The Immigration of Tradition: A Qualitative Study on Gender Differentiation and Cultural Parenting in West African Immigrant Households

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been an influx of West African immigrants into the United States and European countries. By the end of the twentieth century, 1 million African immigrants were living in the United States, of which 50 percent arrived and settled between 1990 and 2000. By 2004, 35% of the total African immigrant population were West African immigrants. As more West Africans migrate away from their native lands, a new challenge arises in adapting to life within a different, less traditional environment—the Western society. This research focuses on the extent to which West African culture and tradition impact the way these immigrant families build their family structure and incorporate their cultural identities into these new environments. I examine the historical construction of gender-differentiated parenting in West African culture and how it has shaped familial, societal, and political structures over time. Through this historical framework, I then analyze the influence of traditional values in West African immigrant households and how they shape the continuation and discontinuation of certain West African practices in the new society. I also examine how these families carry aspects of their culture through their adaptation journey and their cultural parenting practices as a way to keep the West African identity from dying out and as a way to secure stability in Western society. From my research I have found that by leaving certain traditional values of their culture back home, such as certain marriage practices or gendered education, West African immigrants work to find a balance between their native culture and the cultural expectations of Western society. As Western society becomes more progressive and less accepting of traditional gender roles, as depicted in media and entertainment, being true to one's identity conflicts with the ability to "start new" in a foreign community in the face of different societal norms.

Keywords

West-Africa; Mali; Immigrant; Gender-Differentiation; Cultural Parenting; First-Generation; Soninke; Migration; Tradition: Parenting

My mother was raised in a small village in Kayes, Mali until the age of 16, when she was sent off by her parents to be married to my father in the capital, Bamako. The landlocked country of Mali sits above Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso. It borders Senegal and Mauritania and includes the Niger River, which runs from the Sahara Desert and through the nation's veins. My parents met only once before; it was traditional for women to leave their homes for marriage between the age of 16 and 20 in Mali. My father was a businessman, and my mother couldn't be any happier to start her life with him. When my parents immigrated to the United States, they vowed to keep their culture alive through the preservation of West African identity. Their parenting affected how my siblings and I approached education, friends, religion, and even shopping. It wasn't until later that we understood that our idea of normal was shaped by what my parents deemed to be socially acceptable as a result of their upbringing and their method in preserving identity.

When a person migrates, they don't travel alone. In addition to the physical luggage, the internal anxiety, and the increasing anticipation, a person's values are also on the move—this set of values follows the migrant and sets the framework for building a life in a completely new environment. These values can be tied to one's cultural heritage, one's upbringing, one's religion, and even one's gender. West Africans who immigrate to Western settings, like New York City, often bring with them their traditional values that they have adopted since childhood. Through my research, I address how the roles of West African tradition play into cultural parenting practices, the formation of gender roles, and the building familial structure within West African immigrant households. For centuries, unique societal customs and familial traditions have been preserved in West Africa; therefore, it is vital to explore the changes in cultural values over time because the future of West African culture in foreign countries depends on how people, like myself (a first-generation child of an immigrant) maintain, or not maintain, their familial ties. As more West Africans move away from their homes, it is also important to explore the value of cultural parenting through the lens of cultural identity. Cultural parenting amongst West African immigrants can be defined as the way in which West African immigrant parents make a conscious effort to preserve and teach their ethnic identity to their children through the use of language, observational learning (clothing,

eating customs), and traditional practices (greetings, praises, worship) in their new home. Cultural parenting also describes how West African immigrants may minimize their personal assimilation within the foreign land so that their children can directly recognize the value in maintaining one's cultural identity. This research also steps away from the common idea in scholarly literature that West Africans migrate to Western society to create a new life away from the corruption and lack of employment in many parts of West Africa because of European colonialism. Instead, I explore West African migration as a more personal decision that is influenced by the roles placed on the individual by their traditional society.

Analysis of these topics was conducted through oral histories, media representations, ethnographic works, qualitative observations, and secondary sources from select scholarly journal articles. I have spent time with family members who have migrated to the United States, specifically older family members, as they recollected their experiences growing up in West African culture and how it influenced their immigration. For a large portion of my research, however, I spent a month in Senegal and Mali to gather oral histories from family members who chose to stay in West Africa; I've listened to how their experiences shaped their view on those who did migrate. Through this immersive experience, I was also able to observe how gender roles and cultural parenting set the framework for daily living.

West African immigrants have spent the last few generations building their own communities in many parts of the world, like in France, in Spain, and in the United States; it is my goal through this research to shine a light on them and their experiences.

