Chapter Ten

Arab Students: Surviving the Storms

> Acquire knowledge. It enables its possessor to distinguish right from wrong, it lights the way to heaven, it is our friend in the desert, our society in solitude, our compassion when friendless. It guides us to happiness; it sustains us in misery; it is an ornament among friends; it is armor against enemies.
>
> —Prophet Muhammad, Hadith

Early on a summer night, a white ice-cream truck rolled down a tree-lined street, luring children with its tinny rendition of "The Entertainer." A moment later, an undercover police officer wearing a red-white-and-blue bandana was kneeling over the prone body of an Arab American who had just been driving the truck. The officer was pointing a gun at the man's head.

How did this suburban scene jump so quickly from American to American Gothic? According to Arabs and Muslims, it has to do with another day, one that featured lightning-quick assaults on the American psyche: hijackings, jetliner crashes, and falling skyscrapers.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, unleashed a torrent of hatred and ugliness against Arabs and Muslims. Some say they have suffered small indignities, while others talk of blatant discrimination that violates their civil rights.

Abedulah Alkhateib, the Jordanian who was selling ice cream to supplement his salary as an engineer at Daimler Chrysler, was approached by an undercover detective dressed in a tank top and cut-off shorts. He also wore earrings and sunglasses. The detective was responding to calls from residents of the neighborhood who were suspicious of the dark-skinned man. They thought Abedulah was selling drugs because of a

backpack on the seat. The backpack was full of books. Abedulah was working on his doctorate at a local university.

The detective drew his gun and ordered Abedulah out of the truck and to his knees. He then kicked the Jordanian in the back so he was lying prone on the ground. "Are you Arabic?" asked the detective as he kicked Abedulah's legs and pointed his gun at his left temple. Abedulah was then handcuffed, and a police dog was used to search the truck for drugs. After an hour Abedulah was released. He was badly shaken and his ice cream was melted and spoiled. The police defended their actions.

Other Arabs and Muslims can relate to Abedulah's experience. They, too, are nursing bruised and angry feelings since 9/11. The complaints range from job discrimination to violence and name-calling. The alleged discrimination has come from all directions: employers, neighbors, police officials, and passers-by in the street. Arabs and Muslims have been insulted unknowingly by friends and openly by strangers. They feel constantly on the defensive to explain Islam. Arab immigrants feel like outcasts. They have to constantly prove their loyalty to their adopted homeland. The irony is that many came to America to escape just this sort of thing.

Discrimination has grown since 9/11. Lives have been changed. Some Muslim women are less likely to wear their headscarves, called hijabs, worried that it could prompt an angry outburst by strangers. Others Americanize their first names to fit in better. Ibrahim becomes Abe, and Muhammad is Mike. They are afraid to exercise their freedom of speech, worried that any criticism of the United States' actions in the Middle East or here at home may make them look like enemies of the state.

Local imams now preach in tones similar to those of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in the early 1960s. They tell followers that they are being closely watched so their behavior must be beyond reproach.

To understand our Arab wave of immigrants we look at land, people, history, and culture. Arabs follow many ways of life, but they are united mainly by their history and their culture. Most Arabs live in the Middle East, which spreads across southwestern Asia and northern Africa. Arabs have also migrated to such countries as Brazil, England, Canada, France, and the United States.

Approximately 200 million Arabs live in the Arab world, which is defined politically and linguistically. Politically, the Arab world is usually

said to include the following countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The people and their governments regard themselves as Arab. In a linguistic sense, the term *Arab world* refers to those areas where most people speak Arabic as their native language.

Originally, the word *Arab* was probably associated with the camel-herding nomadic tribes of the Arabian Peninsula and nearby parts of the Middle East. Later, it was applied to settled people who spoke the Arabic language. Today almost all Arabs live in cities, towns, or villages.

Many aspects of their culture today unite Arabs, above all their language, literature, and music. Religious and historical factors also bond the people together. Most Arabs are Muslims, following a religion called Islam. Their rise to political and cultural importance during the Middle Ages was closely associated with the rise of Islam. The modern Arab identity emerged during the 1800s and 1900s, when most Arab lands were colonies of European powers.

Despite this common heritage, deep differences exist among Arab countries. For example, many Arab countries possess valuable petroleum deposits. The export of oil has made countries like Kuwait and Qatar extremely wealthy. Other countries, such as the Sudan and Yemen, remain poor. Some countries, including Jordan and Lebanon, have highly urban societies where many people work in industry or commerce. Others, such as Mauritania and Yemen, have rural societies that rely on farming or herding. Lebanon and Tunisia have been heavily influenced by Western culture, while Oman and Saudi Arabia remain strongly traditional. These and other differences have caused conflicts, and even wars, within the Arab world.

LIFE IN THE ARAB WORLD

When people think of Arabs, they often picture nomadic herders or Bedouins, living in tents and crossing the desert with their camels, sheep, goats, or cattle, in search of water and grazing land. Today, less than 1% of Arabs are nomads. Livestock herding now resembles ranching rather than nomadic life, and animals, even camels, are transported by truck.

About half of all Arabs live in cities or large towns, working in factories, businesses, government, and health care. Others live in villages and farm or work in local trades.

Arabs strongly value family ties and hospitality. Traditionally, Arabs have placed great importance on belonging to family or kinship groups, including the extended family, clan, and tribe. The extended family includes members of two or more generations, many of them sharing one home. A clan consists of several related families. A tribe might include hundreds of families.

Today, some kinship ties have loosened, especially in the cities. The impact of Western values and the need for some people to move far from home to earn a living have tended to weaken family relationships. However, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives, in addition to parents, raise many Arab children. It is still common for parents to arrange their children's marriages. Women still form the focus of family life. They supervise the raising of children, preparation of meals, and organization of family celebrations. Due to economic pressures and educational opportunities, a growing number of women are working outside the home.

Until the 1900s, religious authorities operated most schools in the Arab world. Today, all Arab nations have free, nonreligious primary and secondary schools. In most Arab countries, about 90% of all children receive at least an elementary education. Kuwait has 85% of its children attending secondary schools and even offers special education services for disabled individuals. More women attend school in Kuwait than any other Arab nation. In Jordan, all children are required to attend school through the 9th grade. The government controls all schools, and a United Nations agency operates several schools for Palestinian refugees. Most adults in Jordan can read and write. In Egypt, children between the ages of 6 and 14 are required to attend school. Attendance is enforced for ages 6 to 12. One half go on to high school. Overcrowding, lack of funds, and lack of teachers have hindered the Egyptian educational system. In Iran, little is known about the quality of education or the number of students attending school. The government requires children from 7 to 11 to attend school. Many teachers have left the system; others have been executed for counterrevolutionary activities. Girls and boys in Iran are educated separately at all levels. All education is free, but those students attending the university must agree to work for the government for the number of years equal to

the time spent at the university. Arab institutions of higher education have existed for centuries. Al-Azhar University in Cairo was founded in 970. Today there are approximately 85 universities in the Arab world.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ARAB WORLD

As we explore a brief history of the Arab World we find that the word Arab first appears in documents about 850 BC. The documents, written by the Assyrians (a people residing in what is now Iraq) suggest that the early Arabs were nomadic camel herders centered in what is now Jordan and Israel.

