Diaspora in Global Development: First Generation Immigrants from Kenya, Transnational Ties, and Emerging Alternatives

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DIASPORA IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT: FIRST GENERATION IMMIGRANTS FROM KENYA, TRANSNATIONAL TIES, AND EMERGING ALTERNATIVES

Maria M. Kioko, Rutgers, The State University

Abstract

Transnational ties form an important aspect of immigrants’ experiences. Using ethnographic accounts of 38 first generation immigrants from Kenya this study analyzed (a) why and how participants maintain ties, (b) characteristics of the ties, and (c) the degree to which ties influence immigrants’ experiences. Findings revealed that participants connected to Kenya through social, economic, and political transnational practices. Ties took on a U-shaped curve with the highest intensity at points of arrival and after extended stay in the United States. While participants had moved spatially, their values and attitudes remained static resulting in “particularistic” development efforts. This demonstrated how ethnicity, class, and length of stay in the United States permeate diasporic experiences. The paper discusses perspectives on collective organizing and emerging diasporic efforts to foster nationalistic development.

The United States has a long history of receiving voluntary immigrants. An overwhelming number of contemporary voluntary immigrants come from racially and ethnically diverse parts of the developing world, leading to increased racial and ethnic diversity within the United States. The new wave of immigration has implications for a society that has historically been confronted by complex and deeply ingrained ethnic and racial divisions. These demographic shifts have provoked questions regarding the processes of integration of contemporary
immigrants and greater focus upon relations between immigrants and the residents of the host country and within and across immigrant groups.

Undoubtedly, immigrants are influenced by their cultures of origin and, as such, their immigration experience is a product of their old culture as well as the new. However, the ways in which the cultural strands interact are complex and are influenced by various factors that at times compete with and other times complement each other. At the same time, immigrants arrive with their own expectations and perceptions. For example, some immigrants coming from countries where they constituted the majority at every level of society are confronted with an unfamiliar set of challenges upon arrival in the United States when they become members of "minority groups." As a result, there have been several concepts describing and explaining how immigrants deal with these changes. Some studies have centered on the processes of settlement of immigrants in the host society. Others have directed their focus to the resulting changes that occur over time following immigration. While different studies have postulated various views on immigration processes and experiences, they all have sought to explain the ways in which immigrants interact with the host society. The emphasis may have varied at different periods in history, but their focus has been to understand how and why newcomers adapt, resist, or eventually conform to the ways of the host country.

The earlier immigration perspectives postulated the assimilation theory. The theory was popularized by scholars like Robert Park (1864-1944), Ernest W. Burgess (1886-1966), and W. I. Thomas (1863-1947) from the Chicago School. Their underlying presumption was that immigrants would become acculturated thereby taking on the values, customs, and culture of the majority White American population. They proposed the "race relations cycle," which comprised four stages: contact, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. Milton Gordon's *Assimilation in American Life* (1964) refined the theory and included multidimensional and temporal aspects in the stages of assimilation. Gordon distinguished between the possible cultural outcomes of immigration: "melting pot," "Anglo-conformity," and "cultural pluralism." He proposed that immigrants begin the process of assimilation with acculturation, that is, acquisition of language, and end at the final stage of civic assimilation when an immigrant participates and performs within the host country's institutions (Gordon, 1964).

Gordon, like the scholars at the Chicago School, believed that immigrants would abandon their old cultural ways and identities and acquire a new American identity. According to the assimilationists, being American meant acquiring the values and desires of middle-class White Americans. However, these perspectives (a) overlooked that not all immigrants would prefer to sever ties with their home country, (b) disregarded the existence of race and ethnic inequalities, and (c) assumed that the
host society had a unified core culture to which all immigrants would gravitate. For example, Foner (1987, 2000) and Waters (1994) argue that recent Black immigrants would rather retain their distinctive identities because assimilation into American society means they lose status, since they become part of a group with lower status in the United States, that is, the African American group.

