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## Back to Africa: Second Chances for the Children of West African Immigrants

*This paper examines the phenomenon of West African parents living in Europe and North America who send their older children back home: from places of high immigrant aspiration to those of hardship and privation. Drawing on a project on West African immigration to Europe and on previous field studies in Africa, we conclude that West African immigrants fearing the consequences of their children's indiscipline in the West, where racism and hostility can endanger the entire family, may send unruly children back to the home country. In doing so, we believe, they build on long-standing African disciplinary efforts in hopes of toughening their children's resilience to the challenges in the new place and wait for the risk to dissipate.*

Recent decades have seen a sharp rise in the number of West African nationals in Europe and North America. Most have been young men seeking work or a degree, though women have come in greater numbers as well, whether independently or, under family reunification

provisions, to join a husband (Sow, in press). More thinly documented have been the West African children who are directly affected by international migration to the West. Some of these children are left behind when a parent travels abroad for work; others come as migrants themselves, whether as the dependents of a working parent or, in more extreme cases, unaccompanied by an adult.

Among the most puzzling cases are those of the children of West African immigrants in Europe or North America who are sent back to Africa, particularly children of older school age. Leaving places that seem to offer every advantage—established health and educational systems as well as the likelihood of a stable, prosperous future—these children effectively return to countries with levels of personal hardship and privation that most Europeans and Americans would find unacceptable for their own children (Ariès, 1962). When asked to explain their actions, immigrant parents may point to lower costs of living and abundant child care back home. Alternatively, they may declare that a child is adapting poorly to the new place or needs to grow up knowing the family's ancestral roots. If pressed, though, nearly all West African immigrant parents living in Europe and the United States, which we describe collectively as “the West,” ultimately say they want their children to gain a secure footing the West. Observations like these raise two questions. First, what might immigrants of recent West African origin find so objectionable about

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countries usually described as the pinnacles of African immigrant ambition to the point that they would send their children back to live in one of the poorest regions on earth? Second, why would they so often send their children back home at just the point when the children should be preparing most intensively for a successful professional life in their new homes?

Stripped of their wider social and cultural contexts, we believe the apparent facts in this case are misleading. Drawing from our past and present studies in Africa and Europe and from a range of secondary sources, we examine in some detail the West African tenet that ensuring a child's social and intellectual development requires maximal parental access to long-standing disciplinary practices. We then turn to two related concerns of West African parents about life in Europe and the United States. One is what parents see as a Western tendency to coddle and spoil children and to restrict parents' access to the discipline they may deem necessary for bringing a child into line. A child with an easy life, they fear, will have faltering interest in school and career achievement, losing the ambitions the parents had for him or her, quite possibly the main reason they made the international move in the first place. Even more serious for parents may be the repercussions of an undisciplined child's involvement in gangs, violence, and crime. In a place that can quickly become hostile to the African immigrant presence, parents know that such activities can decisively derail undisciplined children. What is more, the new home country can hold equally serious risks for the parents—and, by extension, the extended family that relies on their remittances—when they try to discipline children. Forbidden to levy the kind of discipline they deem necessary to control an intransigent child who may have begun to draw attention from authorities, immigrant parents, we conclude, may decide to send the child back home, whether to relatives or to boarding schools, to wait for the risk to abate.

In choosing lenses through which to see the phenomenon of sending back older children, our analysis implies a focus on children in their early to midteens, a range that usually covers a demanding phase of formal education in which much can go wrong. Gender may well figure in decisions to send children back, especially in the matter of female "circumcision," but

cases stemming from behavior problems usually involve boys. Finally, although we focus on parents' perspectives rather than on those of children or of guardians or authorities. Parents' voices most prominently appear in our textual data on children's relocations. This is likely so not just because parents usually have the most authority over a child's relocation, but also because immigration laws usually make parents alone responsible for a child in whom the entire extended family has invested so much.

#### METHOD

Studying cases of children living apart from their biological parents poses no small challenge. Among the complications is the enormous variation they manifest across time and space. Children's separation from their parents may last from a month to the entirety of childhood; they may live down the street or on different continents. Some children in the formal care of others see their parents every day; others have no memory of them. Relationships to caretakers can range from rural grandmothers who care for newly weaned toddlers to service in the household of elites who seek low-cost household or farm labor.

A related set of complications turns on definitions. In Africa, instances of child transfer seldom resemble formal adoption as described in the European and American legal systems. The exceptionally rare examples of formal adoption in Africa arise almost exclusively in cases involving Western adoptive parents or in which Western countries' family reunification rules can be met only by transferring a child legally to the destination family. At the same time, two qualities distinguish transfers of children between adult caretakers in Africa from those more familiar to Europeans and North Americans. One is that they are taken for granted. Western ideals cast parents, whether biological or those acquired through formal adoption, as the best caretakers for children; departures from this pattern are considered to risk psychological damage to the child. Perhaps for this reason, Western societies emphasize that children are fragile creatures who need the stable parental figures best created by a nuclear family structure; they see a child's transfer to a household headed by nonbiological parents as a response of last resort to an intolerable

situation. West African families, by contrast, see relocation to a different household as normal, or even beneficial, for a child's progress in life and hence as something in which a child could engage several times.

