

African-Americans vs. Africans in America

Is there no true African diaspora in the US?

A brief political background of Tanzania, from the CIA World Factbook:

Shortly after independence, Tanganyika and Zanzibar merged to form the nation of Tanzania in 1964. One-party rule came to an end in 1995 with the first democratic elections held in the country since the 1970s. Zanzibar's semi-autonomous status and popular opposition have led to two contentious elections since 1995, which the ruling party won despite international observers' claims of voting irregularities.

Emil Muta Augustine was once the Head of the Department of Passports within the Immigration Division of the African country of Tanzania. After being falsely accused of treasonous actions, he was jailed with no hope of release. With the help of his brother, who bribed the police, he escaped and fled to Kenya. Running from his own government, he had to leave his wife and two children behind. He sought help from the American embassy, and then decided to come to the US, specifically Washington State, because of his brother-in-law who was studying at the University of Washington.

By the time Augustine arrived at the SeaTac airport, however, his brother-in-law had already been deported back to Tanzania.

Augustine found himself literally wandering the streets of Federal Way, Wash. Alone, and unable to contact his family, he found nothing familiar until he came upon a Lutheran church.

“What brought me inside was the name ‘Lutheran,’ knowing the way we worship is quite the same,” Augustine said.

Although there are no Lutheran services in Augustine’s national language, Swahili, he is able to feel a connection through the liturgy and some of the traditional music. “Sometimes there is a song that we sing in your language, but the beat is the same, and I can see it in my language,” he said, then went on to explain that it made him feel more confident to be able to hear familiar beats and melodies.

The little Lutheran church adopted Augustine, giving him temporary employment as a janitor until he could find more a more suitable job. Coming from Tanzania with a law degree that he cannot use here, this was a significant step down. Still, he considered himself lucky to have work at all. Many members of the church said that he did his job well and with enthusiasm.

Augustine misses his homeland and feels disconnected from his African culture. “When you talk to other Americans, they don’t know much about Africa. They think, ‘Africa, that is where the lions are,’ but that is all they know, even black Americans. The animals are still there, but there are other things – we have people, we have culture, we have other things that they do not know.”

For lack of any truly African stores, Augustine tends to shop at Vietnamese stores, where he can find familiar foods like green bananas, yucca root, cassava, corn meal, mangoes, and pineapple. He says that while Tanzania has apples, “Apple juice is new to me, we do not have the juices. Orange juice. Mango juice. We have the apple, but no juice of apple.” He finds these differences interesting.

Augustine has been searching, but he knows of no Tanzanian groups in the area. Though he is in an area with many different Africans, even those from countries that neighbor his homeland such as Kenya and Uganda, he still feels isolated at times. He states that it is easy to pick out a “real American” from an African in America.

“Africans tend to walk as if they are skipping over stones that are not there, and their manner is more formal, sometimes almost defensive,” he said. “Even if their accent is not apparent, it is obvious. We have learned to say ‘what’s up’ rather than ‘how are you doing’ because other people do not speak that way in America.”

Unlike the diaspora created by other ethnic groups, Augustine believes that there is no true African diaspora. “For an African, there is no group with the same culture in America, outside of the church,” he said. “African-American culture is quite different from African culture. Now they are on the other side; they are no longer African.”

Augustine referred to watching the cable channel, Black Entertainment Television, “African-Americans have no unique culture in America. I could not figure what was so special or so different about BET. It seemed to be American shows with black faces, but not different. I remember the African-American shows were trying to be influential in Africa, but they were not accepted because they went against our culture.”

One example of the cultural friction is in the way an African-American may address an elder. It can be disturbing to an African.

“We do not just call out an elder’s name,” said Augustine. “We first say something such as ‘baba’ (father) or ‘bibi’ (grandmother) to show respect.” He says that he still feels a pang in his chest

when he calls a person older than himself by their first name. “[My host] has been understanding. She allows me to call her mom.”

Augustine’s take on BET coincides with Hamid Naficy’s observation of how the station fails to address an African culture, rather, it “centers on life and times in the United States. The homeland for these programs is ultimately located here and now, not over there and then” (2003, p. 378). While called African-American, there is no cultural influence actually from Africa.

This follows through to most exported shows on Tanzanian channels. Usually, the shows are left as they were shown in America. Augustine recalls Tanzanian television, “We have five stations in Tanzania, this I-TV. It shows American shows, mainly music programs and Hollywood stories, all in English.” The rest of the programming is local, mostly news and sports from Tanzania and Kenya. There exist no truly hybrid shows, says Augustine, “mainly because of the languages, the expense of production, and a general lack of interest on the part of African people.” This coincides almost exactly with Timothy Haven’s theory on why African-American sitcoms are not more popular internationally (2003). Haven cites that these sitcoms do not translate well, have less appeal than white sitcoms, and tend to be too costly to produce overseas. Augustine agrees that when there is an appeal, it tends to be the younger audience, but still, traditions are challenged in such a way that the majority of Africans are not interested in these shows.

Much like the anxious enjoyment of the husband-wife relationship exposed on such hybrid shows as India’s *Adarsha Dampathigalu* (McMillin, 2003), these semi-hybrid programs in Tanzania are watched with a sort of trepidation, as they tend to step outside the bounds of social etiquette. Imported shows, for the most part, are not dubbed, but run just as they are, in English, with a panel of Swahili voices explaining the action over the top. “The opera *Days of Our Lives* is popular in Tanzania. It is imported in English, and explained in Swahili to keep interest. I did not watch it,” confides Augustine.

The second largest hindrance to successful programming in African countries is language. Even among African countries that speak the same language, it can be difficult to broadcast shows that will be understood. While most Kenyans and Ugandans speak Swahili, Augustine says that, “they must be taught how to speak Swahili. Swahili’s source is in Tanzania and they do not speak real Swahili.” He believes that the difference is much like how a southerner’s dialect differs from that of a northerner’s here in America. “How do you choose which Swahili will be spoken when making a program?” That may be why there are so many regional shows, even in national news.

America tries very hard to be multicultural, yet in his search for movies or music from his homeland, Augustine was not able to find anything truly from Africa, except for a limited supply of Reggae music. “Reggae is popular in Tanzania because we have the same beats in both our music and the way we speak. Not the Reggae Americans think of from Jamaica, but real Reggae that comes from the southern parts of Africa.” Augustine tried a store in Bellevue called ‘International Video and CD’ and found it to be lacking. “I do not understand why there are African- or Asian- Americans, but no European- Americans. It would make no difference. Everyone wants to be called Something- American, but they are all the same.”

Augustine has been in the US just under two years. He is just 38 years old. Currently, he contracts with the US Immigration Department and is working on his US citizenship, sponsored by members of his new church home. He is unable to return to Tanzania, as the political climate has not changed. He lost both his wife and daughter to malaria. Because it is so difficult to get word to and from his family in Tanzania, he was not notified of their passing for several months. He is working on bringing his son to America.

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