The West African Family Structure

In the summer of 2014, I learned how to efficiently pack a suitcase in under 20 minutes. I was 15 years old and I had just completed my first year away at boarding school. During the year, I was repeatedly traveling back and forth to see my parents whenever there was a school break. As I reflected on this, I could see that my parents were getting sad all over again because I was about to start my second year, meanwhile my sister rarely said anything because we were slowly growing apart due to my new-found independence at the prime of my teenage years. My excitement slowly

started to turn sour as my neighbor, who my entire family calls Tante, came downstairs and saw the luggage scattered around our front door.[1] "Ehhh, who has all of this stuff?! Are you moving to Africa forever?" she yelled through the front door. I came to the door and told her that they were mine and I was getting ready to go back to boarding school in Massachusetts. My mother came behind me, put her hand on my shoulder, and greeted Tante. Tante raised her eyebrows at the suitcases as if she wanted to say something and then she walked away. Later that day, my mother received a phone call from her, which left my mother speechless for days. This is what Tante said to my mother, roughly-translated from Soninke:

> Why do you keep allowing your daughter to go away to these white schools in an area that you do not know? Do you know what happens at those schools? Not only will she become Americanized and forget her culture at such a young age, but she will never learn the ways of a Soninke woman. Who's going to teach her to cook our food? Who's going to teach her the language? She doesn't even speak Soninke fluently now. Daughters must stay close to their mothers and gain knowledge and wisdom from their mothers. How will your daughter gain that from you if she's going to develop with these white people, instead of within her household? If you do not hold on to her now, you will lose your daughter forever.

These same words still linger in my head whenever I travel away from my home. My African authenticity was always in question; my mother knew that her parenting was being judged, but she did not care because she believed she knew what was best for her daughter. And, granted, I turned out to be one of the best cooks in my household. However, Tante's bold words were the thoughts that many of my elder relatives shared when it came to raising children in American society. Family structure and gender roles are important to culture, especially when families have dispersed away from their countries of origin; it takes more effort to maintain these cultural values on foreign soil. Me going away to a boarding school was seen as a rebellion against family structure and against my role as a Soninke woman in America. Despite how much family structure may vary from culture to culture and from country to country, there is still the general knowledge that gender roles

1 French translation of "Aunt".

became a standard part of West African society long before the colonization of Africa.

Gender roles were normalized in West African history through the use of caste systems. Despite their influence and contribution to society, the minority of the populations in West Africa belonged to caste institutions—in Bambara, Dogon, and Soninke populations, caste people were estimated to make up about five percent or less. Even though their numbers were small, they were able to provide jewelry, precious metals, oral storytelling, music, art, and pottery to the West African community, which still carries an influence today. Some caste occupations were also tailored to women or men specifically. Blacksmith women were usually potters, meanwhile blacksmith men worked wood to make doors, locks, furniture, and weapons. As potters, the women spent more time indoors, or in the home, making their crafts, meanwhile, the men would go to the forest or an open area to carve wood and make furniture or weapons for sale. Of the Adangme people in southern Ghana, "the craft of making pots was embedded in puberty rituals for females, and the Adangme have elaborate rites for female initiation" (Akyeampong and Fofack). During this era, these rituals of learning pottery and "becoming a woman" could last for two to three years. One can see how gender roles during this time originated from occupation and placement; whatever jobs were indoors and not too strenuous on the body were set aside for the women and whatever jobs required heavy-lifting, being/traveling outdoors, or dealing with weapons were mostly set aside for the men.

This gendered way of working served as one of the early blueprints of gender roles in West Africa. Gender roles in West African culture is a topic that most would consider as "swept under the rug." They are present but not discussed because of their normalization. Gender roles in West Africa are shaped by religion, status, and familial history. In the specific West African countries where Islam is the predominant religion, cultural values teach that it is the husband's responsibility to shelter, feed, and sexually satisfy his wife (Babou 235). In other countries throughout West Africa, men and women are assigned different positions in society based on their social status, which are then passed on to their children. In most cases, a wife of higher status may have a higher income compared to her husband but her wealth is used to build social capital through luxurious

spending and self-ornamenting, instead of financially contributing to the family, which is valued as the husband's job (Babou 235).

