

UNCOMMON GROUND

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, AFRICANS AND AFRICAN-AMERICANS
STILL STRUGGLE TO COME TOGETHER

BY SHERRI WILLIAMS PHOTOGRAPHY BY VANDELL COBB

Mohamed Adam came to the United States 12 years ago fleeing ethnic and tribal clashes in his native Somalia that turned the East African country into a civil war zone.

He never imagined when he arrived in America that cultural conflict would put him in the center of another battle.

The Masjid Ibn Taymiya mosque in Columbus, Ohio, where Adam is the director and 1,400 Somali immigrants worship, has been repeatedly vandalized and congregants harassed. Vandals spray-painted “Go back to Africa” outside the mosque last November.

The hateful incidents displayed disdain for Adam’s congregation. But the sting went even deeper because the acts were committed by African-American youth in the mostly Black neighborhood where the mosque is located.

“When we came here we thought this was a peaceful land,” says Adam, 35, who spent four years in a refugee camp before coming to Columbus. “We already had enough trouble at home. We are trying to heal.”

In fact, healing among African immigrants and African-Americans is the goal in Columbus and other cities across the nation where descendants of Africa have experienced tension and violence while struggling to live among their American cousins.

Indeed, while Africans and African-Americans share skin color and ties to the continent, cultural differences have caused division. And conflict and cohesion between the two groups have emerged across the country as African immigration has increased nationally to 1.3 million Africans living here, according to the U.S. Census.

In Seattle, relations between African-Americans and East Africans were strained after a 2006 shooting outside an Ethiopian restaurant left an African immigrant dead. Now, a new coalition of representatives from both groups are working to mend the rift.

In New York City, where Ethiopians are the spiritual base of

his Harlem congregation, the Rev. Calvin O. Butts III, pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church, is helping cement a connection with Ethiopia through a pilgrimage to the East African nation and partnerships with Ethiopian leaders.

In Columbus, home to the nation’s second-largest Somali population with about 45,000 Somalis, growing pains have erupted into fights over the past decade as the face of Black neighborhoods has changed to include more Africans, shifting languages and traditions. According to a city official, at least 100,000 African immigrants from across the continent now live in Columbus, a city that has now become an African mecca in the Midwest.

Acts of aggression against Africans committed by African-Americans—including paintball attacks on congregants at the mosque—have caught the attention of authorities, says Columbus Police Commander Jeffrey Blackwell.

“It’s degrading,” says Blackwell, an African-American who grew up in the area where many Somalis live. “I equate that to the fire hoses in Mississippi... What we have [here] borderlines on hate crimes, Black-on-Black hate crimes.”

After misunderstandings between African and African-American neighbors at Columbus’ Three Rivers Apartments blew up into brawls last fall, an African-American family was evicted.

The sudden influx of African immigration has contributed to the tension, says Elwood Rayford, 67, an African-American neighborhood activist in Columbus.

“No one told us they were coming, what they were about or why there were here,” says Rayford, a 40-year resident of the area where many Somalis live. “And no one told them the truth about us. They have heard we are all criminals, drug dealers and prostitutes.”

In fact, stereotypes of Africans and African-Americans color how they relate to one another, says John A. Powell, director of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University.

“A lot of the negative things about African-Americans get portrayed in the media [and] get portrayed to Africans,” he says.



Hanah Mohamed is one of the students at Mifflin High School in Columbus, Ohio.

“We heard negative stuff about them too. Sometimes there is both identification and distancing. People are proud of Barack Obama and Tiger Woods and also think African-Americans are gangbangers. So it’s uneven.”

Some neighborhood leaders’ efforts to connect with Africans to create a sense of community have been met with reluctance by African leaders, Rayford says, with very little or no immigrant participation in activities.

But a language barrier, especially among Somali refugees who recently arrived, keeps Africans and African-Americans from communicating, says Abdirizak Farah, 43, a coordinator with the Columbus Community Relations Commission. “If I’m an African-American living in a neighborhood and someone comes in and doesn’t say anything to me, that leaves a lot to be misin-

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terpreted,” says Farah, a Somali who helped mediate between Somali and African-American neighbors.

First-generation immigrants are typically close-knit groups with intact religion, customs and language, and they associate mostly with one another. In fact the disconnect between Africans and African-Americans should come as no surprise because immigrants who share a link to a continent don’t always connect, Powell says. Even in Africa, problems exist among Africans.

Just as White Americans did not associate with Polish, German and Irish immigrants at the turn of the 20th century and they later merged into the White community, the same will eventually happen with African descendants, Powell says.

But that distance contributes to a sense of isolation African immigrants already feel when they arrive, says Hassan Omar, president of the Somali Community Association of Ohio.

“When you come to a new country, it’s like a baby being

born,” says Omar, 46. “You don’t know the language, the culture, the country... Since they are Black and they have lived in this country before we got here, we thought they would guide us and tell us how to live in this country. What they [Africans] got was resentment and lack of support.”