**Immigration in a Globalizing Economy**

Diverging from the linear assimilation perspective of the Chicago School, subsequent studies found that the relations between immigrants and their home countries were more complex. These studies have centered on how contemporary immigrants integrate into the host society. Even though only a small number of immigrants are continuously engaged in activities in their home countries (Portes, William, & Luis, 2002) (Portes, 2003), the studies suggest that a significant number remain linked to their communities of origin even if on a periodic basis. There is widespread back and forth movement between the country of origin and receiving country (Alba and Nee, 1999, 2003; Foner, 2000; Levitt, 2001a, 2002a, Mahler, 1998; Morawska 2001a; Pessar, 1999; Portes, Luis, & Patricia, 1999; Portes, William, & Luis, 2002; Rouse, 1992).

Various terms have been used to contextualize and define these immigrants' cultural, economic, political, and social experiences. The term "transnationalism" (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc 1992) is commonly used; others include "transnational migration circuits" (Rouse, 1989, 1992), "transnational communities" (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991; Levitt, 1996; Portes, 1996), "global villagers" (Portes, 1996), "transnational villagers" (Levitt, 2001), and other terms. As Portes (2003, 2004) and Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller, (2003) emphasize, transnationalism refers to the regular and sustained involvement of immigrants across national borders as opposed to the occasional or one time connection through remittance or visit. Such immigrants circulate regularly between their home and host countries using their earnings to support families and finance projects.

These kinds of transnational relationships are not entirely new (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004). Earlier research by Morawska (1987) showed that earlier East European immigrants to the United States also remained involved in activities in their countries of origin. What is different about contemporary transnational migrants is the context within which these activities are happening. The Economic Commission for Africa (2004) points out that the processes of globalization have increased and strengthened connections between sending and receiving societies, thus expanding and intensifying ties.

Transnational studies have initiated a shift in the analysis of immigration moving more toward analyzing the contexts within which contemporary
immigration takes place. They have explored various aspects of immigrants, including the development of transnational identities (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991; Mahler, 1998), gender and transnationalism (Mahler & Pessar, 2006; Pessar, 1995, 1998; Pessar & Mahler, 2003), marital relations (Min, 2001), ethnic and racial inequality (Massey, 1995; Waters & Eschbach, 1995), spatial aspects and assimilation (Alba & Nee, 2003; Massey, 1995). Others have explored the scope of transnational practices among the immigrant population as a whole (Guarnizo et al., 2003; Mahler, 1998; Portes et al., 2002; Riccio, 2001). However, there are still questions that linger, especially for smaller, "subordinate", immigrant groups that have not been extensively studied.

The majority of studies on non-European immigrants have focused on Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asian countries. Indeed, to a large extent, much of what we know about transnationalism is influenced by the experiences of immigrants from these regions. Africa, and in particular Sub-Saharan Africa, has received little attention in studies or discussions of transnational connections and immigrant experiences. Hence, it is not clear whether the findings indicated for other groups of immigrants are comparable to the situation of immigrants from other places, including Africa.

For Kenya specifically, there is a paucity of data and related studies of the extent and magnitude of ties that immigrants maintain. As Ghai (2004, p.3) aptly noted, "There is hardly any quantitative data on the numbers, trends and characteristics of Kenyans abroad. There is even less information on economic links between Kenya and the Kenyan community abroad such as flows of investment and remittances and support of charitable work and voluntary humanitarian and development agencies." Much of the data that is around is largely estimated. Kusow (2007) gives an estimate that of the one million African immigrants in the United States, 43,779 are from Kenya. These numbers are based on census data, and it is not clear how many immigrants feel comfortable responding to census questionnaires.

To address this gap, there is a need for studies that focus on African immigrants' experiences so as to allow for within and across group comparisons. Such analysis would provide a better understanding of the complexities of specific immigration groups' experiences that take into account each group's unique set of circumstances and histories. This study was a step in that direction focusing on first generation immigrants from Kenya and the ties they maintain with friends and family back in their home country. The challenge was to document and understand the nature of these ties, how and why they are maintained, and how they influence immigrants' experiences in the United States. The expectation was that the findings would provide a more comprehensive understanding of not only the magnitude and patterns of ties but also how the ties are expressed.
and embedded in the everyday lives of the immigrants. In this way, the study attempted to move forward the analysis of transnational practices and their embeddedness in social and economic relations.

