discrimination.

In the areas of respect and good manners, the participants were all concerned. Respect for adults (elders/seniors) and good manners are an important part of sub-Saharan culture. For instance, it was considered rude, defiant, and stubborn for a child to look at an older person directly in the face when spoken to; disrespectful for a child to give and ungrateful for him/her to receive from an adult anything with the left hand; discourteous for a child to talk to adults with both hands in his or her pockets or to sit cross-legged among older people; and a sign of insolence for a child to be the first to stick out his or her hand to shake that of an adult. All of the African immigrant fathers acknowledged that the moral ethics toward adults were broad, diverse, challenging, and that many of them were out of place if attempted within the American cultural norm. Summing up this challenge, Njoh noted:

You see, there were some things that we value at home which are very difficult for me to teach my children here. For example, the respect of elders and seniors: that when you talk to them you do so in a respectful manner and try not to look at them in the face [contrary to U.S. tradition, where children are taught to look at adults in the face and make eye contact when being talked to], how to eat the different meals—for example, that fufu is enjoyable best when eaten with the fingers and not a spoon or fork—and some of the variety of African traditional dress styles. These things are to give them the knowledge and flavor of the variety of cultures out there so that when they see people who are different from them, they should be conscious.<sup>8</sup>

In these efforts to instill moral lessons, some of the African immigrant fathers made use of the various cultural associations that unite the different African nationalities. In all major U.S. cities with a high concentration of African immigrants, they have created continental, national, ethnic, or alumni associations that meet regularly to perform diverse functions, including promoting African culture and history, assisting newcomers, providing temporary shelter for refugees, serving as resource centers, providing scholarships for students here and back home, and raising funds for development projects there (Alex-Assensoh, 2009: 107–110; Takougang and Tidjani, 2009: 36–38). In addition to these broader socioeconomic and cultural goals, these associations act as forums whereby African parents could take their children to socialize and learn some aspects of African manners.

Though back in Africa it was a taboo for parents to sit down and discuss sexuality with their children, most of the African immigrant fathers relied on their wives to discuss the issue, and a few approached the topic with caution. For example, Ngole stressed:

One of the things which I have instituted for our family is that every Sunday we have to sit together and have a meal, where we can talk as a family. I try occasionally to teach my boys what I was taught also growing up in Africa. It is interesting. Most recently, because

all of them have reached the teenage age, I sat them down and was talking about puberty, signs of puberty in teenage life. And they all started laughing when I started talking about...you will notice that very soon some of you will start growing hair here and there and they started looking at...and you have to take care of those hair. I have that relationship with them, I always want them to be aware of themselves, their personal care, their identity, and how that shapes their future.

Nassako was concerned with their dress:

Dressing, that is personal care; we talk to them about dressing. That, for example, for the girl, we talk to her that you can't dress with part of your body exposed because when you do that you are inviting people to see your body and you do not know what the consequences might be. For the boys, we talk to them that if you want someone to look at you and give you some respect, you have to look decent. You can't walk down the street with your pants hanging down.

For many of the African immigrant fathers, religion and church services provided a moral foundation and sense of community, and they used it in various ways to strengthen faith in their children. They welcomed the faith, moral sense, and spirit of community that the church expressed. As Tambe pointed out:

I want my daughter to have a faith that she believes in, a faith that could guide her in making decisions, that could provide the conscience needed in deciding what is right and what is wrong. Because sometimes it is difficult, we cannot say it is right or it is wrong, but every person has his own opinion, and the church can provide that foundation of what is right, mostly through touching your conscience.

According to Nyonga, who was sharing custody with the mother of their 6-year-old boy:

I did not like going to church when I was growing up, but my grandfather insisted that I had to go. They



did not care what I was thinking inside; they made it clear that I was living in their house and they made the rules. Today I tell my children the same thing. When they say they do not want to go to church, I tell them “my house, my rules”: Get dressed, and we are going to church. By taking them to church and making them volunteer all add up to building them morally. And when they see me volunteer at church also, the chances are they will take a second look at their belief and know it is not a joke. Somewhere in their heads and hearts, they will keep that belief or think about it in future. The small fear that I instill in them as their father, now added to the bigger fear that the church puts in them, and will all add up and guide them.

### **Educational Responsibilities to the Child**

When the colonial powers introduced Western education in Africa, they did not have as part of their objective to open its doors to all. It was restrictive in the quality and the depth of knowledge transmitted, and in quantity, the number of students admitted, number of schools opened, and their locations. From the outset, gender inequality was an integral part of European formal education and was manifested in various ways that allowed men to dominate all fields.