In some rural regions of Mali, women are less encouraged to go to school because most of their responsibilities are in the home. There is an increased priority to work and cook for survival compared to larger cities like Bamako. In 2017, One Campaign, an international, non-profit campaigning organization that fights disparities within Africa's continent, ranked Mali at #6 as one of the countries where girls are less likely to receive a valuable education (White). In 2013, only 33% of all women in Mali could read, which was an increase from 16% in 2011. There is slight progress in women's education in Mali, however, more work is required for effective change to be made. In 2017, it was noted that boys in Mali attain an education at a higher rate compared to girls because household customs, like cooking, cleaning, organizing, and caring for family members are not regarded as a man's job **(**Hodal). This gender inequality finds many women as the nurturers of the village, therefore, going to school and attaining an education is not a priority set for them.

My father never questioned my mother's educational experience until they both moved to the United States. However, when my father brought my mother over to New York, the first thing he wanted her to do was take an English class catered to new immigrants. He went against what he was raised to believe about the lack of importance for women's education in Mali, so he pushed my mother into taking these classes—much like how education was enforced within my household. My father could not hold on to this part of culture that he was raised to believe in after migrating to New York. Life was different in New York, and he knew that in order to start building a better life, my mother needed to learn basic English so that she could find a job. The customary ways of staying at home was no longer the case for my Mom. So, she worked—worked hard—and represented her own reflection of what it means to be a West African woman.

Women in Pre-colonial West Africa

Before the colonization of West Africa, caste systems were put in place to not only build family structure, but to also define one's position in society. This allowed for gender roles and occupational roles to be passed down from parent to child; it also provided a way to maintain

structure in the society and in the home. In a report studying gender roles during the period of caste occupations, writer Tal Tamari highlights the gendered way of working and the specific tasks that each caste was assigned to do. Once young boys were of adolescent age, they learned from their parents the importance and function of their roles as men. Tamari explains that to be a man was to be hardworking, no matter what one's social status was. To be a man also meant getting married and providing for the family. For women, marriage was a sign of success, but it raises questions about how and where the women gained their power (Tamari 224-30).

There's a perception in African literature that the subordinate position of African women, specifically West African women, is a general and accurate description of the circumstances of women in these societies. Not only is this false, due to the diverse nature of the roles of women throughout West Africa and the continent, but this myth eliminates the significant power that women in West African history exercised to make the region into what it is today. Women in pre-colonial Africa took positions of prestige and recognition for their societal roles (Agyeiwaa 2). They did not live lives that were only confined to the home, nor were they behind the scenes; women were active in negotiations, politics, religion, and familial situations. Despite the fact that gender was a social construct in West Africa, as Agyeiwaa explains, gender was "not the most important stratifying category because power was based on seniority rather than gender" (2). The *horehs* were different from the *comehs* who were different from the *nyakamala*, but the women within these different social groups still had their own positions and took pride in their respective roles.[2]

In his novel, "Matriarchy and Power: Aneji Eko," a biographical story of his grandmother's life in Nigeria during the late 1800s, author David Uru Iyam thoroughly describes the authority and power of Nigerian women in their daily lives and relationships. Iyam characterizes the women in his life and his grandmother's life in particular as "independent, assertive, resourceful, authoritative, and sovereign" (3). He recognizes their responsibilities in decision making and engaging the entire

2 Horeh: Translation of noble or freeborn in Soninke
Comeh: Translation of slave in Soninke
Nyakamala: Translation of caste people in Soninke

community as they work through issues involving family, lineage, parenting, political affairs, and the village members.

In Walata, a modern-day town in Mauritania, Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta wrote how the women were of “surpassing beauty” and how they were highly respected in comparison to the men. He wrote, “the state of affairs amongst these people is indeed extraordinary. Their men show no signs of jealousy … no one claims descent from his father, but on the contrary from his mother’s brother.”[3] Family lineages were expanded through the names of the women because of their power, in the same way that I was named after my grandmother who was named after her grandmother. It was a liberation for women to exercise their societal authority, and their political power, which is why they were extremely influential political actors in the ruling of the state. However, in some regions of Ivory Coast and Ghana, women were raised to be reproductive rather than to hold positions in community as this is a form of exercising power through the expansion of society (Akyeampong and Fofack). This can be explained by the belief that the value of women in these regions came from their ability to continue the familial bloodline and pass down every aspect of their culture to their offspring.

Generally, women were proud of their role in culture which they sought to pass down to their daughters. They taught their daughters the principles of what it meant to be a woman in West Africa and how they are valued. Daughters were taught the honor of being able to formulate kinship. Through ancestry, marriage, or adoption, kinship was formed; this provided a sense of belonging for members of the family as well as helping create social relationships between community individuals. Family structure determined the role of each member and “defined the limits within which members must confine their behaviors and activities” (Falola and Amponsah 2012).