About 400 BC Arab families or tribes began to establish small states, often at centers for the overland caravan trade. Roman influence reached its height around 200 AD. The prophet Muhammad was born about 570 AD, and history saw the rise and spread of Islam. A sense of Arab identity emerged in connection with the spread of Islam. By the mid-1500s, nearly all Arab lands were under the control of the Ottoman Empire.

By the mid-1700s the rapid economic and military development of much of Europe gave the European states control of the Arab world. France controlled Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. England took over Egypt and the Sudan, and Italy took over Libya in 1912. By the 1920s nationalism grew into a major movement throughout the area. From 1920 to the 1970s, Arab countries struggled for independence. In 1945, seven countries founded the Arab League. Today 21 countries belong to the league, which works to promote closer political, economic, and social relations among its numbers.

The Arab-Israeli conflict can best be described and understood as a struggle between two nationalist movements, both of which claim Palestine as their national homeland. Tension between the Arabs and Jewish settlers has existed since Israel became a state in 1948. Thousands of people died in wars fought in 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, and 1987.

ARABS TODAY

Arabs today continue to face major challenges. The problems of poverty, overpopulation, poor health care, and inadequate educational facilities are

severe in some Arab states. In others, enormous oil wealth has provided high-quality medical care and education. Another challenge is to find ways to solve religious or ethnic conflicts, such as that between Arabs and Kurds in Iraq or among Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, Christians, and Druses in Lebanon, as well as the Arab-Israeli dispute. Arabs must also deal with the powerful conflicts between Islamic tradition and the influence of the West.

With the exception of Arab Americans, the typical citizen of the United States has been exposed to little information that provides humanistic and realistic insight into the identity of the Arab peoples. Shaped by a lack of multicultural education and a prejudiced, uninstructed film industry and television media as well as newsprint, American perceptions about Arabs range from the overly romanticized to the harmfully negative. Terrorism, 9/11, and the war in Iraq have added to the negativity.

Many Americans narrowly stereotype Arabs as greedy billionaires, corrupt sheiks, terrorists, desert nomads, camel-riding chieftains, slave traders, oil blackmailers, sex maniacs, harem girls, enslaved maidens, belly dancers, and veiled women. Arabs are often described as barbaric, uncultured, uneducated, committed to a religion dedicated to war, quick to torture and behead, and responsible for the conflict with Israel. With little or no knowledge of the Arab peoples' rich heritage and accomplishments, the American public perceives Arabs as "anti-American," "anti-Christian," "cunning," and "war-like."

Despite, or perhaps because of, the continuation of negative Arab images, a countertrend to dispel misconceptions is rising today. This trend to combat defamation of both Arabs and Arab Americans has been influenced by a number of factors. Increasing numbers and visibility of Arab immigrants and the rapidly expanding relations between the United States and the Arab world have sparked a much-delayed interest in Arab Americans and their counterparts abroad. Educated immigrants as well as foreign students in colleges and universities have played an important part in the political and cultural revival of the Arab American communities and the revitalization of the doctrine and traditions of Islam.

Furthermore, the former Iran hostage situation, the invasion of Kuwait, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Afghanistan conflict, civil wars between Christians and Muslims, oil boycotts, and the control of major natural resources of the area as well as 9/11, the current war in Iraq, and the war on terrorism have magnified the need for the American educational system to present accurate information about Middle Eastern cultures.

WHO ARE THE ARAB AMERICANS?

Arab Americans are a very heterogeneous group of people who are multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic. Although "Arab" and "Muslim" are often linked together in the popular culture, many Arabs are Christians and many Muslims are not Arabs.

The first wave of Arab immigrants came between 1875 and 1930 from regions now known as Syria and Lebanon. Ninety percent were Christian and assimilated quickly and with relative ease into their new country. The first wave consisted largely of young unmarried men, not well educated. They came to America with little capital, limited skills, and speaking little or no English. The immigrants worked diligently as pack peddlers, and some achieved a large fortune quickly. They walked a fine line in trying to balance religious and cultural traditions with social pressures from the schools and the larger society. These men married into other cultures and gave up the Arab family structure.

A second wave of Arab immigrants began to arrive after World War II. They were seeking economic opportunity. Later they came because of the Arab-Israeli conflict and civil war. The second wave also practiced Islam, a religion that was not well known in the United States. Most of this group were college graduates or came in pursuit of higher education. Palestinians, Egyptians, Syrians, and Iraqis dominated this wave. They came to the United States with an Arab identity shaped by Cold War politics and the Arab-Israeli conflict. They were less likely to assimilate at the cost of losing their ethnic identity. A devout adherence to the practice of Islam has deepened their interest in Arab tradition and culture. Schools also began to teach Arabic.

The U.S. government does not classify Arabs as a minority group. They are not defined specifically by race but are united by culture and language. The anti-Arab sentiments and "terrorist" stereotyping in America today have increasingly impacted many of this group.

Arab Americans are citizens or residents of the United States who are

immigrants or descendants of immigrants who came to the United States primarily from the countries that constitute the present Arab world. Arab Americans are extremely diverse with regard to their country of origin, the beginning of their family ancestry in America, and their religion. Estimates say approximately 3.5 million Arabs reside in the United States.

Religious diversity is characteristic of both the Arab world and the Arab American population. Although it is true that Islam is the religion of the majority of Arabs in the Arab countries, many Americans are often surprised to learn that of the 200 million Arabs living in Arab countries, including North Africa, nearly 14 million are Christians and 10,000 are Jewish. Arab Christians comprise the Catholic, Orthodox (Greek and Roman), and Protestant churches. It is significant to note that Arab Muslims are increasing in number among recent immigrant populations. It is also significant to note that Islam is (after Christianity) the second largest religious group in the United States at this time.

Arab Americans live throughout the United States, with the majority residing in California, New York, New Jersey, and Michigan. The top five metropolitan areas are Los Angeles, New York City, Detroit, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. Lebanese Americans constitute a larger number of the total population of Arab Americans residing in most states except New Jersey, where Egyptian Americans are the largest Arab group. Americans of Syrian descent make up the majority of Arab Americans in Rhode Island. The largest Palestinian population is in Illinois, and the Iraqi and Assyrian/Chaldean communities are concentrated in Illinois, Michigan, and California (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Descendants of earlier immigrants and more recent immigrants work in all sectors of society and are leaders in many professions and organizations. As a community, Arab Americans have a strong commitment to family, economic, and educational achievements and make contributions to all aspects of American life. Their Arab heritage reflects a culture that is thousands of years old and includes many diverse Arab countries.