**Study Objectives and Methodology:**

The research objectives were (a) to explore why and how first generation immigrants from Kenya engage in ties with their home country, (b) analyze the characteristics of the ties, and (c) establish how these ties influence the immigrants' everyday experiences. The study analyzed immigrants' ties across variables such as gender, age, income levels, education levels and length of stay in the United States. The participants were drawn from Paterson, New Jersey. In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with 38 participants. The interviews were conducted in the participant's language of choice. However, many participants chose English, and the only African language chosen was Kiswahili. Data were also collected using participant observation methods through attendance of Kenyan organized activities, political, and socioeconomic events.

Ten contacts (five men and five women) were established as points of entry for the sample and subsequent participants identified through snowball sampling. In total, 20 (53%) men and 18 (47%) women were interviewed. There were no distinct men-only or women-only networks. The length of stay in the United States ranged from 5 to 25 years, with an average of 11.6 years. Seventeen (45%) had been in the United States for over 10 years. The median income for this group was $49,999 per annum, a figure slightly higher than that reported by Kusow (2007) of $43,600. Men reported higher incomes than women. More than half of the participants worked in the social services and health care sectors. Three (8%) participants reported running their own business on a full-time basis; businesses included general trading, entertainment, and cab services.

Urban Paterson provided a suitable backdrop because of its growing and diverse nontraditional immigration population. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the population of the foreign born was 32.8%, with 27.3% from Latin America. The data also showed that the numbers of Hispanic and African Americans were much higher in Paterson than in the State of New Jersey and the country as a whole. In 2000, Paterson had also become home to one of the largest population of Arab immigrants from Palestine, Syria, and Jordan. It was listed as one of the cities with a presence of over 100,000 people who indicated their ancestry as Arab (U.S. Census Brief, 2000). Census data on ancestry showed that 4.7% were Italian, 3.7% West Indian, 3.2% U.S. origin, 1.8% Arab, 1.6% Irish, and 1.3% Sub-Saharan African. Since immigrants' settlement patterns are not random, they tend to settle mainly in the major urban areas within their own
communities (Alba & Nee, 1997). Paterson’s Sub-Saharan African population provided an entry point for the study of Kenyan immigrants.

**Kenyan Immigrants in the United States**

The number of African immigrants to the United States has more than quadrupled in the last two decades, from 109,733 between 1961 and 1980 to 531,832 between 1981 and 2000 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000). The table below shows the total number of immigrants arriving from Africa and Kenya between the years 1995 and 2003.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>720,461</td>
<td>915,900</td>
<td>798,378</td>
<td>660,477</td>
<td>646,568</td>
<td>849,807</td>
<td>1,064,318</td>
<td>1,063,732</td>
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<tr>
<td>Africa % of total</td>
<td>39,818</td>
<td>49,605</td>
<td>44,668</td>
<td>37,494</td>
<td>36,700</td>
<td>44,731</td>
<td>53,948</td>
<td>60,269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya % of Africa</td>
<td>1,419</td>
<td>1,666</td>
<td>1,387</td>
<td>1,696</td>
<td>1,412</td>
<td>2,210</td>
<td>2,514</td>
<td>3,207</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: Table compiled using data from Department of Homeland Security

While the percentage of immigrants from Kenya has remained fairly constant, the total number shows a steady increase since 1995. At the same time Kenyan immigrants represent many linguistic groupings, ethnicities, class, and religious backgrounds. As such, while they share a common experience as Kenyan immigrants, there are within-group differences. Furthermore, they arrive in the United States via multiple trajectories. Given these factors different groups tend to settle in specific areas. In this case, many of the African immigrants living in Paterson, New Jersey are mainly from East Africa and the Horn of Africa.

In exploring the contexts of African immigration, Arthur (2000) outlines three important developments that have influenced immigration trends. The earliest development was an increase in the number of African students and professionals who stayed in the United States as a result of political and economic difficulties at home beginning in the 1970s. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 made it easier for this highly educated group to obtain permanent residency status and remain in the country. The second development began in the mid-1980s with the arrival of large numbers of political refugees, especially from the Horn of Africa, who were fleeing repressive regimes and violent conflict
in the region. The third development resulted from the Immigration Act of 1990, which made it possible for immigrants to be admitted on the basis of the Diversity Visa (DV) Program.