At the Three Rivers Apartments in suburban Columbus, fights among neighbors felt like another civil war, says Somali immigrant Tirig Mohamoud, 37. She has lived at the complex for five years and has thought of leaving because of the tense atmosphere.

“We would want to talk to one another, but we don’t understand one another,” says Mohamoud, who lives in the complex with her husband and four children.

Miscommunication and misconceptions about one another fueled a strained relationship, Farah says. Religious customs, including not knowing that Muslims do not shake hands with members of the opposite sex, have been unknown to some African-Americans. So, for example, when African-Americans have extended their hands to African brothers and sisters in friendship and did not receive a handshake back, Farah says, Somalis were seen as rude.

Part of African-American frustration with Africans boils down to economics with Africans appearing to prosper quickly while Black Americans continue to struggle economically, says Noel Williams, president of the NAACP branch in Columbus.

“It’s almost as if there is a betrayal,” says Williams, who is African-American. “Some African-Americans feel the Africans have betrayed us because they can get the [economic] access and they haven’t reached out to us.”

Financial frustrations among Africans and African-Americans came into focus in Seattle in 2006 after the shooting outside the Blue Nile restaurant left two African men wounded, one fatally. An African-American was the suspected shooter.

Immigrant business ownership in Black neighborhoods along with Black unemployment, including few Black employees in African-owned stores, emerged as a major issue in community discussions after the shooting, says the Rev. Robert Jeffrey Sr., pastor at New Hope Baptist Church in Seattle.

Black residents resented supporting African businesses and feeling like they weren’t getting anything back, while Africans felt they weren’t embraced by the Black community, Jeffrey says.

Years of work to defuse the tension has morphed into a partnership in which Africans and African-Americans in Seattle will jointly operate a farmers market set to open later this year.

“Most of the struggle is that we have to find common ground on which we need each other,” says Jeffrey, 60, who has lived in Seattle for 21 years. “We need the Africans. They connect us to many things that we’ve lost.”

Historically, Africans and African-Americans have been strong supporters of each other through waves of pan-Africanism, Powell says.

“African-Americans played a critical role in the [South African] anti-apartheid movement,” he says. “Nelson Mandela is admired by several people, especially African-Americans. It was real when Muhammad Ali went and fought in Africa. African people were extremely proud. There is conflict and there is tension. But there [also] is real symbolic and tangible unity.”

Some Africans do recognize and appreciate the paths African-Americans paved here to make life better for people of color, Farah says, because Africans on the continent face many



In Columbus, Babacar Ndiaye, a dance instructor and choreographer, leads a class at Thioassane West African Dance Institute.

of the same hurdles.

“They [Africans] are Black and plus they have an accent,” Farah says. “Any issues of discrimination will affect them even harder. It’s imperative that we Africans become part of the African-American community to work for civil rights and economic justice.”

During weekly dance classes at the Thioassane West African Dance Institute in Columbus, differences disappear and culture creates cohesion as arms sway and feet tap to the rapid-fire rhythm of ancient African sounds created by almost a dozen drummers.

Suzan Bradford-Kounta, an African-American who runs the institute with her Senegalese husband, Abdou Kounta, uses West African dance and drum to teach the traditions that link Africans and African-Americans.

“When people aren’t informed they can’t appreciate their differences,” she says. “When they do have that knowledge, they can see so many similarities.”

The kinship Africans feel with African-Americans is clear in Columbus at the Global Mall, where African immigrants own a variety of shops. Photos of Sen. Barack Obama and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. are taped to store windows. A biography about Rosa Parks sat near a register.

African youths stroll through shopping centers wearing the same low-hanging baggy jeans and gold chains as African-American youth.

But the need for more than a symbolic connection to African-Americans was clear to Omar, who runs a social services agency that assists Africans to acquire employment, education and language skills. The first week he arrived in Columbus in 1998 a

fight occurred between African and African-American neighbors at an apartment complex, Omar says. To help bridge the gap, he hired Sandra Murphy, an African-American case manager, to work with African immigrants to expose both groups to one another. African-American youths now participate in the Somali Community Association of Ohio’s after-school programs.

In fact, over the past decade relations between the groups have improved slightly in Columbus, Omar says, because community leaders are starting to realize Africans and African-Americans share some of the same struggles. “We share the same interests being minorities and being Black and poor,” he says.

Somalis who came from an environment where they were the majority and everyone looked the same are now grappling with belonging to a minority group and the discrimination that comes with it, Omar says.

Similar experiences and a shared oppressor can create a sense of unity and as the African immigrant population increases it will change the definition of what it means to be an African-American, Powell says.

“When Africans come here and spend time here, within a generation or two there is much greater identification with African-Americans, but it doesn’t happen right away,” he says.

Indeed, time and necessity may prove to be the ultimate unifying factors between African descendants in America, Williams says.

“We might as well come together and work together because we need each other,” she says.

—*Sherri Williams is a veteran journalist and a National Association of Black Journalists Ethel Payne Fellow.*