To understand and appreciate Arab Americans, one must remember that Western civilization owes a large measure of its heritage to the Arab World of the past. One must also remember that people of Arab descent have made modern contributions in almost every field of endeavor. In truth, the impact of the Arab American has never been greater, and the reality of what is observed does not fit the stereotypes harbored by many Americans. Most Americans should recognize the names of Arab Americans such as John Sununu, U.S. senator from New Hampshire; George Mitchell, former U.S. Senate Majority Leader, Doug Flutie, former professional football player; Rony Seikaly, professional baseball player; Abe Gebron, Chicago Bears coach; Casey Kasem, Paula Abdul, and Paul Anka, music entertainers; Marlo Thomas and Jamie Farr, television entertainers; the late Danny Thomas, entertainer and founder of St. Jude's Hospital (recognized for research on and treatment of children afflicted with cancer and leukemia); Helen Thomas, senior White House correspondent and United Press International journalist; Najieb Halaby, former head of the Federal Aviation Administration and holder of the aviation record for the first transcontinental solo jet flight across the United States, also journalist and father of Lisa Halaby, Queen Noor of Jordan; Vance Bourjaily, prominent novelist and author of *The Man Who Knew Kennedy;* John Haggar, founder and CEO of Haggar Slacks; Emile Khouri, creator of the Disneyland architectural conception; Dr. Michael De Bakey, pioneer heart surgeon and inventor of the heart-lung bypass pump; Cindy Lightner, founder of Mothers Against Drunk Driving; Christine McAuliffe, first teacher in space and one of the seven crew members who died aboard the space shuttle *Challenger*; and Ralph Nader, consumer advocate.

For years, Americans ignored Arabs. In the fall of 1973, when Arab states cut back oil production while at the same time the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) raised prices sharply, Americans for the first time had great reason to think about the Arab world and the millions of American Arabs both American and foreign born. As the U.S. economy suffered and worldwide panic set in, many realized that a bridge between Americans, Arab Americans, and the Arab world was essential. Subsequent events of international significance, particularly the current U.S. military action against Iraq, brought this realization into greater focus. The American people are struggling to recognize and understand their newest, and one of their fastest-growing, ethnic groups.

THE MODERN ARAB WORLD: AN ERA OF POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, EDUCATIONAL, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The 19th and 20th centuries brought new changes that impacted the Arab world's political and economic status, educational systems, and social

life. Political and economic changes were influenced greatly by foreign interference. European colonial powers began to gain economic power in the Middle East and undermine the control and the power of the Ottoman Empire. The positive focus by the European powers on the Christian sects eventually led to an even more pronounced division between Muslims and Christians. The Arab world was faced with requests for the reform of Islamic law. Some of these reforms centered on equality for men and women. Numerous Arab sectors resisted the European domination, and struggles for independence ensued.

In 1948, lasting and devastating effects of the Jewish Holocaust influenced the British to play a key role in the creation of a Jewish state (Israel) in Palestine, causing the exile of thousands of Arab Palestinians from their homeland. The final conquest of Jerusalem by the Israelis in 1967 caused again the exile of thousands of Palestinians.

Since World War II, the modern Arab World has experienced many other changes. The desire for Arab nationalism, social justice, acquisition of education, and closer unity among Arab groups has been prevalent throughout the Arab countries. Economic growth has been rapid thanks to oil resources. Revolts, riots, and wars have taken their toll. Throughout the years, the goal has been Arab solidarity.

SOCIAL LIFE: FAMILY, HONOR, AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN

The roots of modern Arab family life are found in the ancient Arab traditions. Strong family ties and group loyalty were cherished. Family bound its members in work and leisure; food also tied families together.

Arab cuisine is known for flavor and its use of fresh ingredients. The staple in every Arab's diet is bread called *aish*, which is a darker form of the pita bread in the Greek culture. Fava beans are also important in the diet. At an Arab meal it is expected to have a soup, meat, vegetable stew, bread, salad, and rice or pasta. The desserts are mostly fruit.

Everyone works to preserve Arab status, honor, and welfare. Families provide economic and emotional support. The family's survival is placed above individual needs. During the 20th century, changes began with regard to the roles of women and the structure of the family. Change came

slowly because of social customs that were deeply rooted in the core of the Arabic culture. Women were expected to yield their own interests and goals to the male family members. The education of Arab women lagged behind owing to political, historical, and economic reasons.

Currently, progress in women's education has accelerated and is given top priority. The rapid rate of women's enrollment in all levels of education is becoming more evident. Modernization has taken root, but for most Arabs, life is still organized around their religion, and their values are expressed in relation to the family.

IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN EDUCATION

An old Arab proverb says, "To see yourself in a different light look through someone else's eyes." The presence of approximately 3 million Arab Americans that include increasing numbers of visiting Arab students and a burgeoning population of new immigrants from Arab countries all have noteworthy implications for the U.S. educational system. The problems faced include cultural and behavioral norms and the curricula of the U.S. schools. The displays of overt and covert prejudice and discrimination toward people of color and different ethnic backgrounds must end. Multicultural education should be the norm, and teachers must learn to become culturally responsive to the unique needs of students of Arab descent.

To accomplish outcomes teachers must have a broad and in-depth command of both the ancient and the modern histories that undergird today's Arab and Arab American culture. Thus the histories, cultures, religions, and contributions of Arab Americans, which are largely ignored in the pages of American textbooks, must be placed alongside those of other previously excluded groups in the school curricula. Respect for and acceptance of diversity and the inclusion of multicultural education within our educational institutions are the life-support systems to enable all students to define their role in history and to legitimize their own cultural values, beliefs, customs, and ideas, improving the educational, economical, and social survival of all students. While understanding Arab culture broadly, it is equally important that teachers also recognize the great

diversity within Arab culture and see the child of Arab descent as an individual.

Children who have recently emigrated from the Arab world are coming from countries that are seeing deterioration in individual and political freedom. There are few preschools, and there are shortages of classrooms, lack of professionally qualified teachers, very few counselors, librarians, or technology. Dropout rates are high, and the matriculation rates less than 10 percent in many Arab states. The post 9/11 anti-Arab backlash and the fact that the United States won't grant visas has denied many young Arabs the opportunity to study in the United States. Access to digital media is among the lowest in the world. There are 18 computers per 1,000 students compared to the global average of 78 per 1,000 students. Only 1.6% of over 270 million Arabs have Internet access, also one of the lowest rates in the world (*USA Today Weekend*, 2005).

Are American teachers aware of the following:

- Some Arab students tap a pencil to help keep them on task.
- Many Arab students can't memorize spelling words unless they spell the words out loud.
- Many Arab students are kinesthetic learners; they move around and use their large muscles.
- Other Arab students are tactile learners and work best when they are able to feel using small motor muscles.
- Many Arab students only learn academically after they have formed personal relationships with the teacher.
- Still other Arab students are visual learners and work best when they are able to see, watch, read, and view.

Teachers should know, for instance, that Arab Americans and Arab "foreign" students often face social and psychological displacement when confronted with a new language, methods, and curriculum that are foreign to the culture they know. Many students feel it is their responsibility, their duty, to maintain their native culture, yet they need to feel comfortable with the culture of their new target language, English. In addition, behaviors reinforced within the Arab home are often not regarded in the same way outside the home, especially in school settings. The learning required by two different cultures (home and school) may lead to a lack

of "fit," which may have detrimental effects on the development of adolescent self-esteem. For example, an important characteristic of Arab culture concerns the idea of "face." Teachers may find that the parents of Arab students are very sensitive to public criticism. Consequently, criticism should be shared in a way that will minimize loss of face and honor for both the student and the family.