The rise of colonialism in West Africa radically changed the structure and order of West African society; colonialists utilized their own sex and gender system to influence the power dynamics of the West African people (Brennan). For example, in Nigeria, the British government

3 These are translated words from Ibn Battuta’s book, *Rihla* (Book of Travels), in which there is a section dedicated to “Ibn Battuta in Black Africa.”

assigned males as "native authorities" and discriminated against women by creating a system in which only men were allowed to run for positions of power. Women did not have a place in colonial society and therefore, were confined to their homes, which resulted in them losing a part of their culture (Brennan). Today, men predominantly hold positions of political power in West Africa; this ultimately reflects how colonial power dynamics were passed down and spread across West Africa.

Gender-Differentiated Parenting

From my research, it is clear that the history of gender roles in West Africa is a result of gender-differentiated parenting. Gender-differentiated parenting can be described as the way in which parents treat or control their children differently as it relates to their specific gender. As families continue to grow, the roles and responsibilities for both women and men are passed down to daughter and son, respectively.[4] During my travels in both Senegal and Mali over the winter break, I spent time discussing with my elders the history of gender in the Soninke culture and how it has developed after colonialism. One day, my sister and I took the public city bus from Dakar, Senegal to Diamniadio to visit our uncle, Tonton Mala, and his family. Going back to caste systems, Tonton Mala's lineage traces back to the *horeh* caste in Mali; he is a descendant of authority and power; therefore, it was his duty to become successful so that he can provide for his family and pass that responsibility down to his children. We took an early morning bus, so by the time we arrived in the relatively new city, the sun was shining brightly over newly constructed buildings and colorful construction sites. There was a lot of sand everywhere, but we did not seem to pay any mind because Tonton Mala was standing at the bus stop waiting to greet us. He instantly recognized who we were through the many photos that my Mom sent him and we were slightly overwhelmed with how excited he was to see us. As he drove us to his home, I noticed the

4 Gender is a spectrum; it is not binary. There are a multitude of genders that a child or an adult can identify with, however, due to the nature of this thesis, there is not enough relevant data for me to discuss the parenting roles in West Africa for families that include children of a different gender outside of the binary. More studies need to be done on this specific topic due to its importance in the development of a child in a West African household. Due to the lack of information, I chose to limit my research to cis-gender children and their relationship to cis-gender parents in West Africa.

many unfinished apartment buildings which Tonton Mala made sure to comment on: "This city is going to be the new Dakar. Everybody is moving here now." Pulling up into his driveway, I also noticed the many farm animals that occupied his property; there were cows, goats, and chickens freely roaming the area. As soon as I stepped out, I smelled the scent of new paint and *sameh* floating through the air and Tonton Mala's daughters rushed out to meet us.[5] I didn't see his wife until Tonton Mala brought us into his three-story home and sat himself down with my sister and I in the living room, on small decorated cushions, and had his wife bring us *ataaya* as a welcoming drink.[6] She was a tall, beautiful woman dressed in her colorful Senegalese attire. She had a small smile and would quickly enter and leave the room every few minutes. I wish I had spent more time talking to his wife about my project, however, she was always either busy with the children or was fixing the garden. Tonton Mala was very comfortable in his chair and was introducing each one of his daughters to us, who were also shy. We had very little time to spend in Diamniadio, so I asked Tonton Mala about his experience growing up as a Soninke man and traveling to different countries in West Africa. He explained how his role as a man and a husband was written for him thousands of years ago due to the Soninke culture's deeply-rooted history. By emigrating, the young men of the Soninke are able to send more money back home. They work from abroad to develop the village infrastructure and send food, supplies, and necessities, so that the people who are in the village can be comfortable in their lives. That is what proves the success of a man and explains why Tonton Mala is always back and forth between Dakar, Angola, Mali, and other neighboring countries. In his words,

> *Telle est notre culture. Ce n'est pas l'Islam qui a dit cela. C'est notre culture Soninké. C'est l'homme qui fait tout pour les femmes. Tout. C'est l'homme qui doit construire une maison pour la femme, c'est l'homme qui doit acheter les vêtements de la femme. Tout ce dont une femme a besoin, c'était l'homme qui le ferait pour elle. Mais, maintenant avec l'évolution, le monde a changé, les femmes travaillent et tout. C'est pourquoi nous migrons. C'est*

5 Sameh is a West African dish made of rice, goat meat, and slow-cooked vegetables.

6 Ataaya is a special kind of gunpowder tea and it is a staple to Senegalese culture.

pourquoi nous partons. [7]

Tonton Mala explains that his responsibility as a man is viewed through how successful he is in his travels. Before, men did all the work within the community and worked to keep money flowing into the village, however, now as times change, more young men are moving to Western communities and France to find success. Tonton Mala sees this as a blessing in disguise, because as times change, people change and the culture changes. This also explains the influx of young West African men into America and France within the last few decades. To be a man is to be successful, so that your wife and kids can be happy. But in a society where women are working as well, to be a man is to take care of the entire community, including the village and its heritage In Tonton Mala's words, not much is left in the village, in terms of jobs, local businesses, and agriculture, so everyone must play their part, including emigrating away from home (ironically), in order to keep whatever is left intact.

