

GROWING UP IN THE GRAY AREA:

# American-born African youth face culture gaps

By Caroline Joseph

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MINNESOTA (NNPA) -

A country's borders are strategically defined and easily identifiable. The distinct outlines on any map detail the physical characteristics that distinguish one man's land from another's. On paper, the geographical lines are inked in black and white, but in this evolving global melting pot of cultures, how do we claim our nationality when we fall within the marginal gray area?

No one knows better how confusing a task this is than the thousands of us first-generation American children born to immigrants from other countries. We are born within the geographical lines of the United States; however, our upbringing is grounded in the traditions of our respective parents' homelands.

It is almost like leading a double life: During the day we're passing as socialized American children, but within the confines of our homes we are well-learned and acculturated in all things Nigerian, Somalian, Liberian, etc.

Personally, identifying with either culture has been a struggle for me. In junior high, I remember asking my mother if I could change one of my middle names from Taiwo — a traditional Yoruba title given to the first born of fraternal twin children — to the more American-sounding name "Tameka" so I could identify more with my friends.

I pretended to know artists that my American friends grew up listening to, like Marvin Gaye and Al Green, when, in fact, on any given morning, my mother and I danced around the kitchen to the high-tempo beats of

popular Nigerian artists like Fela Kuti and King Sunny Ade.

I enjoyed staying over for dinner at my friends' houses for casserole, pot luck, and fondue night, but I always saved a little extra room in my stomach for a plate of Mama's fried plantain and jollof rice when I got home.

Even more contrasting are American versus Nigerian social functions. In America, formal dances are generally stiff — the dresses, the hair and the dancing. African parties are somewhat of an extravaganza. Men and women alike drape themselves in flowing traditional garments of lace, adorn their bodies in jewelry made of assorted gems and gold, and drown themselves in potent perfumes suited for royalty. The laughter and music are loud, the drinks are overflowing, and as long as the buffet line is never-ending, the night remains young.

Although Africa has a vast history and is diverse in its rich cultures, the majority of the world, including America, still degrades the continent by perpetuating the stigma that Africa and Africans are barbaric, uncivilized, uncultured, or on the other end starving, disease-infested, and prone to war.

Fellow first-generation American Kau (last name omitted by request) began her life here in the U.S. back in 1990. At that time a turbulent civil war erupted in her native Liberia, forcing her and many others to flee their homeland in search of welcoming safe havens. Kau has been in Minnesota since she was six years old. Now, at the age of 22, Kau reflects on her childhood and admits that growing up as a first-generation American was difficult.

"Just the pronunciation of

my name was incredibly hard for Americans," she said. Kau (now pronounced Koh) is a very common name in Liberia, traditionally pronounced with an emphasis on the "au." She also had to face negative stereotypes about being African. Growing up, she was often asked why she spoke such "good" English when in fact English is the national language of Liberia and a lot of other African countries with the shared colonial history of being occupied by the British.

Being on the outside of any societal norm usually generates self-doubt and some sort of internal conflict, but to me being African was equivalent to having a scarlet letter on my forehead.

Despite even my fondest memories, I reluctantly admit that growing up I was ashamed of being African. Having to defend my culture in class when asked what it is like to live in a tree, or explaining to curious yet very misinformed strangers that wearing clothes is not a new phenomenon to me, was aggravating and embarrassing.

The pressure to conform to either culture is overpowering, especially during the formative years of life. One response for many first-generation children is to semi-withdraw from the American culture — that is, to interact with non-Africans only when necessary, like when price-checking canned tomatoes at the supermarket or wiring

money back to Africa at the bank.

A more common practice for these children is to fully submerge themselves in the music, dress, language and style of the American culture until most traces of Africa and its associated stigmas are undetectable.

For both Kau and I, it was not until recently that we individually decided to fully embrace our heritages. Realizing that America is not just Black and White, and that indeed there is an array of lifestyles, skin tones and cultures here, enabled us to embrace who we are.

I did more than become at peace with myself; I now celebrate the fact that I am the most recent beneficiary of a

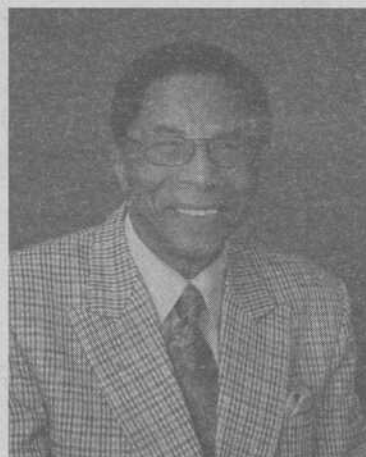
long legacy of intelligence, beauty and strength. I realize that, unlike many African-Americans, I am fortunate to be able to locate on a map where my ancestors derived from and actually trace my exact roots back to the earliest records of human existence.

Likewise, I am embracing that I am African-American as well. Although the term African-American has a slightly more unconventional meaning for me, since it is more often used as a synonym for Black Americans who are descendants of slaves, the term is still very accurate in describing the fusion of cultures that American-born African children

(See Gray Area, Page 12)

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## Health

(Continued from Page 2)

Reno and Las Vegas offer residency programs through the School of Medicine: University Medical Center, Sunrise Hospital, Mike O'Callaghan Federal Hospital, Renown Regional Medical Center and the Iannis A. Lougaris VA Medical Center.

Valley Hospital Medical Center has its own residency training program, but it accepts only doctors of osteopathic medicine, said Dr. John McDonald, dean of the School of Medicine.

None of the St. Rose Dominican Hospital's medical facilities have residency programs, officials say.

Sunrise Hospital is the only hospital within the Sunrise Health family to offer residency programs.

"They have to come on board," McDonald said, referring to private hospitals creating residency programs. "We also need more funding from the Legislature."