Also, teachers must realize the problems of acculturation. Many Arab children are bilingual or trilingual; many speak Arabic, French, and English. Matters of religion, diet, hygiene, gender roles, social distance, and punctuality reflect cultural differences that are often misunderstood. Many may experience feelings of loneliness, hostility, indecision, frustration, sadness, and homesickness. They are caught between cultures, not sure which they belong to. Cultural stress or shock may linger.

Arab American students must confront harsh American perceptions of their way of life and the differences that tend to isolate them from the mainstream. For example, Arab Americans enjoy proximity to one another when talking. Members of the same gender are known to walk arm-in-arm or to hold hands, a behavior normal for Arabs but often unaccepted within mainstream America. Additionally, features of their language, such as loudness and intonation patterns, perfectly acceptable in their own mother tongue, unfortunately can have connotations of rudeness, anger, and/or hostility as they attempt to speak in a new language.

Teaching within a pluralistic society further requires educators to realize that traditional Arab customs and values, especially from students who have a Muslim heritage and sometimes other cultural religious heritages, pose unique difficulties in typical U.S. school settings. For instance, male students who have never been exposed to female authority figures may have difficulty following orders from women teachers and administrators. Also a lack of familiarity with deodorant has often led to the practice of washing hands and face with cologne, usually reinforcing the U.S. perspective of being unclean, when in reality cleanliness is greatly valued but culturally addressed from a different perspective. Punctuality, in contrast to the value placed on it by most middle-class Americans, may also present a problem. Some Arabs may place little significance on being late. Tardiness is not considered a sign of disrespect. With regard to food, Muslims, who are forbidden to eat pork, often find it served as an entrée in school cafeterias.

Again, their differences are often brought to the forefront without any attempt to understand the rationale that gives value to them. Many Arab students fast during the month of Ramadan and may appear tired or irritable during this period. Teachers should be understanding of the strength and endurance required by these young people to commit to the doctrines of their faith. Ramadan is a chance for Arabs to reaffirm their cultural traditions and values. Teachers need to be patient and supportive during this period when some students may withdraw from or be isolated by classmates who perceive difference as being strange, wrong, or unacceptable.

Arab Americans are bound by a common ancient heritage, language, and culture. In spite of the effects of enculturation and acculturation in American lifestyles, it is clear that family unity, honor, religious beliefs and practices, feelings of identity with their homelands, and many other traditional values and customs remain strong in Arab American culture.

Even though American schools need to change their instructional methods and curriculum, Arab students are surviving. Statistics show that 85% of Arab Americans have at least a high school diploma. More than 40% of Arab Americans have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 24% of Americans at large. Seventeen percent of Arab Americans have postgraduate degrees, which is nearly twice the American average of 9% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Many Arab Americans go on to use their degrees as they seek employment in managerial, professional, technical, sales, or administrative fields. Twelve percent are government employees.

Arab Americans are well educated, diverse, affluent, and highly entrepreneurial. Though Arab Americans are the least-studied ethnic group in the United States, they receive considerable publicity associated with political and economic events at home and in the Middle East. The media often put them on the defensive. Arab Americans simply want to enjoy America's riches while preserving the important parts of their native culture.

An Arab American high school student sums up the feelings of many Arab Americans: "I know now how to see below the surface of things in order to gain a deeper understanding of the world around me. I have learned to understand and gradually accept the American way of life."

Recognizing the great importance of preparing young Arab Americans for their roles as thoughtful and informed citizens of the 21st century

challenges society to acknowledge that American involvement with the Middle Eastern nations and the world of Islam is certain to remain significant. Arab countries provide the United States with 80% of its oil, provide a place for employment for many Americans in the Persian Gulf area, and serve as a market for American goods and services. In turn, the United States opens its schools to provide quality education for Middle Eastern youth and continues to draw thousands of Arab immigrants to its shores annually. The Arab culture and population are becoming more visible.

Thus, an essential goal for educators ought to be to increase awareness and understanding of the Arab people through the study of their history, culture, religion, and contributions. An equally important educational goal should be to dispel the misconceptions and stereotypes about Arabs that continue to be promoted through the media. The Arab caricature in the United States continues to be dehumanizing, depriving the Arab American of much-deserved respect and ethnic pride. We, as educators, have a great opportunity as well as a moral and ethical responsibility to address aggressively these heinous forms of bigotry.

Living in a pluralistic society should not make it virtually impossible for ordinary people and highly sensitized educators alike to ignore the value of any of its citizens as contributing and distinctive members of American society. Education must become the vehicle for eliminating Arab stereotypes, as well as all stereotypes, and replacing them with understanding and acceptance. Educators are fortunate indeed to be in a position that allows them to reach out to all cultures in order to form bonds of friendship, savor shared memories, and create mutual respect for cultural traditions. In truth, the embracing of diversity is, and will remain, essential to America's social health and prosperity. Teachers should not fear diversity; rather, they should enjoy its gifts.

Chapter Eleven

Somali and 21st-Century African Students: Drums of the Future

> When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.
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> —Audre Lorde

From Senegal, Ghana, Ethiopia, Mali, Nigeria, Kenya, Eritrea, Somalia, and many other areas, Africans are making their way to America to start new lives, just as the first African adventurers and colonists did over 400 years ago. These new arrivals are coming in great numbers. However, there is a difference: they are not arriving in chains.

The new Africans are coming to a country that has seen dramatic changes during the past four centuries, and a nation that has been profoundly shaped by the long African experience in America. It is a country where people of African ancestry now hold positions of power, prestige, and influence as the nation continues to grapple with the aftermath of segregation and inequality. It is a country that has seen three of its more prominent black American citizens—diplomat Ralph Bunche, civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and novelist Toni Morrison—awarded the Nobel Prize.

America is also a country that has been influenced in recent decades by the arrival of immigrants from the Caribbean, the descendants of Africans who were taken to those islands as slaves. The immigrants and their children have also made their mark on American life, including Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman elected to Congress, and General Colin Powell, who has served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and as U.S. secretary of state. Modern Africans, such as Kool D. J. Herc, were

instrumental in the creation of hip-hop, which has continued African American music's ongoing conquest of the world.

AFRICA TODAY

The African continent is an immense plateau, broken by a few mountain ranges and bordered in some areas by a narrow coastal plain. Africa stretches 5,000 miles north to south and over 4,600 miles across at its widest part. It is a land of striking contrasts and great natural wonders, from dense tropical rain forests; to high mountain ranges; to the world's largest desert, the Sahara; to grasslands where elephants, giraffes, zebras, lions, and many other animals live.

Africa is divided into 53 independent countries and several other political units. The largest country, the Sudan, has an area of 967,500 square miles, and the smallest country, Seychelles, has a land area of only 176 square miles. The most heavily populated area, Nigeria, has more than 125 million people, and two fifths of all African countries have fewer than 5 million people each.

