West African Communities

Babacar Mbaye
take Karisa back to her house and thank Karisa for the best date ever.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the customs surrounding marriage is the inclusion of family, friends, and community. Wedding ceremonies and celebrations typically involve the people most important to, and closest to, the couple at a landmark moment in their lives. The community is the social milieu out of which one or both of the participants developed as well as a witnessing or sanctioning body for the marriage itself. And whether it is the taking of vows or the tossing of the bouquet, wedding rituals and customs reaffirm the importance of community in married life—and married couples as a building block of community.

Kristi A. Young

Sources

WEST AFRICAN COMMUNITIES

Culturally distinct from African American communities, who have a legacy of enslavement before the Civil War, are enclaves of West African immigrants and their children, who arrived in the United States during the late twentieth century, sometimes as professionals and students, and occasionally as refugees of war, economic and political upheaval, and ethnic strife in Africa. According to the 2000 U.S. census, the population of African immigrants in the United States totaled about one million, most of whom came from West Africa. A notable spike in immigration occurred during the mid-1990s, a time of political conflict and armed conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. Immigration figures for 1996 were indicative of the distribution of national backgrounds among the West African arrivals. The greatest number of arrivals came from Nigeria (more than 10,000), followed by Ghana (6,606), Liberia (2,206), Sierra Leone (1,918), Cameroon (803), and Senegal (641). Many settled in notable West African communities in New York City, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Houston, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles, where they found reminders of their folklife in food, music, dance, hairstyle, and dress. The largest populations of West Africans reside in California, Texas, and Maryland; their percentage of the total population is highest in the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Rhode Island. Although a number of languages, ethnic associations, and religions are represented in the national backgrounds of West African immigrants, they frequently come together in America under a regional identity for cultural celebrations and social assistance.

Community Profiles
At the start of the twenty-first century, an estimated forty thousand to fifty-five thousand African immigrants lived in the Greater Philadelphia area. These immigrants own food, clothing, and music stores as well as hair salons and restaurants that reflect distinctive African patterns. West African kente cloth (mud-colored fabric), sculpture, jewelry, koräs (harp-lutes), balafons (xylophones), and drums abound in art stores located in different parts of the city. In Philadelphia, women from Gambia, Senegal, Mali, and Liberia own braiding salons where they offer a variety of hairstyles—corn rows, screws, the Senegalese twist, interlocks, goddess braids, box braids, and Casamance braids. Such establishments are often located near restaurants where authentic West African mafé (rice and peanut-butter sauce cooked with suc-
culent meat-and-potato stew), *thiep-bou-djen* (rice-and-fish), and hot plaintains are served.

Like Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., is a haven for West African folklife. By some estimates, Washington has the largest concentration of African immigrants in the United States. As in other communities, a large proportion of the Africans come from Nigeria, and a substantial number come from Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Senegal. The African Immigrant Folklore Study Project, sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution during the late 1990s, documented Senegalese organizing celebrations and traditional wrestling matches at local parks and lamb barbecues on the Muslim holiday of Tabaski. Ghanaians of the Ashanti ethnic group appoint local leaders—an *asantehene* and queen mother of Washington, D.C.—with the ceremony and regalia of the Akan tradition in Ghana. Nigerian Catholics, representing close to 40 percent of Nigerian immigrants, flock to St. Bernard’s Church in Riverdale Park, Maryland, where hymns are sung in various Nigerian languages. A number of mosques have been established by Nigerian Muslims, and D.C. is home to the Nigerian Muslim Council in the United States.

In Washington, D.C., public celebration of West African folklore includes festivals of Ghanian drumming, Zairian *soukous* music, traditional ceremonies for eating Nigerian Jollof rice, and Senegalese hair braiding. In field research for the 1997 Festival of American Folklife, Tonye Victor Ereksima and Molly Egondo Uzo described a masquerade called *Ofirima* that was performed in D.C. by members of a Nigerian association of immigrants called the Rivers State Forum: “The distinctive style of this dance is a leisurely cadence with broad sweeps of the arms and slow pacing of the feet; this shows opulence, casualness, and a dignified bearing. . . . Some say it reflects the slow ebb and flow of water in their geographical setting; others, their history as traders who have trafficked with the outside world for centuries with relative ease.” The performance of the Nigerian artists resembles that of Senegalese wrestlers, whose attire and dance before a match signify opulence, courage, expressiveness, and sophistication.