Impact on Future Generations

Gender as a social construct is still present in today's West African society. In Gouthioube, Mali, which is a small-town village that sits by the two rivers separating Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal, there were girls much younger than me who were flawlessly washing clothes, dishes, household items in the river. Despite the many horror stories that were told about the mysteries of the river, these girls were swift in their movements as they washed, scrubbed, rinsed, and wrung out their clothes. As I was led back home by them, I noticed the different small shops lining the streets where men sat out front greeting each other and every single person who walked by. There were phone shops, food markets, woodworking shops, tailors, metal shops, and garages—in all of them there were no women unless they were the customers or were dropping off food to the workers. Young men and boys were seen on horses and donkeys throughout the roads, and when I asked about them, I was told that they were either going farming or to the *goune* for clearing

7 Translated from French: "This is our culture. It wasn't Islam that said that. This is our Soninké culture. It's the man who does everything for women. Everything. It is the man who must build a house for the woman, it is the man who must buy the clothes for the woman. Everything a woman needs, it was the man who would do it for them. But, now with evolution, the world has changed, women are working and everything. That is why we migrate. That is why we leave."

the land because of how difficult it was a task for women and elders.[8] Once we were back home in our familial compound, I could see many of the younger kids running around and enjoying the Malian sun. Once inside the compound, it wasn't as if there were separate immediate families who happened to be in the same area; no, it was one large family where parental control had little to do with the development and growth of their children. Children were raised by the entire family, not just the parents. When my little cousins were called by my grandmother or a distant aunt who lived in the same compound, they would run to them and do whatever it was that was asked of them. Everyone in the compound becomes the parent. Elders use communication, mannerisms, cultural customs, and religion to teach the child what it means to be a member of the community. It is in this same fashion that roles are taught to the child, especially in terms of gender.

Gender-differentiated parenting of a child in West Africa is less in the hands of the parents as it is in the hands of the community in which the child is raised. I was able to witness the truth of the proverb "it takes a village to raise a child" during my trip abroad. In one of my conversations with Bass, my brother-in-law, he spoke about his experience growing up as a young boy in Ivory Coast:

> My grandfather sometimes told me that man must be like a tree. You have to have your roots, that is to say your feet, underground, to keep your origins, and take advantage of the winds blowing, like new civilizations. If you do not have your roots well buried underground, each passing wind may blow you away, that is to say each new civilization risks making you forget your origin, your culture, your religion. He wanted me to know that every civilization has its positive and negative effects and for everyone to have a strong belief and to benefit from the beliefs of others without giving up your own. Even though Bass moved a lot when he was younger, he carries with him the teachings of his parents, his *imams,* his grandparents, his aunts and uncles, and his village.[9]

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8 Goune means "the woods" or "the forest" in Soninke.

9 Imam is an Islamic preacher, or leader, who often leads prayers and gives guidance to members of the Islamic community.

Many New York City teenagers of West African immigrant parents find peace, comfort, and relatedness with other West African children as a means to justify their traditional upbringings at home. Gender-differentiated parenting in Western communities can be examined as one aspect of traditional upbringings often normalized in new environments due to similarities shared amongst the different enclaves of West African culture in a particular neighborhood. This can be seen as a subcategory of cultural parenting, which encompasses other forms of parenting, like cultural discipline practices and religious parenting. Looking back on Sall's research, for example, young West African girls can relate to each other and their experiences as daughters of West African immigrants by comparing cuisine, language, and cultural customs. Through speaking their local languages at school or discussing who has the best cuisine, these children are able to relate to each other on a deeper level because of the values that they were taught (Sall 1-19).

