ONE FAMILY'S HISTORY: A MICROCOSMIC HISTORY OF WEST AFRICAN MIGRATION

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Among West Africans in New York City, there are many Ghanaians, living mainly in the Bronx and Brooklyn, who identify themselves by the Hausa term '*yankasa*. An ethnic label of sorts, *'yankasa* literally means "son of the town." A child born in New York is an American, and also a Ghanaian, but on a community level, also a member of a group whose members describe themselves by this Hausa term. This identity is not exactly an "ethnic" label, itself a complicated term involving ascription and self-identification, but rather a word that reflects the complex history of migration in and beyond West Africa. As much as the term *'yankasa* connotes the status of belonging to a new place, and being rooted in one's place of birth, in the West African context it also highlights the fact that the person is a "stranger"—a child born of the experience of migration, and not an "indigenous" person. A term like *'yankasa* can only be defined in specific cultural and political contexts, but in West Africa generally, stranger status can be a significant matter, at times leading to denials of citizenship. (This was an issue, for example, in Côte d'Ivoire where a recent presidential candidate struggled to claim national identity). *'Yankasa* identity refers to the process of moving and putting down new roots, but not necessarily relinquishing old ones.

For West Africans living in New York City, being part of a great mix of peoples and cultures— African and non-African of various religions, occupations, and languages—is a continuation of their life experiences in West Africa. Most of these people have lived with such diversity all of their lives, whether they were born in Kumasi, Bamako, Ibadan, or Dakar, or in smaller towns and villages. Centuries of cosmopolitanism in West Africa give people psychological and cultural tools for adapting to new situations and '*yankasa* and other West Africans do not feel they have to make choices about ethnicity, local, or national identity except, of course, when forced to do so by restrictions placed on them by national governments or communities in times of strife, in Africa and elsewhere, sometimes expressed in xenophobic laws or actions Their lives and families cross borders and oceans, made easier all the time by modern communications technology. Cell phones, affordable (for many) air travel, and the hugely discrepant value of money, all mean that people can live in more than one community; they can work in New York, and, if they are successful, remit funds to family members in Africa. They can instantly send news, images, and videos of events in New York to families in Africa. People can hold on to various African identities (religious, ethnic, national) and still feel themselves to be participants in American life.

West Africa as Seen through One Family's Story

Many people consider that the founder of the New York *'yankasa* community is a man named Ibrahim, a taxi driver, who first came to New York from Kumasi in 1972 (see fig. 1). Shortly after Ibrahim came to New York, he asked me to help him bring his wife, Safiya, to New York, since I knew Safiya, and Ibrahim, from the days when I was doing my doctoral fieldwork in Ghana. Safiya was the youngest sister of the former leader of the Mossi community in Kumasi, AL-Hajj Abdul Rahman. Safiya came to New York in the summer of 1973. She has now returned to Ghana but her husband, and some of her children and grandchildren live in New York and return to Ghana when they can. Over the years many other members of this family have come to New York for brief visits or long residences. In 2007, there were seven cousins from Ghana in New York, not to mention one in Germany, two in England, two in Spain, one in Italy, and one in Chad. One person lived in Saudi Arabia before coming to New York; another lived in Nigeria.

Migration is nothing new in this family, as is the case with many other families from Ghana. Al-Hajj Abdul Rahman was born in the Ashanti Region of Ghana, in Kumasi, Ghana's second largest city. He too described himself as a *'yankasa*, because his father, Adam, was born in Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) before moving to Ghana in the 1920's. Their Mossi identity comes from Burkina, where the Mossi are a dominant group (itself composed of sub-groups). Along the way the ethnic identity of this family expanded as new identities were added to older ones. In Ghana, marriages were made to with people from the Hausa, Dagomba, and Wangara ethnic groups, all of whom, if born in Ghana, would identify themselves as *'yankasa*.