For all the participants, education occupied a unique and precious place, an important gem that they needed to acquire, enjoy, and provide to their children. They saw it not only as capable of opening the gates to higher wealth, but also as the great equalizer of status. Thus, all the interviewees were actively involved in their children’s schooling in various ways: setting examples, providing a conducive learning environment and homework assistance, attending Parent-Teacher Association meetings, and volunteering at their children’s schools. But this involvement is not the case with all African immigrant fathers, for there are some who did not have the time (because they were working two or more jobs), the knowledge of science and technology, or the mastery of computer knowledge to teach their children at home (Ogbaa, 2003).

Sixteen of the African immigrant fathers said that although at least one of their parents could not read and/or write, they knew the value of education and sacrificed much to make sure their children attended school and succeeded there. As Epie points out:

You see, my mother did not go to school and could not read or write. However, she realized that school was very important. She always wondered what the white man was often reading from books opened before him and so she wanted me to learn and find out. In addition, she told me that while the cutlass was vital and served as her main tool to work on the farm, to cut the grass, till the soil, to plant corn/beans, to pull out weeds, and to harvest, I was to make a pen the most important tool in my life. I was to learn how to read and write and use a pen to the maximum. She told me she had nothing to give me, but that if I mastered how to use the pen, it will be my own source of wealth. With the pen, I may never have to use the cutlass.

Nyonga gained the same lessons from his grandparents, who constantly challenged him with higher expectations:

I grew up with my grandfather, and he made sure I did my homework every day before I went to bed. He was always reminding me to read. I did not like that. I hated it at times, and hated my grandfather for that. But today, when I look back, I know that this was the best thing I could have ever had in my life, and I am trying to do the same for my children.

...When it came to education, it meant pushing and pushing and persisting. If I brought a bad report home, my grandpa will whip me, and I knew I could not make the same mistake again the next term. I made sure that I took my schooling seriously and left behind all jokes. He was behind me with reading and math, making sure that I do some everyday.

Nzobotane also identified a similar push from his parents.

I remember I was a truant growing up. One day my teacher could take it no more, and so he gave me physical whipping. I recall that when I got home and told my father he said nothing. The next day, he accompanied me to school and added to the whipping. He whipped me in front of the teacher and my classmates. From then going forward, I knew that it was a strong message. I should not take schooling lightly. Education became the most important thing, and [understood] that people who were providing me with that education should be considered at a very high standard.

All participants recalled that their parents sacrificed nice pairs of shoes or clothes in order to pay school fees and provide school supplies. It was now their turn to do the same for their children.

In the area of homework, all interviewees acknowledged themselves as the first educators of their children. They were at the front line, monitoring their children's progress, whether at home or in school. They were motivated, first, by genuine interest in their children's future, and second, as a way of learning how to adjust to the demands of the American society. Here again, some of the fathers were following the example inculcated by their own parents. For instance, according to Mwambo:

As I was growing up, school was so far away, I guess about two miles, and I had to cover that distance every day back and forth. My mother will get me up very early in the morning, heat the leftover food for me to eat, and then escort me a long distance to school. When I came back, though she could not read, she had asked my teachers to show her the difference between a right mark (a tick) and a wrong mark (an X). She will go through my work, looking for ticks and asking why I had an X here and there. Though I knew she could not read, the thought that she will always look at my school work made me to do well and avoid having failed grades.

The African immigrant fathers were interested in developing

stronger ties between the school and their community. They knew the school(s) their children went to, the administrative and teaching staff, and attended on a regular basis their children's parent-teacher conferences. During the conferences, Njoh, for example, recounted how he listened to the teachers' views on the performances of his children and advice on what should be done to help them. He always expected the maximum from the teachers so that the children could have all the tools that they needed to succeed. He kept the teachers' email addresses and phone numbers, and followed up closely any complaint from the teachers.

But this level of involvement was not the case for all the interviewees. There were others who did not acquaint themselves with their children's school and came in only when there was a problem between the school and their child. An African immigrant man I spoke to but did not include in this study because he has no children, told me of a child he encountered in one of the Milwaukee Public Schools, where he taught as a special education teacher. He knew the child had African parents because of her names, appearance, demeanor, and attitude. The child's parents had attended hardly any of the programs organized in school or bothered to know the teaching staff. He recounted:

I have, my heart prays, some times when I think about it my eyes wet up. I have a child in a school I was working for who was very intelligent but autistic....I did not know who the parents are and, because they do not want people to know that their child is autistic, they don't come to school....No matter how I tried they did not want to come...left to me, that child should not be there...she should have been sent to another school, where, because of her intelligence, she will be challenge[d] further. When she is put here with the lower level students, they only help to bring her down, she is not challenged enough...teacher give her the same things they give to the lower level students.