As I continue to get older, my mother is not afraid to speak to me about the customs of marriage and the way in which our culture honors a marriage. When I was younger, I found it bizarre that my mom would speak to me about these things, but I also found comfort in talking with my Malian girlfriends in high school going through the same experience. Not only did our experiences relate to each other, but we found peace in questioning the gendered aspects of our tradition. When my younger sisters hear the conversation about marriage, they tend to run off and not engage in what my mother is trying to say. I listen because I am curious about what our culture permits us to do, but I am also listening to appease my mother. In describing the phenomenon of migration's impact on the African family dynamic, author Pauline Uwakweh states, "generational differences between immigrant parents and their children may constitute another source of conflict in identity formation, especially when the children lack 'the interior knowledge' about home that their parents possess" (33). The future of West African culture in new environments is dependent on the identity formation of the children of West African immigrants and how these children relate, or do not relate, to different aspects of their family's culture. In terms of marriage, first-generation daughters of West African immigrants who are not keen to the idea of marrying between the ages of 18 and 22 will most likely not continue the practice with their offspring, which labels the

practice as something that is left behind with past generations or back in the native community within West Africa.

Based on these findings, gender-differentiated parenting in West African immigrant households causes children to both normalize and question the gender roles that are placed on them and work through the pressures and expectations of their parents. My father once told me that this approach to parenting is a part of West African cultural history, and it is true. The concepts that were used when my parents were raised back home are the same themes that keep the villages running today, which is what I had witnessed in Senegal and Mali.

The Immigration of Tradition

There are two parts to the West African immigrant identity when it comes to adapting to these new environments. The first part is the notion that there are certain cultural assumptions that are either forgotten or left behind in their native land because they hinder the success of the immigrant in Western society; we may acknowledge this as the "parts left behind." The part left behind represents the removal of certain West African values in the daily lives of West African immigrants upon adapting to their environment because they clash with particular cultural elements of Western society. For example, my father left behind the idea that it was not necessary for women to gain an education by making sure my mother took English classes. Had he not done that, my mother wouldn't be able to work at her full potential due to the language barrier, so my parents had to rid themselves of that mindset.

The second part of West African immigrant identity is the "part that migrates." The part that migrates is the acceptance and the pursuit of acting on certain West African values by the West African immigrant because it keeps their traditional culture alive despite being miles away. By speaking one's native language, for example, or cooking ethnic food that was taught to them by their elders, in a New York City apartment, the West African immigrant is reminded of their home and is able to pass down different aspects of their culture to their respective families in the new environment. This keeps the culture from dying out and allows the immigrant to maintain both an internal and external connection to their West African roots.

The Part That Migrates

Since the end of the 20th century, as West African governments have become more corrupt due to the damaging effect that the colonial powers, many migrants seek to find a "better life" and financial stability in the United States, or in Europe. For example, in Nigeria, many young women and men migrate trans-locally or trans-nationally due to distrust of democracy and law enforcement officers. Bribery and corruption have become driving forces within the government, which makes locals feel unsafe and forces them to search for better living environments elsewhere (Kirwin and Anderson 17).

For some who do return home, their stay is not permanent. One of my cousins, for example, migrated to the US when he was 23. He assimilated into American culture, found a great job, learned how to speak fluent English, and made many American friends. He did not have a desire to go back home; "America has too much money," he said. He described how back home it was not easy to make as much money as it was in America—it was truly a dream. When he did return home at the age of 30, it was for a one-month stay. He went bearing gifts and was pleased to see all of the elders and many of the young kids who had grown up. However, he was aching to come back to his second home, his permanent home.

On the other hand, some migrants, like my parents, do not have the access to return back to their home countries. In my home, my parents constantly speak about their desire to go back home—their desire to complete the circular motion of coming back as a hero. Migration is idealized as temporary; it is something that is to be experienced for a short moment so that the achievements of the time abroad can be shared amongst the community, which can ultimately help community members progress collectively. As a West-African man who emigrated for a better financial life, my father's goal is to go back and share his wealth within the community—his money is not just for him, but also for his family to use for their own personal achievements. This concept of returning home was so valuable that it has been passed down through generations within West African families. On the other hand, a person who chose not to return home is seen as having lost a part of their culture, whether it was acknowledged or not. By wanting to stay in their host

country, the migrant is seen as being rebellious and uncaring for the betterment of the community. The value of sharing wisdom has become less important and the significance of building financial security, which is the basis of Western societies, has become the main priority. Only those who have found it difficult to assimilate, which is predominantly seen among older migrants, have more of a desire to return.

The cultural fabric of West Africa includes the customs and traditions that have been respected and maintained for generations. West Africans are more community-based; they pride themselves on communicating with each other and building strong relationships. Most families live in big compounds and meals are preferably shared together, instead of eaten individually. Those who do immigrate to the United States, for example, are put off by America's "socially-impoverished" fast-paced society (Stoller 166). They see that Americans tend to keep to themselves, whether it's through eating alone, running from one appointment to the next, and not taking the time to talk with one another within their daily lives. Despite these social and cultural differences, West African immigrants still work to establish social connections amongst each other through building their own communities and maintaining conversations with family members within their home countries, which can often lead to alienation from American society.