Adam himself was a Yaraga, a Muslim sub-division of the Mossi group. In Ghana he became the head of the Mossi community, one of several "stranger" communities in Kumasi, and his son Al Hajj Abdul Rahman succeeded him. When Al Hajj Abdul Rahman passed away, his son, Ibrahim, because the head of the Mossi community in Kumasi. Ibrahim's son, Masurur, is the Imam of the NYC *'yankasa* community and like me, formerly worked at the American Museum of Natural History. Like many other Ghanaian immigrants in New York, his wife is African American.

Stranger communities, consisting of migrants from northern Ghana and the surrounding countries, developed over many years in response to economic opportunities. These were based first, on long distance trade, and then, in the colonial period, after the introduction of cocoa in the early twentieth century, on additional opportunities for seasonal work in rural areas. The migration of farm laborers from the Sahel to the more forest rural part of West Africa was

one aspect of this migration. Urban migration, based on kola, cattle, and other kinds of trading, and on the dissemination of Islamic scholarship, was another.

In Kumasi, the capital of the Asante region, this "stranger" community dates back to the late eighteenth century, long before the British conquest. While accommodating to the shifting constellation of political powers in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times, the strangers have never assimilated to the Asante host community, but rather have created a new community based on common religious beliefs, control over certain sectors of long distance trade, and language. While many speak Twi, the Asante language, and English, now the national language, the day to day language of the immigrant "stranger" community, known locally as the "Zongo," is Hausa, the language of northern Nigeria and a major trading language in West Africa.

This "stranger" status is very hard for many Americans to understand, because what it represents is the maintenance of multiple identities, accommodation to the customs and political structures of the host community, and an independence that at the same time allows people to maintain trans-national connections. People in this situation construct their complex identities by holding on to the multiple strands that link them to many different worlds. They are cosmopolitan, trans-national, and always aware of opportunities and dangers from every corner.

I once asked Ibrahim, the taxi-driver founder of the New York *'yankasa* community, how it was that people could arrive here from Ghana one day and be driving a taxi the next. "Easy," he said, "I just tell them that if they pick up someone in the Bronx, tell them they normally drive in Brooklyn so that the passenger will give directions, and if they pick up someone in Brooklyn, say they normally drive in the Bronx." This adaptability, and peoples' ability to enjoy and take advantage of the opportunities of a complicated multi-cultural world, is not new for West Africans, but rather has been part of their history and culture for centuries.

On the other hand, the possibility of maintaining multiple identities and living in multiple communities was not something envisioned by earlier generations of trans-Atlantic immigrants, for whom immigration was a wrenching rupture with the past. Obviously the wrenching history of the slave trade, which broke up families on arrival and obliterated everyone's past, left no room for nurturing connections. European migrants generally broke with their families in their home countries. My grandparents, for example, like many Eastern European Jews who came here at the turn of the 20th century, maintained no ties with "the old country"; people and places from the past were rarely mentioned, and everything was about starting over, changing, and becoming something else. Other choices followed from this rupture—the need for children to adopt all the

signs of becoming American including language, dress, the accoutrements of consumer culture, and even, for some, breaking ties to “old world” religions.

For many East Europeans of my grandparents’ era, not to mention Irish, Italians, Greeks, and others, becoming American meant becoming less “ethnic” which on some level meant becoming White although the definition of White was not self-evident or simply a question of skin color. Race was, for people from many places, not only those from Africa, Asia and South America, but Europe as well, the elephant in the room that is American life. Perhaps this is finally changing, but it surely is still not resolved.

While new African immigrants, and especially their children, have no difficulty in dealing with the complexities of multiple ethnic, national, and local identities, race is an issue that, for most of them, had little or no meaning in West Africa. To many, its importance in the American landscape is puzzling. At least until the election of Barack Obama ‘the question of whether they were African American may have been difficult to answer. It is a positive sign that all of these definitions are now shifting, and that many people are becoming more comfortable with multiple identities.