For Kenyan immigrants, the first "wave" came during the 1950s and 1960s. At that time Kenya was still a British colony. During World War II Kenyans had been obliged to fight for the British Crown, and after the Kenyan soldiers returned home they started the clamor for independence. To pacify the soldiers, the British administration sent them to study abroad. Additionally, in the Cold War era the United States and Soviet Union covertly competed for Kenyan students as part of their Cold War strategy. The objective was that these Kenyans would receive training or education, and then return to Kenya to implement development (Okoth, 2003). Many of these graduates returned to Kenya and applied their skills to nation building. Many of those who returned held high posts in the government including the first president of Kenya, the late Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, the current president, Mwai Kibaki, and strong opposition leaders like the late Oginga Odinga.

As in many other African countries, the immigration trend shifted to a one-way mass exodus in the 1980s and 1990s, largely due to political and economic woes that were rampant on the African continent (Gordon, 1998). After Kenya gained independence from the British in 1963 there were fairly constant levels of economic development. The situation changed in the late 1980s when the country was plunged into an economic depression. The country experienced significant decline of educational and other infrastructure, resulting in its inability to handle the demands of the growing population. Economic growth stagnated or even at times declined; there were widespread government mismanagement and inefficient policies bogged down by widespread corruption, tribalism, and nepotism. When the economy deteriorated and the students were faced with great uncertainty and grim economic realities upon their return to Kenya, many settled in the United States. For many, the decision to stay in the United States where there are more opportunities was easy to make because of the realities of economic despair and political instability back in Kenya. Many Kenyan families that were able to afford the initial financial costs of sending one or more of their members abroad on a long-term or permanent basis considered it an investment or a form of economic insurance.

Currently, the majority of Kenyan immigrants still migrate in pursuit of educational opportunities. According to a report by the Institute for International Education (IIE), in 2002-2003 there were 7,862 Kenyan students attending American colleges and universities, representing a 25% increase in the previous two years. The report stated that this was one of the highest growth rates for any country. Kenya was ranked in the 16th position as a source of international
students on American campuses. Kaba (2006) reports that the high number of Kenyan students is attributed to the close ties that Kenya has enjoyed with the United States and that the students have established a reputation as hard workers and hence many more colleges are willing to grant them admissions. Subsequent IIE reports show that the number of foreign students enrolled in the United States has declined but Kenya still holds the leading position among African countries. The IIE Open Doors 2005 report attributes the decline to rising tuition costs, stiff competition from other major student-receiving countries, expanding educational opportunities in student-sending countries, perceptions abroad of the difficulty of coming to the United States, and more stringent visa issuance policies.

Earlier migration literature argued that the migration of technical and skilled workers from Africa was leading to "brain drain." However, other views have shifted the discussions to "brain gain" through returning skilled migrants (Economic Commission for Africa, 2004). Immigrants may return home after time abroad and make valuable contributions to national development with the skills and experience acquired while working abroad. Other scholars argue that brain drain may not always have only adverse effects. In countries where there is an abundance of trained unemployed people, migration might improve job prospects for others (Ghai, 2004). Takougang (2003) notes that as remittances to Africa increase so do the numbers of economic and social institutions established to provide various forms of assistance to those at home. Ratha (2003) explains that remittances are significant to many developing countries' economies, and are considered a more stable source of assistance than other foreign investors. Kapur (2003) argues that remittances are a form of social insurance for people in countries afflicted by economic and political crises.

For the case of Kenya, while there are no actual numbers of the amount, use, and origin of remittances, estimates place the amount as ranging from $494 to $600 million. These estimates indicate pretty high amounts of revenue for families and investment purposes. While remittances may play a role in poverty alleviation, their role in economic development has been heavily debated.

**Findings**

**Why Do Kenyans Come to the United States?**

The findings from participants interviewed showed that the decision to leave one's "home" is very complex, especially when one is advanced in age. Responses showed that participants migrated in search of better educational and financial opportunities. Virtually 8-in-10 (n=32) of the reasons cited for coming to the United States mentioned search for better financial opportunities. Education
took second place with 64% (n=24) responses while 8% (n=3) said they came to reunite with their families. Twenty-three (61%) participants came to the United States on student visas while only 3 (8%) came on business visas, suggesting that while the search for financial opportunities was the driving motivation for most participants, many entered the United States as students.