He was lucky to encounter the parents of the student one day and asked: "How come I have never seen you in school here, attending a parent-teacher conference, or even a visit?" The parents had little to say,

except that they would try to do so in the future. Most of the African immigrant fathers interviewed did volunteer in their child's school in various capacities: arranging chairs for choir and band concerts, taking part in scholastic book fairs, helping in before- and after-school programs (for example, basketball, swimming, baseball, choir practice, forensics, mock trial), cleaning classrooms after school to reduce the cost of hiring janitors, and acting as a chaperone for field trips.

According to Mboabwo, he was hooked to his daughter's school after she invited him to talk to her class about Africa:

I did not know my daughter loved to see me in school, until one day she told me that they were learning about foreign cultures and she had suggested to her teacher that she invite me to talk to their class. Though the presentation was two weeks away, she kept reminding me almost every day and informed me to prepare very well for the talk. When I asked why, she said because her friends will judge her after my presentation, and if I did not present well, then the negative aspects of that will stick with her all through middle school. Therefore, while my presentation was to last a few minutes, the lessons will last for a long time. She wanted me to help her build a good public image.

Tambe recalled many of the fun-filled field trips he went on with his child, such as Discovery World Museum, Milwaukee County Museum, Milwaukee County Zoo, Jelly Belly Factory, Marcus Cinema, all in Milwaukee, and Shedd Aquarium and Museum of Science and Technology in Chicago. He recalled that after volunteering to chaperone one of his son's classes, the teacher encouraged students to write him a thank-you note.

All the participants raised the issue that in many of the schools their children attended, they came home with various identity challenges and cultural sensitivity issues.<sup>9</sup> They pointed out that most American students showed a sensitivity to foreign names, names that were unfamiliar and hard for them to pronounce. This uneasiness with African names reminded African immigrants of the colonial era, when authorities expressed their resentment at the "un-godly Africans" by

baptizing those who accepted their faith and providing them with Christian names. Those Africans whom colonial authorities and missionaries could not baptize but with whom they had to work regularly had their names phonetically corrupted to suit speakers of European languages. Participants pointed out that many African children who did not have names familiar to American society were asked to explain to the teacher or the whole class the reason their name was chosen and its meaning.

The naming of strangers and the questioning of names have long been part of the human experience. For example, as Likaka (2010: 3–4) points out, in the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo under Belgian rule, Africans, like Europeans, were prone to use their own names “to identify individual Europeans and groups of Europeans...the practice worked broadly the same way across the village world.” What American students were doing then was participating in an old human social tradition whereby names have been subjectively applied to identify people based on such characteristics as “physical appearance, behavior, cultural practices, moral qualities and flaws” and the ways they carried out their activities or duties (ibid., 4). Human societies, as a way of distinguishing “the other,” have been applying this approach for millennia.

Another major challenge the participants experienced with their children’s schooling was their search for identity. This is a common theme plaguing immigrant children in the United States as a whole (Awokoya, 2012). Who are these African immigrant children? To which nationality do they belong? Are they, for instance, African Americans; Ghanaians, Nigerians, or Cameroonians; Ghanaian Americans, Nigerian Americans, or Cameroonian Americans; or simply Americans? And what does it mean to be one of these? The search for these multiple identities and the pressures to manifest them as a sign of belonging emerged as a constant nightmare for the children of these fathers. Also, Njoh, Lyonga, Tambe, Ndumbe, Ngolle, and Epie, all with teenage children, observed that there was salient uneasiness even among children of African immigrants generated by their length of stay in the United States. Some recent arrivals often considered themselves more African and claimed they had not yet been corrupted by the American system. Arriving recently from Africa, they had an air of “African purity” that ironically their parents rejected when they chose to emigrate. But it was

one that they also may have to modify and transform if they wished to succeed and catch up with the novel demands of American society.