Paul Stoller, an American cultural anthropologist, studied the migration of West Africans, predominantly Hausa people from Niger to New York City, and their adjustment to life in America. When explaining how assimilation influences the migrant's way of life, Stoller emphasizes the large extent to which West-African immigrants adjust their identity to "the social and economic fabric of life" in America (160). These immigrants come to make their presence known in the host society, which can be an alienating factor to their home countries as they continue to build families and deepen their roots in the United States. West-African immigrants "will not disappear tomorrow morning or afternoon" because their comfort and their rooted communities are a result of how well they are able to maintain their cultural values amongst others who look like them as well as how well they are able to adapt themselves into American society (Stoller 160). This is a valid explanation as to why many West-African immigrants often find themselves staying

in their host countries for longer periods of time than expected. This greatly impacts the overall family structure of West African migrants who choose to have children in these host countries. As migrants become more adapted to Western society, they seem to stray away from the abstract values of their culture, therefore altering what gets passed down to their children.

The Part Left Behind

When my mother finally came to the United States, she expected my father to be living lavishly. She thought they were ready to live the American dream, but they had to start from the bottom together. They settled in the Bronx and started from there. My father became a taxi driver, and my mother opened her own hair salon. Typical. I grew up with my father dropping me off at school in a taxi and doing my homework in my mother's salon chairs. My mother would teach me how to braid while my little brother followed my father everywhere he went. Despite our circumstances growing up in a small apartment in the Bronx, my siblings and I were able to make our parents realize that their true affluence came from the successes of their children. As an American citizen, I had to learn the importance of balancing life with two different cultures. I had traditional American friends, went to American schools, and became a part of American life, but as soon as I came home, my West-African identity took over. Soninké was the primary language spoken in our household. Occasionally, my Mom would scream, *"Ana mané kho? An lakhé lagha!"* whenever my sister and I were talking about boys, scandalous reality T.V. shows, or anything related to American culture.[10] The values of being a West-African Muslim were strictly instilled in us within our Bronx apartment. My mother began cooking with my sister and I since we were twelve and the five daily prayers were enforced in our life routine. When I was younger, I asked my Mom, "Why do I have to pray five times a day? My friends at school only pray on Sundays and they don't even wear a headscarf." My Mom sat me down and gave me a lecture on why we were different from those kids at school. "Those kids were not blessed with the history and culture that this family has. *Alhamdulillahi*, you're special," she told me.[11] My siblings and I

10 Translates from Soninké to "What did you say? You better close your mouth!"

11 Translates from Arabic to "Thank God".

have only gone to private institutions in New York throughout elementary and junior high school. Our parents planned for us to be successful, no matter the risks that they had to face, so they made sure that I understood the importance of education and the opportunities that came with it. My father did this by immigrating with his love for education and passing on that value to his children. He would tell me stories of how he would trek with his friends every morning to go to class and made sure that he was seen by all the teachers. No matter how much he aged, he always looked at a classroom chair as a seat on a royal pedestal.

West Africans continue to move to the West in search of a new experience, for my parents, it was in search of a better financial life. For others, it may be for a better education, or a better career. There is a search for "better," which happens to be the story for many West African families that I have encountered throughout my life.

I've witnessed several West African immigrants move into my Bronx neighborhood in New York City. Our neighbors hail from Senegal, Mauritania, Nigeria, and the Ivory Coast. One stop away on the subway, one would be able to find enclaves of Ghanaians and Gambians situated within these NYC neighborhoods. Amongst the families that I am surrounded by, these families adapt to society and continue to hold on to their culture. But to what extent? Going back to my father and his views on education, my father made an exception. Many other West African families also make "exceptions" to their way of living post-migration. For example, when it comes to economic opportunities for immigrant workers in foreign countries, West African immigrants are more willing to take on jobs in Western communities that would have rather been looked down upon in their home country. Bruce Whitehouse, an American anthropologist, studied the labor dynamics of West African natives, predominantly from Mali and Cote d'Ivoire, who moved to Congo and noted the "exceptions" that these workers would make if they were to move to New York or Paris. He writes:

> For this reason many natives of Abidjan and Brazzaville who would balk at keeping a shop, driving a taxi, or sweeping streets at home would be willing to perform these same jobs as immigrant workers in Paris, Marseilles, or New York. (29)

These exceptions depend on the place that the migrant travels to. There is a class hierarchy in which the status of being a taxi driver in New York is viewed as better than being a taxi driver in Mali due to the prestige of being a worker in the United States. West Africans are willing to make these exceptions much like my father made an exception for my mother. He believed that by being in a new environment, there was a new priority that came with speaking English because of the different job opportunities that may present themselves—the gender roles that both my parents were accustomed to did not matter as much in terms of education.