The African people belong to several population groups and have many cultural backgrounds. South of the Sahara, where most Africans live, blacks form the great majority of the population. They are divided into over 800 ethnic groups, each with its own language (over 1,000 languages are spoken), religion, and way of life. The large number of ethnic groups of uneven size has made it difficult for many African countries to develop into unified, modern nations. Ethnic differences have led to civil wars in several of the African nations.

About two thirds of all Africans live in rural areas where they make a living growing crops or raising livestock. In many parts of rural Africa, the people live as their ancestors did hundreds of years ago. However, since the 1960s and 1970s millions of rural Africans have flocked to the cities, where traditional lifestyles are being replaced by more modern ways.

Agriculture is the leading economic activity, but most farmers use outdated tools and methods to farm thin, poor soil. In case of crop failure or drops in world market prices, a country's economy suffers. The majority

of African nations rely heavily on aid from countries outside the continent.

Nearly 200 million Africans practice local traditional religions. Each ethnic group has its own beliefs and practices. In general, however, local religions have many features in common. They teach what is right and wrong and define relationships between human beings and nature, and between young and old. Nearly 150 million Africans are Muslims, and about 130 million are Christians.

FAMILY

Strong feelings of loyalty and cooperation bind African families closely together. The family helps its members (parents, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins) with business concerns, employment, legal matters, and other affairs. The family also cares for the sick and the elderly. Marriage is thought of as a way to acquire more relatives, and to have children. Bride wealth, in the form of money, livestock, or other valuables must be given to a woman's family before the man may marry her. Many African ethnic groups also practice polygamy.

EDUCATION

Education began hundreds of years ago when Muslim scholars established some of the first schools in Africa. These schools taught Islam, the Arabic language, and science. But for most Africans, education did not involve going to school. Parents taught their children what they needed to know to get along in the community and to make a living. Young Africans were trained in such skills as metalworking, wood carving, pottery making, and weaving. Christian missionaries taught some groups how to read and write as early as the 1500s. However, large advances in education did not begin until the 1900s when the European colonial powers decided that they needed more Africans to fill jobs in government and industry.

Today, many African governments strive to build schools and to extend education to as many people as possible. Over one half of all children in Ethiopia ages 7 to 11 attend school for 5 hours per day. Those who attend

learn three languages, including English, as well as science, mathematics, reading, writing, and health. Still many children do not go to school at all. Education for them is learning to do what the adults do and finding adults with the time to show and train them. Because of the very high unemployment rates, many parents have adopted the "why bother with school?" attitude. The children will have no jobs anyway. Only 25 percent of the adults in Ethiopia read or write.

Ghana requires all children to attend school for six years (three in elementary and three in middle school). The students are taught reading, writing, math, and English, the official language of Ghana. Sixty-four percent of all adults read and write. In many areas of Ghana there are no school buildings so the students bring their own chairs and tables and set up outdoors. If it rains, they find shelter under trees.

In Nigeria children attend school from ages 6 to 12. The first three years they are taught in their native tongue. After third grade, math, science, reading, and history are taught in English. Bush schools still exist where students learn the ways of their ancestors. Men teach the boys to hunt, make tools, and care for animals. Women teach the girls about cooking, sewing, and making crafts.

In Kenya, 57% of the adults can read and write. Only half of the children in Kenya attend school. Schooling is not regulated by the government. Elementary school is offered from ages 7 to 11. One in every seven children goes on to high school. All levels of schooling are taught in Swahili and English. In some remote villages, children learn about farming and raising livestock. Elders come to the villages and teach tribal dance, crafts, and folklore. Most adults in Kenya over the age of 40 cannot read or write.

In South Africa, during the apartheid years, black and white children attended separate schools. Since 1993, all children have been taught in the same classrooms. The children are required to attend school from age 7 to age 16. South African children are taught all subjects in both their native language and English. In the urban areas and in most rural areas, 82% of the adults can read and write.

Most African governments are committed to education. However, crushing poverty is one of the most overwhelming problems these African nations face. Many adults throughout Africa cannot read or write. The literacy rate varies from country to country. In many rural areas there is a

shortage of schools, educational materials, and qualified teachers. A significant number of children still do not attend school at all, and others leave after only a few years. Progress is being made, but the process is very slow.

HISTORY OF AFRICA

Africa has a rich history. One of the world's first great civilizations, ancient Egypt, arose along the banks of the Nile river over 5,000 years ago. Later, other powerful and culturally advanced kingdoms and empires developed in Africa. About the time of Christ, southward migrations began because of the constant need for more land to support a growing population. The rise of Islam was a very important development that helped shape African history. Kingdoms in Western Africa began to flourish about 1000 AD owing to trade routes and the increased use of gold, silver, and copper. The eastern, central, and southern kingdoms flourished because of trade routes to India, Indonesia, and China.

During the 1400s and 1500s Europeans began to establish trading posts in Africa. Gold and slaves became two of the continent's most valuable exports. By the 1800s, Europeans competed fiercely for control of Africa's resources. By 1900, Europe had carved almost all of Africa into colonial empires. Many Africans resisted colonial rule from the beginning, but the demands for independence did not become a powerful mass movement until the mid-1900s. Between 1950 and 1980, 47 African colonies gained independence. However, leaders in many of these new nations could not handle the social and economic problems that remained after independence. Military officers overthrew the governments of many nations. Military dictatorships emerged or a single political party became the ruling power. Civil wars broke out in the Congo, Nigeria, Chad, and other countries. Today, ethnic rivalries and territorial disputes continue to threaten the stability of Africa.

Africa today continues to face serious problems including poverty, illiteracy, disease, and shortages of food. One of the worst droughts in history struck Africa in the early 1980s. Thousands died of starvation, especially in Ethiopia.

In many African countries economic and social development is handi-

capped by dependence on one or two products as sources of national income. Inflation has caused Africa to pay more for the manufactured goods it imports. Ethnic rivalries continue to divide many countries.

WINDS OF CHANGE

Many people see signs of hope in Africa in spite of all its problems. More Africans than ever before are attending school and developing skills needed to improve their standard of living. The finding and mining of mineral deposits in Angola, Gabon, and Nigeria is helping these countries to attain greater economic strength.

African nations are also trying to work together to solve common problems. Various groups are trying to find peaceful solutions to disputes between nations and promote economic relationships. It is the hope that greater cooperation will lead to greater progress and stability throughout the continent.

Let us now look more closely at two groups of African immigrants who are arriving in the United States in large numbers in the 21st century, Somalis and Algerians.

SOMALIA

Somalia is the easternmost country on the mainland of Africa. Its coastline, which runs along the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, forms the outer edge of the horn of Africa. About 95% of Somalia's people share the same language (Somali), culture, and religion (the Sunni branch of Islam). More than two thirds of the population are nomads. During the dry season the nomads concentrate in villages near water sources. When the rains begin, the nomads disperse with their herds.

The basis of Somali society is the clan, a large, self-contained kinship group, consisting of a number of families claiming common descent from a male ancestor.