### **Discipline**

In all societies, children are the future not only of their families, but also of the society as a whole. They belong to and are part of both worlds. It is incumbent upon the family and society to mold and train them in such a way that they can project and carry forward the cultures, beliefs, customs, traditions, and imaginations of the society. One component of that training process involves dishing out punishments when and where needed. The interviewees were unanimous that the task of disciplining their children was challenging and difficult in the United States. They had the double challenges of first grasping, grappling with, and understanding for themselves the complex cords and nuances that rendered American society dynamic and functional; and second, while finding that balance, molding their children (who were faster adapters to the social transformations) and instilling in them valuable survival skills. They felt frustrated that many children in the United States were given so much power and yet remained dependent on their parents.

The desire of all the participants to discipline their children was motivated by other experiences. First, punishment was seen as a corrective measure, aimed toward reinforcing sound and proper conduct. It was interpreted as guiding wayward children back into the family and societal fold and making them conform to the collective demands of the society to which they all belonged. Second, the parents were conscious of what they interpreted as the racist application of the criminal justice system in Wisconsin and elsewhere in the United States, where blacks constitute about 6 percent and 12 percent of the state and national population, respectively, yet comprise close to half of all the inmates in both jurisdictions. To most black observers, racial “disparities permeate the entire criminal justice continuum, in the number of arrests, cases charged, sentences, probation, and parole revocations. In some offense categories, like drug arrests and minor offenses, the disparity is more pronounced... [with African Americans 42 times more likely to be incarcerated for drug possession than whites].”<sup>10</sup> African immigrant fathers were frightened and determined to protect their children and prevent them from falling

into a system that targeted young blacks. According to Umaru, disciplining his offspring

was part of bringing up my child. I was not there to punish the child or send him/her to jail. I was there to show him/her the way, to teach them to apologize when they do something wrong.

Furthermore, as Ndumbe noted, echoing the view of the other fathers:

I believe strongly in discipline, and they know that. I strongly believe that children need to have some sense of respect and fear towards their parents; for without fear, they will be prone to do whatever they want, wherever they want, ...but I have trained them to know that when I look at them in a certain way, they had to stop the wrong or disagreeable things they were doing.

But instilling discipline was a complex and challenging affair. As Lyonga pointed out,

Disciplining my children was a huge challenge because I had to establish a balance. The children are between two cultures, and regardless of what you want to accomplish at home, because you want to raise the kids the way you were raised, because somehow it worked. Instilling in them the sense of value, the sense of respect that you were taught back home, and when needed the physical discipline which, when seen closely, is against the laws here. I was disciplined at home. I got a lot of it and I did not turn out bad.

All participants noted that one of the best ways to discipline a child was to start early and for both parents to be consistent with all their children. As Matuke observes, for example, "Once my wife decided, I accepted and did not come in to undermine it." The disciplinary methods and approaches they adopted varied from one parent constantly being at home with the children to sending stubborn children back home to Africa. Eyong-eta, for example, stressed that



preventive measures were taken when one parent was always at home to watch the children. As he puts it:

...the best way then to maintain discipline and raise the children properly was for one parent to stay at home. With one parent staying at home, it reinforced the same message over and over and over again until it become second nature to the children and they realized they could not turn off the switch any time they needed to. We could nip problems in the bud, and there you go, solve it, as they say.

Other forms of disciplining included taking away the privileges of children and having a full-scale talk with them and letting them know the consequences of their actions. The fathers rewarded children occasionally for good behavior. For example, Esapa noted that for him to punish the daughter and make her feel the impact, he always tried to find out what she liked most and then took that away for a while or gave her a time-out from it.

But this did not prevent the participants from scolding, yelling, or shouting at their children for doing something wrong. For instance, as Bonangoh pointed out:

Sometimes I have the tendency to scream and yell to get their attention and maybe remind them to stay quiet. They know the behavior I will not tolerate and, even when they go outside, they know I expect them to behave accordingly. I think I have at one time spanked the little one for disturbing and refusing to take simple instructions, but as they get older, I do much talking and reminding them of what [it] is they are supposed to do...but this vary with the situation. I compliment when they deserve it...it is a balancing act, you know...

The African immigrant fathers expressed a major advantage that they did not hesitate to tap when needed: living in two worlds—Africa, their original home, and America, their adopted one from which they were trying to extract positive values. Almost all of them found it normal and necessary to send their wayward children back

home to learn manners and, in some cases, attend elementary, secondary, or high school. Such parents brought their children back here when they were ready for college. As Mboabwa pointed out, failure to take decisive action meant they could lose their children:

You know, the police are out there just waiting for black children who do not toe the line. I do not want my boy to disappear into the criminal justice system. It was only a matter of time and that mouth he was making to me would be no more.