Immigration statistics also showed that the number of immigrants arriving increased as the economic situation in Kenya deteriorated as shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1 Kenya Economic Performance and Number of Immigrants to the United States](image)

Thirty-six participants (about 9-in-10) participants started their lives in the United States as guests of earlier immigrants, suggesting that “chain-migration” may have taken place; only 2 (5%) had no existing contact. Fifteen (40%) knew a relative/family member; 12 (32%) knew a friend; 5 (13%) had a spouse/fiancé(e); and 4 (10%) had a business contact. These participants emphasized that having an existing contact in the United States was important to their migration decision. They acknowledged that these networks provided crucial information on employment, and a sense of familiarity as well as helping them learn their way around, and get important paperwork together. The participants mentioned that the most important aspects of existing social contacts were (a) not having to learn through trial-and-error and (b) receiving invaluable advice on more competitive school courses, careers, and jobs.

Generally, participants related stories of the support and assistance they had received. However, one in four (n=2) participants stated that they had not received any support. They expressed extreme disappointment at how they had been treated by their hosts and subjected to gross exploitation. These findings reveal that the relationship between earlier and new immigrants is not always based on kindness and generosity as generally perceived. This is contrary to the expectations that earlier immigrants will provide for the new immigrants selflessly.
Another reason participants chose the United States was related to language; participants preferred English-speaking countries since they were familiar with the language. Three (8%) participants explained that they chose the United States over Denmark, Russia, and Germany because of language. Participants considered the ability to communicate as important for their survival in the United States. There were two other factors that participants considered paramount to settling successfully in the United States: (a) acquiring education to avoid being stuck in dead-end jobs and have a decent income to sustain oneself and family back in Kenya, and (b) attaining legal status in the United States to enable one to explore all the available opportunities.

**How Do Kenyan Immigrants Maintain Ties?**

All the participants said they maintained ties with family and/or friends in Kenya. They stay in contact through a combination of phone calls, money transfers, internet communication, goods they need, home visits, letters, and video and audio-tape messages. All participants said they made phone calls to Kenya with 31 (82%) stating that they called at least every week. Money transfers were the next most common form of maintaining ties. Responses showed that 28 (74%) participants sent money at least every month, 9 (24%) sent money at least a total of six times a year, and only one (3%) stated he or she “rarely” sent money. It was not possible to establish precisely the average amount sent monthly because participants explained that they sent money on an “as-needed” basis. However, there was consensus among participants that money was sent in larger amounts and more frequently at the start of school season and during holidays, especially Christmas.

E-mail communication was also popular, with 11 (29%) participants stating that they used it regularly and 13 (34%) stating they used it sometimes. There was only one participant who reported that he or she never used e-mail. As Mwende, in her mid-thirties and in the United States for eight years explained,

> I call home almost twice a week and e-mail every now and then. When I want to explain something very much, I go to e-mail because explaining on the phone can be very expensive. Sometimes I use the phone for long but I try very much just to use little time because even with phone cards it is very expensive to talk for long.

Participants used e-mail to supplement their phone conversations and avoid the high phone call expenses. Blogging or chatting online was not common
with 28 (74%) participants stating they “never” used it. There were 22 (68%) participants who said they read Kenyan newspapers or tracked events happening in Kenya online. The low usage of internet resources could be related to lack of electricity and internet services in most parts of Kenya.

Home visits were not frequent. During the past five years, almost half of the participants, 18 (47%), had not visited Kenya. Thirteen (34%) had visited Kenya once while 5 (18%) had visited more than once in the last five years. There were 2 (5%) who had visited more than four times in the last five years. Forty-year old Musembi, in the United States for fifteen years, explains his annual visits as,

I go home every year, I have to go home. I am lucky now, before, it was difficult. It took me nine years before I was able to travel. I had not seen my children for nine years, so now I make up for that time and go home every year.

Other forms of ties mentioned but not used frequently included sending goods, letters, and audio and video tapes. Mailing was mainly used for bulky materials especially college application paperwork.

Contrary to earlier assimilation perspectives that ties with home country would decline the longer immigrants stayed in the host country, the frequency of ties took on a U-shaped curve with highest frequency upon arrival and in the later years.

How Are Kenyan Immigrants Involved in Transnationalism?