In the 1980s, Somalia had an influx of refugees numbering nearly 1 million driven by war and drought from Ethiopia. During the 1990s hundreds of thousands of Somalis died as a result of the violence, starvation,

and disease that accompanied the drought and civil war. An estimated 1 million refugees fled the country. Many of the Somalia refugees came to the United States.

Education in Somalia

Because of the civil war and drought many children have never been in school. Fewer than 20% of all Somali children attend school, and most of the adult population cannot read or write, even though education at the primary level is compulsory in urban areas but not enforced in rural areas. At the age of 3 children go to Quranic school to learn how to read and write the Qur'an. At age 7 many can read and write Arabic. Secondary education is not compulsory so even fewer than 20% attend school. There is no special education program, and children born since the civil war are not receiving a reliable education.

Somalia Today

Somalia today is trying to regroup from the rebels who overthrew the United Somali Congress and dictator Mohamed Barro, who had been the ruling force in 1991. The fighting disrupted agricultural production, which was already suffering from the effects of a prolonged drought, and an estimated 1.5 million Somalis were threatened with starvation. By December 1992, about 270,000 Somalis had starved to death. In 1993, a multinational peace force, led by the United States, intervened to secure food supplies. This group of peacekeepers was forced to withdraw in 1995 in the face of violent clan assaults. Physical and social infrastructure (roads, bridges, water, law and order, education and health services) have virtually collapsed. Authorities are able to provide only the basic administrative framework (security and trade) while the needs of the people (health, education, and food) are largely unmet. In 1997, heavy rains caused flooding in the south, and floods killed about 1,300 people. More than 200,000 were forced from their homes. Again, many countries saw an influx of Somali immigrants, including the United States.

Somalis in the United States

Since 2002, by some estimates, more than 40,000 Somali immigrants have settled in the state of Minnesota alone (making Minnesota home to

one of the largest Somali communities in the United States), leaving behind possessions, relatives, and a country ravaged by civil war, for a new life in a radically different culture in America. The largest communities are located in Los Angeles, San Diego, Atlanta, and Detroit. The one thing they could not leave behind was their Islamic faith. "We think, act, and live within the framework of Islam," said an elderly Somali man, newly arrived in Minneapolis.

As the Somali population grows, it is not uncommon for Islamic values to collide with the practices of American schools. Among the issues raised by the clash of cultures, the Islamic requirement to pray has proved a particular challenge for both Somali students and their teachers. Daily prayer is part of their way of life. Five prayers must be done at fixed times each day (approximately at noon, midafternoon, sunset, early evening, and at 6:00 a.m.). For a Muslim student, at least two of these prayer times fall during school hours. Another issue is food. Pork is strictly forbidden. Schools with Somali students must provide lunches to accommodate Islamic dietary requirements. Both issues can and should be accommodated in our American school system.

To better understand the Somali families and their children who are enrolled in our schools, we must explore and learn about their culture and beliefs as well as their educational background. Somali students can be divided into two groups: students who attended school in Somalia and students who are new to the educational system. The first group will have fewer problems in the American school system if their cultural needs are met. The second group will have more problems because they have never been in school before, have never spoken a language other than their native language, have never lived in large cities, and have never experienced a culture other than their own. These students need help to cope with their new education. They need more explanation about how and when to use a pen or pencil and how to use crayons, paper, scissors, and so forth.

Somali students can be successful in the American educational system without rejecting their culture. However, we must be aware of traditions that may create barriers that can affect the life of the Somali student. The meaning of dress, food, prayer, greeting, and other elements of tradition relates to educational performance. Understanding the Somali culture related to the behavior of Somali students will be helpful tools to American school staff who want to help Somali students reach their academic goals.

Somali Dress

In Islamic tradition, the form of dress is important for Somali women and men. The men wear Western pants or a flowing plaid ma'aiois (kilt), Western shirts, and shawls. They may wrap a colorful turban around their heads or wear a koofiejad (embroidered cap). Women usually wear one of the following: direh (long dress worn over petticoats), coantino (a four-yard cloth tied over the shoulder and draped around the waist), or hijab (a dress that covers the entire body except for hands and face). Both boys and girls start dressing this way at age seven.

With these traditions in mind, Somali families have the following expectations from the American schools:

- Schools should separate girls from boys when they have mixed or body-touching activities such as swimming.
- Girls should be allowed to dress in uniforms that reflect their culture if the school requires uniforms.
- Schools should give options to the students, especially girls, about any activity related to dress (gym sports dress).
- Schools should consult with parents should any conflict related to dress arise.

The families have high expectations from the American schools, especially with things related to culture and religion. Parents want to be consulted about their child's activities and education.

Somali Food

Like dress, food is important in Somali culture and religion. Because of the Islamic tradition, it is prohibited to eat any food related to pork or drink any alcoholic beverage. Pastries made from lard are also forbidden. Therefore parents expect the schools to listen to the following advice:

- Schools should send home their breakfast and lunch menus for the month.

- Schools should be aware of the cultural food traditions.
- Schools should give out a menu translated into Somali, which helps families understand American foods—for example, that a hot dog is not dog meat.

Somali Religion

As mentioned earlier, Muslim Somalis pray five times every day, wherever they are. Most Somali students and their parents have questions about where their children can pray and how American schools can meet their prayer needs. The following are the expectations of the Somali American families with regard to school and prayer:

- Students should be allowed to go to Friday prayer or have group Friday prayers in school.
- Schools should have resources or basic information about prayer in the Islamic faith.
- Schools should take seriously any advice about prayer coming from students and their families.
- Schools should provide a private area for prayer.
  Ramadan is the most important month for Muslims around the world.

Fasting is required and food can only be eaten between midnight and dawn. The student can attend school and observe fasting with no issues on the part of the student. At the end of Ramadan, holidays are celebrated and Somali students do not attend school. We must be aware of these days, excuse our Somali students, and wish them a happy holiday.

Somali Greetings

Every culture has its own way of greeting. Like other Muslims, Somali men and women do not shake hands unless they are spouses. Somalis use sweeping hand and arm gestures to dramatize speech. Many ideas are expressed through specific gestures (open hand means no, snapping fingers may mean "and so on"). It is impolite to use the index finger to call somebody to come to you, and the American "thumbs up" gesture is considered obscene.

As educators we have many things to learn about the cultures of our students. We must work diligently to narrow the cultural gaps among students, teachers, families, and community members.

ALGERIA

Algeria is a large country in northern Africa, second in size to the Sudan. Northern Algeria stretches along the Mediterranean Sea, and this area has a warm climate and rich farmland. To the south is the sun-scorched waste of the Sahara Desert covering four-fifths of Algeria. Beneath this desert surface lie huge deposits of natural gas and petroleum.

Most Algerians are of mixed Arab and Berber descent. However, the people form two distinct cultural groups, Arab and Berber. Each has its own customs and language. But nearly all Algerians are Muslims and are thus united by their religion. Algerians prefer to be part of the new African immigration rather than be called Arabs. This is thought by the Algerians to be due to the negative Arab feeling in the United States.