On the West Coast, Los Angeles is a center of West African settlement and culture. Nigerians are especially prevalent in Los Angeles, and have actively organized social and cultural events, including parties with traditional food, dance, and music on October 1, Nigerian Independence Day, to maintain a sense of community and folklife. In South Central Los Angeles, a noontime mass at St. Cecilia’s Catholic Church every other Sunday attracts Nigerians with services in their native Ibo language. On Palm Sunday, Easter, and Mother’s Day, the church is packed with more than a thousand Nigerians from all corners of greater Los Angeles. The service features such folklore elements as conga drums and African music, with women wearing brightly colored headwraps and traditional dress. Water is central to the ethnic Catholic celebration. Each member of the community comes before the altar to be blessed with this symbol of life, healing, and fertility from a land that has known no end to drought and famine.

In many cities, immigrants from Gambia, Mali, Guinea, Nigeria, and Ghana form social associations that organize concerts featuring renowned African musicians in America; interest in these concerts often crosses cultural boundaries. Immigrants from Mali, smaller in number than other nationalities, are renowned for their musical traditions in drums, strings (such as the kora of twenty-one strings and the *ngoni*, a type of lute), and *balafons*. Representing a fusion of West African and American styles, Mali Music is a band from Berkeley, California, made up of Malian immigrants playing the calabash (gourd used for percussion), *djembe* (goblet-shaped drum), *balafon*, guitars, and flute who proclaim that they combine traditional native music with American rhythm and blues. The Mandingo word *badenya*, which means “big family,” was used to describe a festival organized by the Center for Traditional Music and Dance in 1997 and 1998 to allow Malian musicians and dancers to perform in New York City. Malian culture was also featured at the 2003 Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The growing public awareness of Malian music in particular is
evidenced on the radio airwaves and concert circuit of America.

**Festivals and Cultural Conservation**

Recognizing the pressure on American-born generations to assimilate, West African immigrant groups have organized programs to teach native languages and promote cultural traditions. The Isokan Yoruba Language Institute in Washington, D.C., for example, was established in the late 1990s by native speakers to teach the Nigerian language of Yoruba. The Museum of African Culture in Portland, Maine, recognizing the needs of a substantial local immigrant population, organized the Discover Africa Day Camp for children. In Chicago organizations such as the Ghana National Council of Metropolitan Chicago sponsor festivals of West African folklife.

In Chicago and other cities with Ghanian communities, the traditional Homowo (“hootings at hunger”) harvest celebration is symbolically important as a narrative of Ghanian cultural perseverance and frequently described as an African version of American Thanksgiving. The origin story of Homowo is that the Ga people traveled for many years before reaching the west coast of Africa. Along the way they experienced famine, but because they helped each other, they survived. Later, when their harvests were bountiful, they held a feast featuring plenty of yams at which they jeered at the hunger and hard times that had plagued them. In Portland, the two-day community Homowo Festival commenced with a traditional Ghanian procession in which volunteers from local African communities assumed the roles of kings, queens, and followers of the royal family of each of Ghana’s ethnic groups. A yam feast is featured. As a magnet for various West African groups, and African Americans interested in their African heritage, the festival went beyond the borders of Ghana to present music, dance, crafts, and storytelling from the West African region.

Although African immigrants form bonds along national, religious, and language lines, there are signs of an emerging West African regional identity in America. Many festivals and other events gather a number of groups together under the African or West African label. Many dance and music groups use the title “West African” to describe themselves. Some examples are Diamano Coura West African Dance Company (based on Senegalese Wolof traditions) out of Oakland, California, and the West African Music and Dance Ensemble in Tallahassee, Florida (based on Ashanti drumming and vocal traditions from Ghana). Notable festivals that educate the general public and affirm the cultural identity of West Africans are Northern California’s African Cultural Festival in Oakland (advertised as the largest seasonl African festival in the United States) and the West African Dance and Drum Festival in New York City.

_Babacar M’Baye_

**Sources**


**Wiccans**

Wiccans, or modern witches, practice a revival religion variously called Wicca, Witchcraft, the Craft, or the Old Religion. Part of the larger neo-