Nassako expressed that he could take it no more when his boys were having issues in school and the teachers kept calling him to complain. The teachers said his children were stubborn, did not follow orders, and were constantly disturbing the class. He realized the constant complaints were frustrating his children and distorting their ability to learn. After pondering the issue with his wife for some time, they decided to send their children back home to continue schooling. According to him:

We sent our boys to Africa, not so much as a form of discipline, but more so for our concern and love for them. We want them to grow up to be good adults, to help us and the society. If they grew up here, we could have lost them. We could not afford that and we could not take the chances. We are lucky that we have an alternative place and an excellent one where we can send them to learn more positive cultural values before we bring them back here again.

Others sent their children back home during the summer months to learn not only the culture of Africa but also the African traditional value of ascribed respect for elders. For example, as Nguesse recounted:

Some parents send their kids back home, and when they come back here, the difference is like night and day. Kids, who were here and probably not listening to their parents, came back showing much respect from grandma, the parents, and elders.

Some of the fathers did not find it easy to discipline teenagers. For instance, Umaru had a son in Africa before immigrating. When he

got married, he was up front with his new wife about his teenage son, then 9 years old in Africa. After they had two children, he brought his son, now a teenager, to continue his education in the United States.

But the experience was not a good one, as he explained:

I was very happy to bring the young man, hoping that I could give him the best chances possible. Which parent will not seize such an opportunity? We brought him, registered him in eighth grade, and all was well for the first year. The second year, when my young man entered the high school, all hell broke loose. He will stay out late and, when I asked, he said he was with his friends. I objected to that. One day I smelled cigarette on him and, when I asked, he told me he was in the company of some friends who were smokers. He will not allow me to know these friends of his and, when his grades in class started going down, we decided to take action. During the coming summer, I told him we were carrying out a project back home and wanted him to spend some time supervising it for us. We showed him papers to prove that. He accepted to go. That was all. I never brought him back. He has been begging to come back. But no way. I will only think of that when he completes university education.

## **Conclusion**

The act of immigration, whether willingly or not, demands changes, adjustments, and coping strategies. From the mid-1950s, when many African countries began gaining their independence and the United States gradually opened its doors to immigrants from sub-Saharan African countries, men have dominated the flow. This male domination continues a trend that extends back to 1619, when the first large group of Africans arrived in Jamestown. While then they were forced laborers, after independence most African newcomers were voluntary migrants. The various immigration laws passed by Congress since then—for example, the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, the Refugee Act of 1980, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, and the

Immigration Act of 1990 and its Diversity Visa Lottery—have all allowed more African immigrants, most of whom have still been men. Many of these men who came as students, visitors, refugees, labor migrants, or asylum seekers eventually became fathers. These African immigrant fathers faced huge challenges: on the one hand, struggling to establish a foothold in the new geographic space, while, on the other, creating and maintaining strong family links in a country many identified as their second home.

Immigration to the United States opened to African fathers a new world of experiences and gradually transformed the gendered structures they were accustomed to in Africa. It took away from them any thoughts of exercising their macho stereotypes, such as reserving household work (cooking, cleaning, laundry, shopping) and child care for women. Rather than abandon these responsibilities to their wives, they found themselves involved in a variety of roles, from sharing various household responsibilities to shouldering the task of taking care of children. They found themselves actively involved in the lives of their children, communicating, providing moral and ethical guidance, monitoring their education, and meting out discipline when needed. African immigrant fathers monitored and interacted with their children in various ways, because the fathers recognized the vitality of their involvement in guiding the children to become productive members of the society.

The training that African immigrant fathers provided their children was geared toward instilling the values, the tools, and resources that they could rely on to confront different challenges. In these efforts, the fathers gave their children the consistent message that education was a unique gift that could not be taken away from them; it was the master key they could use to open doors at all levels of American society. Yet, as they fulfilled their fatherhood responsibilities, many of them remained conscious of the fact that Africa remained a home where they could seek support in extreme cases.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See also for instance, Patricia Horn (1992), “Emancipation of Women in a Post-Apartheid South Africa,” in *Proceedings of the First International Conference on Women in Africa and Africa Diaspora (WAAD): Bridges across Activism and the Academy*, Nsukka, Nigeria, Vol. 1, (July 13–18), edited by Obioma