Algerian History

Algeria has a long and rich history. By 3000 BC nomadic Berbers were living in the region. In 1100 BC Phoenicians established trading posts along the Algerian coast. The Romans ruled from 200 BC until the Vandals and the Byzantines took control in 600 AD. Next came the Spanish Christians in 1500, followed by the Ottoman Empire, and shortly after, Islam became firmly entrenched.

France invaded and gained control of Algeria in 1830. The French ruled until World War II when Allied forces took control. Algeria was returned to France after the war. By 1954, Algerians were clamoring for independence. Fighting broke out, orchards and cropland were destroyed. This continued until peace talks began in 1961. Algeria was granted independence on July 3, 1962. Fighting resumed among groups within the country in the 1980s and 1990s. Muslim fundamentalist extremists protested against the government and terrorist attacks continued.

More and more immigrants are arriving from Algeria. They are coming

from rural areas where society was organized around extended family, clan, and tribe.

Algerian Education

The current education system is in complete disarray. French colonial education had been imposed for centuries. French was the language pressed on Algerians. Teachers had been trained hastily or recruited abroad. Classrooms were located in the homes of former French residents. Rural areas had no schools. During the 1970s, the Algerian government set out to redesign the system to make it more suitable to the needs of the developing nation. All private education was abolished. Algerian law now requires all children from 6 to 25 years of age to attend school. More than 90% attend elementary school. However, only about a third go on to high school. One of the strongest features of this new reform was the creation of a variety of literacy programs for adults. Immigrants arriving in the United States today are still lacking a basic education, making success in American schools very difficult.

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS

The severe economic difficulties, increased poverty, and the political instability that have plagued many African countries in the last two decades have resulted in the large-scale migration of Africans to the United States. Unlike their counterparts in the 1960s and 1970s who were anxious to return home to Africa after acquiring an American education in order to contribute in the task of nation building, an overwhelming majority of recent immigrants are more interested in establishing permanent residency in the United States. The influx of African immigrants to the United States in the last two decades has been phenomenal. According to figures presented by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the numbers have quadrupled. These new immigrants can be found in major metropolitan areas in states like New York, Texas, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Colorado, and California; they are attracted to major cities like New York City, Atlanta, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Most recently they

are found in increasing numbers in small and midsized cities in Ohio, Nebraska, Iowa, North and South Dakota, Idaho, and Maine.

To experience the sights, sounds, and flavors of Africa without leaving Minnesota, just step into a Somali minimal in Minneapolis or an African shopping center in St. Paul. There you will find the sweet, pungent smells of Somali dishes, the vivid colors of African clothing, and the rapid-fire, foreign-language conversations of Somalis, Ethiopians, and Liberians who moved to Minnesota in the past decade.

Africans also permeate all aspects of Colorado life. These African immigrants are doctors, lawyers, professors, engineers, students, cab drivers, clerks, security guards, and chefs. They reflect some basic American passions: politics, the Denver Broncos, day trading, eating burgers, and even skiing.

One of the motivations for the African migration to the United States was the hopes and disappointments of independence in their home countries. At independence, Africans were filled with tremendous hope and optimism. For many Africans, independence was seen as more than just a period of self-rule and freedom. In their campaign speeches and rhetoric, nationalist leaders led many to believe that independence would also lead to a significant improvement in their social and economic life, including improvements in education, health care, and greater employment opportunities. Unfortunately, more than four decades after independence, the economy of most African states is characterized by grinding poverty, epidemic corruption, and high rates of unemployment.

African immigrants are trying to live the American dream. Many are living with friends and relatives until they are able to find jobs and situate themselves. An advantage of this living arrangement is that they learn and receive advice on surviving in America. However, the most important factor influencing where they live is the prevailing racial climate, political tolerance toward immigrants, and employment opportunities (*USA Today Weekend*, 2005). That may explain why Atlanta, where blacks occupy important economic and political positions in the city administration, has become a mecca for African immigrants.

African immigrants are quick to take any employment opportunity they can get. They work as cab drivers, parking lot attendants, airport workers, waiters, waitresses, and cooks in restaurants. Many African immigrants have become entrepreneurs, opening small family-based business ven-

tures , such as restaurants and grocery stores. They own health care agencies and specialty stores that cater to the needs of African newcomers. Some African-born physicians, lawyers, and accountants have opened offices in Atlanta, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles targeting other African immigrants and the general immigration community.

Even African women, who have traditionally been in the background of the traditional African family structure, now find themselves at the forefront of economic opportunities. Many use their traditional skills like hair braiding, tailoring, and dressmaking as a basis for starting other small business ventures. African women, especially those from West Africa, have stopped waiting for their men to mail checks home from the United States and have joined them in America. These women are earning their own income. Other African women have come to the United States alone, leaving husbands and children behind.

Passing on ancestral traditions and customs to their children is becoming more and more important to most African immigrants. Religious beliefs play an important role in the lives of most African immigrants. Many are followers of Christianity, and equally as many are followers of Islam. Parents are concerned that children born or raised here will grow up to be part of the melting pot of the dominant American culture.

Most recently, African immigrants have started to publish newspapers and produce radio programs. They work as individuals or through groups with the dual purpose of serving the immigrant community and promoting African traditions and cultures. Some radio broadcasts provide news or information about events at home; others allow the recent African immigrant community to discuss issues affecting their lives.

The new African immigrants are no longer just interested in making money; they are also interested in building stronger relationships, stronger communities, and organizing themselves in order to become a more powerful political and economic force in their communities.

Despite their dedication, hard work, and determination to realize the American dream, African immigrants are often faced with the reality of what is called the "innocence about race relations" with which they had left Africa as they struggle to make a living in their new homeland. The new immigrants encounter some of the same stereotypes often associated with their African American counterparts. They are often perceived as lazy, criminals, drug dealers, and welfare cheaters. This perception often

results in police harassment, intimidation, unlawful arrests, and even murder. The February 1999 killing by New York City police officers of Amadou Diallo, an African immigrant from Guinea, near his home in the Bronx has become a metaphor for the way African immigrants are perceived and treated by some law enforcement authorities.

Another problem faced by African immigrants is the lack of cooperation and acceptance by some of their African American counterparts. African immigrants are perceived by some African Americans as responsible for the fact that their ancestors were sold into slavery. There is also the accusation that African immigrants see themselves as better than their African American neighbors. Unfortunately, this perception has led to an uneasy relationship between some African immigrants and their African American brothers and sisters that continues to divide and paralyze blacks in America, thereby making them ineffective political and economic forces in national politics.

What the future holds for the continued flow of African migration to the United States is unclear. But from all indications it appears that African migration, immigration, and integration into American political, social, and economic spheres will continue.

AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS FIND CULTURAL CHASM IN THE UNITED STATES

Growing up in Nigeria, Lillian Obiara and her parents idolized aspects of black America: the vibrant culture, the dynamic music, and the movie and sports personalities they saw on television. When Lillian arrived in the United States recently, she was dismayed by the neighbors' lack of knowledge about Africa, the insulting comments about the way Africans live, and the hostility she encountered from some black Americans.