Participants were engaged in various forms of ties ranging from social, economic, and political to cultural. Economic ties included money transfers to Kenya and financial assistance for fellow immigrants here in the United States. Money sent to Kenya was mainly for various purposes as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Purposes for which participants sent money
Participants expressed their willingness to assist fellow immigrants in the United States financially whenever possible. However, they admitted that it put a lot of strain on their financial resources.

Findings showed that social ties were maintained with immediate family, friends, and community for the purposes of (a) continuing the social support systems participants had in Kenya, (b) providing a flow of information, and (c) supporting community activities. Participants expressed a desire to keep up with social events happening in Kenya; they wanted to know what was happening to people they knew. Cherono, in her early sixties and in the United States for six years, said, “I want to know all the gossip about everyone... I enjoy it too because it makes me feel like I am back at home and I know all that is happening.” Information flow was two-way, and contacts with potential immigrants were mainly for purposes of providing information on how to come to the United States and advice on travel and visa arrangements. Just as the participants were “thirsty for information about Kenya,” their contacts in Kenya were “thirsty for information about United States.” Participants indicated they maintained social ties with people in Kenya as part of their social network of familiar people with whom they can talk. Three (8%) of the participants expressed that they sought advice from Kenya regarding their marital relations. These findings reflect those reported by other studies including Glick Schiller et al. (1992), Levitt (1998; 2001a), Portes (1996), and others.

Community ties with home towns/villages were mainly based on providing support ranging from building and repairing of schools to supporting women’s micro-enterprise projects providing basic medical supplies, contributing money for building hospitals and caring for HIV/AIDS victims and orphans. Eighteen (47%) participants reported that they have supported community activities. However, what was noticeable among the participants was that most of the initiatives were conducted on an individual basis. This finding is unlike findings from other immigrant communities, especially Latin America, where many of the community-based initiatives are conducted through Home Town Associations for example, (Orozco, 2003a). Among fellow Kenyan immigrants in the United States, participants explained that they maintained social ties with fellow Kenyans and usually met to celebrate Kenyan holidays and partake in other social activities.

The participants’ discussions about political ties required more prompting than discussions on social and economic ties. The most common source of political information about Kenya was online newspapers. Twenty-two (68%) participants stated that they regularly or sometimes read the newspaper online. The next source was the news brought back by people who had visited Kenya. In the United States participants reported that they are engaged in local civic activities agitating for
improvements in quality of life and education for minority groups.

Participants claimed that maintaining ties was one way of expressing their commitment to their culture suggesting they had not abandoned their way of life. They used various proverbs to explain why they maintained ties, most of them geared toward maintenance of cultural identity. First-born males were still involved in decision making and other cultural responsibilities. Kipkirui, in his late twenties and in the United States for seven years explains, “Then my father also calls me to discuss some family issues. He has to call me because I am the eldest. Yep, yes I am the eldest.” Other cultural ties included participants’ involvement in communal rituals, especially in terms of financing traditional rituals like weddings, circumcisions, funerals, namings, spiritual cleansings and others.

Among fellow immigrants, participants maintain cultural ties through creative adaptation of activities such as “baby showers,” funeral meetings, preweddings and weddings. Religious ties are practiced through the establishment of jumuiya ndogo ndogo, small Christian communities that meet in individual people’s houses for prayers. They also set up their own churches or establish services in Kiswahili on specific dates. Participants assist churches back in Kenya, 5 (13%) reported giving tithes to their home churches and requesting for prayers in Kenya. These findings reflect findings mentioned by other studies (e.g., Levitt, 2002; Rouse, 1992; Takyi, 2002).

It was evident that while participants maintained ties with fellow immigrants, many of the connections were based on ethnic and linguistic groupings. This finding points to the advantage that immigrants experience from maintaining cultural ties with people in Kenya. On the other hand, in the United States it hinders immigrants from engaging in more national (Kenyan) based interactions and initiatives. These findings are in line with findings by Levitt (2001, 2002) about the existence of positive and negative effects of social ties.

How Do Ties Influence Immigrants?