As more West African immigrant women move, many of them are willing to find employment due to the increase in opportunities, which differs from the gendered division of labor in their native land, where men are the most employed. From a study performed by the Migration Policy, its data showed that, in 2007, "Black African women had an employment rate of 68 percent, 8 points above the employment rate of all immigrant women" in the United States (Capps et al. 16). The rise of employment amongst these women represents the willingness to take on a new opportunity that was not readily available to such an extent in their native land. The women do not have to constantly depend on their husbands as the breadwinner of the family and instead work to build their own financial security, leaving behind the idea that their worth comes from working from home. For example, according to Cheik Anta Babou, during the 1980s in New York City, the Afro hair revolution "created a great demand for braiders that salon owners tried to meet by luring new Senegalese immigrants into the business" (233). Many Senegalese women took advantage of this opportunity and popularized their businesses through showcasing the different creative hairstyles, like Senegalese Twists and Casamance braids, symbols of beauty for black America; these hard-working women not only found a way to be economically active and independent, but they found a way to set themselves apart from the gender expectations that are imposed on them.

As Senegalese women continue to increase their wealth in the hair braiding industry, even in modern times, they hold an influence over the presumed patriarchal power structure within the household. Like mentioned earlier, with the extra income, women are able to participate in tasks that were labeled as a man's job, like paying for the rent and taking care of their partner's

expenses. This then becomes a gender role reversal or dismissal in which the gender roles of the wife and the husband are either switched or blurred due to the change in income distribution and how it doesn't fit into the structure of the traditional Muslim, Wolof family dynamic.[12] Because of this change, there is a call for a negotiation between the family so that nothing leads to an "intense strife in the family" (Uwakweh, et al. 41). In an ethnographic study of Senegalese hair braiders in New York and Atlanta, Cheick Anta Babou found that Senegalese women would rather not have these negotiations and instead denied any subversion to the traditional household system. "[They] insisted that they remain faithful to Wolof and Muslim values of respect and submission to the husband; they display a mentality and set of practices that scarcely reflect their statements" (Babou 236). The irony is that if these negotiations were to be held within the household, they would be interpreted as a threat to the gendered role and authority of the husband, or male dominant figure, as the head of the household. Through this scenario, the concept of the man as the breadwinner in traditional households is an element of West African culture that is neglected to a certain extent. As families move to Western communities and continue to normalize the idea that women work too, they proudly can make more money than their husbands and still be a wife.

Conclusion

Through my research and time spent in Senegal and Mali, I found that the normalization of gender roles and the importance of tradition are deeply embedded in the daily lives of West African families. This impacts how gender roles and gender-differentiated parenting are passed down to future generations. In my time abroad, I was not able to speak to many Senegalese or Malian women about their experiences because of their unavailability: much of their time was spent in the home and catering to the family. I intended to gather more information about how the women pass on gender roles to their children and learn more about the different ways in which children take on the roles passed on by their mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and older sisters. However, the men were the ones who were free to talk, which forced me to gather more external research on the

12 The Wolof population is the majority ethnic group in Senegal. They speak the Wolof language and can also be found in Gambia. The Wolof people situated in Senegal and Gambia are on the farthest western-most point of the entire continent of Africa and are firm believers in staying rooted in one's cultural traditions.

experiences of West African women alone and how the roles placed on them shape their family dynamic. This shows that not only is gender-differentiated parenting present in West Africa to this day, but more research is required on the changes of West African gendered culture. In Western societies, the gender roles of West African immigrant families are constantly being questioned, which I observe in my personal life as well as in the films and stories that I have discussed in my research. Gender-differentiated parenting affects the way the children of West African immigrants, like myself, grow up; we grow up in two different worlds, the world of American society and the West African community. More research is also needed on the deeper effects of gender-differentiated parenting by West African immigrants in America on future generations and on child development.

In order for gender roles to be fully understood and equally respected in a progressive environment, it is necessary that generations pass down the value of communication and knowledge, which is obtained through education, so that parents are aware of the effects and potential drawbacks of gender-differentiated parenting and that they can raise their children without fear of losing culture.

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