While some African Americans feel an emotional and spiritual attachment to Africa and give their children African names (Kwame, Kofi, Hakeem, Kamari), other African Americans are separated from African immigrants by a chasm widened by cultural differences and mutual misconceptions.

Many Africans believe that black Americans either romanticize the continent of Africa or snub its population as unsophisticated. African

Americans argue that many African immigrants do not make enough of an effort to integrate with black America and fail to appreciate how profoundly the legacy of slavery and the civil rights struggle has affected American-born blacks. Stereotypes are created by media images and misconceptions. A clash of culture, language, and class also plays a major role.

When immigrants from other parts of the world arrive in America, they can integrate into communities that share the same cultural perspective and typically speak the same language. Not so for Africans, who speak scores of different vernaculars and have distinct tribal affiliations, none of which American-born blacks can automatically identify with.

Like many other immigrants, Africans come to the United States in search of education and employment. Others are fleeing political instability or persecution in their home countries. Many are too caught up in the fight for everyday survival and for resources to support families back home to care about making an effort to get involved with black Americans.

Black Americans who visit Africa are trying to connect with home, the land, the spirit, the ancestors. By contrast, African immigrants are here for economic reasons, not to connect with African America. Being categorized by race stuns some Africans who come from predominantly black societies where ethnic affiliations and class override color.

Many are humbled by a downward assimilation. They come as university graduates and professionals but find they must take jobs as cleaners, janitors, or taxi drivers. "It is a shocking experience to find yourself down, down, down," said Yaw, an educated businessman from Nigeria.

OUT OF AFRICA

Young African immigrants must choose between being African and African American. Their parents pull in one direction and their peers pull in another. The bus that runs up and down Rainier Avenue in Los Angeles carries two types of East African youth. Their traditional clothes and Islamic politeness and diffidence distinguish the first type. They never speak loudly and always sit near the front of the bus for either safety or propriety's sake. Contrast the second, newer type of East African youth.

These young people always sit in the back of the bus, decked out in FUBU, Johnny Blaze, Ecko, and Mecca with sneakers as thick as Neil Armstrong's moon shoes. In the winter they wear puffy space jackets, their ears sealed in bulging iPod earbuds. In the summer they wear NBA vests and long baggy shorts or white undershirts with polka dot boxer shorts puffing out of their sagging "raw denim" pants. The girls have colorful nails done up at Hollywood Nails. The boys have tight braids and do-rags. No amount of scrutiny can separate them from African Americans. Only when they speak is the truth revealed.

Some say if the students come from Nigeria, Zaire, or Zimbabwe, they know they are African, not because their features are more recognizable, but because they are a year behind the trends. Their pants aren't sagging in the proper, lackadaisical manner, or worse, they are wearing a generic version of Tommy Hilfiger, a brand name already a thing of the past for African American youth.

African immigrants are in crisis mode. To become assimilated may be more detrimental than beneficial for their future in America. Black Americans represent the American underclass, and to adopt their ways is to adopt their fate. Blacks don't stand a chance of becoming white and benefiting from the institutions and connections available to white people. African immigrants, in order to survive in this country, must work hard to preserve their cultural distinctions rather than blend in with African Americans. To blend with African Americans is to engage in downward assimilation. In New York City, Miami, and Atlanta, the retention of foreign accents and culture has helped West Indian and Nigerian blacks get jobs.

Most African immigrants avoid thinking too deeply about what is really going on in America. The complex and unusual structure of their new society is broken down into basic parts: parts that work and improve their lot, and parts that don't work and don't improve their lot. Immigrants can't help but be scared because their world is a panicked world. They arrive in America fleeing desperate circumstances (war, famine, crazy dictators). They are usually forced to live in poor neighborhoods riddled with crime and bad cops, and if they have a job it's rarely stable or meaningful. African immigrants want to improve their lives as fast as possible, and they do not see many African Americans living the lives they want to live in America. Indeed, most black immigrants are as suspicious and critical

of whites as black Americans, but they don't have the luxury of voicing their grievances.

East African youth are in transition; they may look black American, but their core is still African. Their children, however, will be African American in the deepest sense. Because America is the way it is, these African American children will experience the full brunt of America's brand of racism. The happy and prosperous life their grandparents dreamed about when they arrived here from "war-torn Africa" will become, for them, a nightmare of police harassment, job discrimination, and limited social and economic prospects. The African immigrants are trying to block the path to this bleak future by sustaining and imposing their Africanness. African American youth feel they're not being taught what they need to understand African immigrants' history, and their own.

On April 3, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, Accra, Ghana, New York City, Atlanta, Georgia, Jackson, Mississippi, or Memphis, Tennessee, the cry is always the same. 'We want to be free.'"

King's statement powerfully expresses the unity of people of African descent in worldwide liberation struggles in the late 1960s. It is therefore ironic as well as troubling that decades later, African American youth are finding it more difficult than ever to unify with their African immigrant peers.

"We (African Americans) have our own struggle and they (African immigrants) have theirs," said Jamar, a senior at Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis, Minnesota. "It is still hard for us, just like it is hard for them. We still gotta work hard for ourselves, and better ourselves before we can help one another."

"African Americans grew up in a whole other country," said Keyandre, also a senior at Roosevelt. "The things they (African Americans) do on a daily basis are completely different from what we (African immigrants) did when we were in Africa. We try to keep traditions. Our lifestyle is different. We eat different food, we view life differently. We are not the same."

Shawontaya, another Roosevelt senior, was less sure about how to define the difference between African Americans and African immigrants. "Some of them (African immigrants) come over here and practice their beliefs, others don't. Some try to dress like us (African Americans), others dress like they were still in Somalia or whatever."

Most of the students interviewed do not believe that African immigrants should have to assimilate to African American culture or white American culture just because they live here. These students also feel that African Americans should know more about where they come from.

"You should stay true to what you are. Just keep in mind where you came from," adds Jamar.

The students stated that although the obvious solution to this lack of understanding is education, they do not expect schools, community organizations, or other institutions to take the lead.

"The schools are not teaching too much of anything," said Tyana.

"They're teaching the same five or six people and mostly during February (Black History Month)," said Kamari.

The group agreed that the presence of more teachers who use hands-on instructional techniques and more culturally diverse teachers would go a long way toward bridging these cultural gaps.

"We shouldn't have to wait all the way to our senior year to have to take African American topics," said Shawontaya. "We need to understand each other. We are not being taught what we need."

Our African immigrant students arrive with a huge variety of learning styles and basic academic skills. These students, really all students, must be placed at the center of learning. More than ever, classroom climate for African immigrants must be characterized by empathy, understanding, acceptance, sensitivity, listening, authenticity, presence, immediacy, equity, and equality. Assure students of these characteristics and they will thrive.

African immigrant students must be empowered. Empowerment brings a sense of belonging and connectedness. Empowerment comes from having teachers who understand and respect cultural diversity and who promote multiculturalism.

As educators, we must nurture the African immigrant culture in order to promote healthy, safe, and respectful environments for these students and their families. What better way to capture the minds of these young people than to enroll them in schools that are tailored to their individual interests and needs.