Maintaining ties means more than simply the act of making a phone call or sending money or goods. While participants maintained ties so as to provide financial assistance, the findings showed that ties took on various meanings including status, identity, maintenance positions within society, and influence. Participants peppered their discussion of ties with phrases like, “You know how life is like in Kenya; we have to help out,” “I can’t forget people back home. The situation is really terrible,” “If I don’t send money then someone will not go to school.” Everybody else has abandoned Africa, the government, donors, the United States, so I can’t do the same.” These generalized statements about the conditions they left behind suggest that participants view themselves in
positions of ability or potential compared to those they left behind. In sending remittances to people back in Kenya and partaking in development projects, they acquire status and in some ways have the ability to resist the subordinate status they occupy as a minority immigrant group in U.S. These expressions reveal that the exchange of goods does not take place in a vacuum; it happens within existing social relations.

Participants also discussed experiencing significant pressure to provide financial assistance not only from friends and relatives they left behind but also from fellow immigrants. In order to meet all these demands, many of the immigrants hold more than one job and accept menial and/or underpaying jobs. Even under such conditions, participants expressed their commitment to continued maintenance of ties demonstrating their sense of obligation and solidarity with fellow immigrants. These discussions suggested that these ties provided them with a sense of belonging.

Notes

1 All the immigrants expressed a desire for eventual return to Kenya as such ties are part of the preparation for the return. While none of the immigrants provided a specific timeline of departure, most of them hinted that this would happen in their retirement age. Findings also revealed that the decision to stay in the United States was malleable. Kariuki, in his late thirties and in the United States for 15 years aptly explained:

The decision to stay is not an easy one, it depends on when you ask me, when things are going well for me I make up my mind about settling here, when things are not working, I find myself thinking that I should go back home and settle there, so things change depending on the situation. However, lately I have been thinking more and more about returning home, I think I have been here too long. Similar sentiments were expressed by other participants regardless of age, gender, length of stay, or even level of achievement.

Emerging Alternatives

The findings from this study revealed that participants made enormous contributions to activities in Kenya and the United States at individual and collective levels and are an integral part of development. However, there was a major concern regarding how they conducted their activities. Most of the initiatives and fundraising efforts were limited to places of origin, which are largely based on ethnic groups. Organizing within such frameworks hinders the undertaking of projects based on a national agenda. At the same time such initiatives focus solely on poverty alleviation, a short-term measure, as opposed to long-term strategies that address wealth creation for the people in Kenya. To
address this challenge, I conclude that it is important for Kenyans in the diaspora to adopt alternatives focusing on the following:

• Engage in deliberate and conscious aggressive recruitment of global-based audiences to marshal global resources to localized centers. Home-based associations are important for mobilization of people, after which efforts should focus on creating linkages with other groups to promote wider perspectives on development, such as the Global Literacy Project, Twana Twitu (“Our Children”), and others.

• Emphasize the applicability of “brain gain” perspectives and strategies whereby the skills and expertise of immigrants are harnessed and transferred to the country of origin. Immigrants have great creative potential because of the unique blend of newly acquired skills and knowledge with insider perspectives of available indigenous resources. As such, they are in a better position to develop more user friendly technologies using an indigenous resource base (For example, promotion of the medicinal and nutritional value of readily available natural resources like aloe vera, development of less expensive science kits using indigenous resources, and development of information technologies).

• Establishment of global-based alumni groups that cut across ethnic lines. People who went to the same schools, especially national schools, have the advantage of more ethnic mixed grouping. Such alumni groups may emphasize projects with a more overt national agenda whereby immigrants identify themselves more as “Kenyans” rather than specific ethnic groups.
References


Notes

For criticisms of the assimilation perspective see Alba & Nee, 1997; Orozco, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Rumbaut, 1997a; Rumbaut, 1997b; Portes & Zhou, 1993.

2 The government estimates that the Kenyan diaspora remits close to $600 million every year to their families and for investment purposes (Kelley, 2005). Source Economic Commission for Africa Report on International Migration and Development: Implications for Africa September 2006 while World Bank data, prepared by the Luxembourg Group, a group of experts from the UN, the IMF, the World Bank and several country representatives, estimated remittances to Kenya at $494 million in 2005.

3 The concept of chain-migration goes as far back as the Chicago School model and refers to streams of immigrants from the same home country that are attracted to a specific location because of the availability of support from friends and family. For more details see Castles & Miller, 1993; Massey 1990.