Nnaemeka, 207–223; Glo Chi Chukukere (1992), “An Appraisal of Feminism in the Socio-Political Development of Nigeria,” in *Proceedings of the First International Conference on Women in Africa and Africa Diaspora (WAAD): Bridges across Activism and the Academy*, Nsukka, Nigeria, Vol. 1, (July 13–18), edited by Obioma Nnaemeka, 105–126.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars interested in fathers and fatherhood issues come from various fields, such as sociology, demography, economic, social work, health, anthropology, and psychology. In their review of some of the fathers, fatherhood, and fathering articles presented at the International Sociological Association’s XVII World Congress of Sociology held in Durban, South Africa, in 2006, Rudy Ray Seward and Rudolf Richter point out that broad areas are now open for discussion, including paid leave for fathers, nonresidential fathers, stay-at-home fathers, fatherhood strategies, household division of labor, fertility decisions, child care and domestic activities; see Rudy Ray Seward and Rudolf Richter (2008), “International Research on Fathering: An Expanding Horizon,” *Fathering*, 6 (2): 87–91.

<sup>3</sup> The majority of African immigrants can be found in New York, California, Texas, Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, see Aaron Terrazas (2009), “U.S. in Focus: African Immigrants in the United States,” in *Migration Information Source: Fresh Thought, Authoritative Data, Global Reach*, accessed 7/15/13 <http://www.migrationinformation.org/usfocus/display.cfm?ID=719#5>. But as their wave of immigration continues, more have resettled and form communities in other states and cities across the country.

<sup>4</sup> Casey Borch and Mamadi K. Corra (2010), “Differences in Earnings Among Black and White African Immigrants in the United States, 1980–2000: A Cross-Sectional and Temporal Analysis,” *Sociological Perspective*, 53 (4): 573–592; The JBHE Foundation, (1999–2000), “African Immigrants in the United States Are the Nation’s Most Highly Educated Group,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 26: 60–61; Yoku Shaw-Taylor and Stephen A. Tuch (2007); “Earnings, Wealth, and Social Capital: A Review of Debates and Issues,” in *The Other African Americans: Contemporary African and Caribbean Immigrants in the United States*, edited by Yoku Shaw-Taylor and Stephen S. Tuch, 117–152, Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers; Butcher F. K. (1994), “Black Immigrants in the USA: Comparison with Native Blacks and Other Immigrants,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 47: 265–284.

<sup>5</sup> One of the men I spoke to, who is married but has no child yet and thus could not participate in this study, asked me to identify the differences in the role of the Africa immigrant fathers in households where their wives were non-African (white, African American, Asian, or Caribbean African). It was an interesting suggestion but beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>6</sup> Some African immigrants in the United States are unemployed, live under bridges and in homeless shelters, and perform a variety of menial jobs with minimum wages, such as “washing dishes in fast food restaurants, delivering pizza, cleaning linens at hotels, changing diapers in nursing homes, picking trash off the highways, and driving taxi cabs.” See Darlington Iheonunekwu Iheanacho Ndubuikwe (2002), *The Struggles, Challenges, and Triumphs of the African Immigrants in America*, Lewiston, ME: The Edwin Melen Press, 45.

<sup>7</sup> A major limitation here is the fact that by using a semi-structured interview method and themes established in these constructs, I placed the focus on

certain questions/themes, and the interviewees were restricted to certain predetermined themes, with little room for open and free discussion of what the interviewees wanted to say. The open-ended nature of the questions with the various themes, however, still allowed interviewees maximum variations in their responses and lots of room to maneuver. See Bronte-Tinkew and Moore, *The Developing a Daddy Survey (DADS) Project: Framework Paper*, Child Trends, December 31, 2004, 47–48.

<sup>8</sup> Here in the United States, there was a gradual relaxation of the strict protocols common in some traditions. Children could still show their respect for adults even if they did not bow or stoop on one knee.

<sup>9</sup> African children growing up in the United States are faced with multiple identities and are products of multiple worlds, including those of their parents, neighborhood, community, music television, black entertainment, school, and church. See Msia Kibona Clark (2008), "Identity among First and Second Generation African Immigrants in the United States," *African Identities* 6 (2): 169–181.

<sup>10</sup> Office of Justice Assistance, *Racial Disparities*, Madison, retrieved on January 6, 2011, <http://oja.wi.gov/section.asp?linkid=1344&locid=97>; Stanley A. Miller (2000), "'Justice in Black and White,' in the Milwaukee Urban League," *The State of Black Milwaukee*, Milwaukee: Milwaukee Area Technical College, 113–114.

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