The other notable departure of African interpretations from Western interpretations of child transfers between caretakers is their implications for kinship and social connection in general. In Western countries, perhaps because of both a child's perceived vulnerability and the disinterest adults are said to have in children they did not bear biologically, a child's transfer to a new household is interpreted as a rupture in the family and hence a risk to the child. In Africa, in contrast, children are seen as belonging throughout life to the lineage of their birth. Child transfers are not intended, then, to be permanent legal transfers to another family or institution. Quite the contrary; they often are undertaken to reaffirm social connections between parents and guardians. In the view of authors such as Goody (1982) and Alber (2003), in fact, they largely represent residential variations on everyday practices of distributing parenting roles within the lineage. The idea that kin who care for the child of a kinsman would simply be "fostering" them in a sense devoid of meaningful social connection would be anathema.

### *Data*

If these definitional matters pose challenges to conventional understandings of families and relationships, the data problems encountered in studying children who are sent home from Europe and America pose even more challenges. Almost without exception, every adult of recent West African origin living in Europe and the United States knows about the practice of sending children back to Africa; many know a family who has done so. The phenomenon appears as well in many close ethnographies of West African immigrant family life (e.g., Barou's 2001 work on Malians in Paris). Few surveys, however, are designed to capture instances of children who were sent back. Most national censuses and vital registries exclude nonresident family members altogether. One study that has tried to assess scale is that of Farjas i Bonet (2002), from Girona, Spain. Farjas i Bonet's survey suggested that that nearly one third of children of Gambian origin ( $N = 625$ )

had been sent back to Africa for a significant amount of time. Beyond a tiny handful of studies like this, though, published quantitative evidence on the phenomenon seems virtually nonexistent. Far richer and more abundant sources come from research usually termed "qualitative": interviews, written texts, and ad hoc conversations.

Our sources fell into two broad categories. The first was an ongoing anthropological demographic study of reproductive and family life among transnational Gambians in Spain. This study began under a 2004–2007 project, in collaboration with Gunnar Andersson, called, "Transnational Vital Events: Family Dynamics, Law, and Migration between Africa and Europe" (see Bledsoe, Houle, and Sow, 2007; Empez Vidal, 2007; Fleischer, 2010). Other bodies of data come from previous studies. For Bledsoe, the most relevant was a study of child fosterage in Sierra Leone (1982–1983). Relevant as well was an earlier study on marriage in Liberia (1971–1972), and a later one in The Gambia on fertility, aging, and contraceptive use (1992–1995). Sow's relevant research centered on African immigrant communications with communities back home (Sow, 2010), the informal African immigrant economy in Europe, cultural perceptions of pathology among aging immigrant men, and immigrant struggles over remittances in the face of economic turbulence back home.

The research has been ongoing, however, in two senses. First, its exploratory nature has required seizing opportunities that can best clarify findings and refine questions. The other is the recognition that the opportunities for doing so are all around. Certainly for co-author Sow, who was born and reared in Senegal and is now an active researcher on and participant in West African communities in Europe, his "ethnography" is not merely ongoing; it is an unavoidable daily experience.

Although we draw a number of explicit examples from the current study and use past studies' published results to set the African cultural context, the process of writing the present paper led us to draw on aspects of the past studies that were not previously published. In reviewing these materials for patterns relevant to the present paper, however, we began see in them a number of gaps and inconsistencies. The review also raised new questions; answering them would require data we did not have. Hence,

we launched a series of open-ended, exploratory forays into secondary materials for illuminating accounts. Of those materials we found, some turned up in scholarly books and journals; others came from online media: news stories, editorials, and newsletters.

Because the phenomenon of sending children back to Africa from the West was so thinly documented, we also opened the search to personal histories and quotes in journalistic or "discussion group" media. In a similar way, we often found published analyses useful not just for their attempts to understand the practice, but for the data on which they were based. In some cases we came to see new questions and interpretations in the cases cited in these works. Needless to say, if the use of quantitative data requires a constant search for alternative explanations and externalities that may have shaped the results, as well as a vigilance about the complexities introduced by language and subterfuge, then the use of sources like those on which this paper relies explicitly demands them.

Having implied that some of the sources of information described above comprise scholarship while others comprise qualitative data, we stress that these are highly problematic divisions. On the one hand, a work of "scholarship," whether it relies on statistical significance or on the analysis of complex cultural statements, inevitably reflects a history of disciplinary or historical influences. A contemporary analysis of Durkheim's book *Suicide* is probably more likely to focus on it as "data," as an example of a particular phase in the development of sociology, than it is to take as facts Durkheim's reported differences in suicide rates between Catholics and Protestants in nineteenth-century Europe. On the other hand, materials such as interviews that are collected from a subject population of interest are usually seen as "data," as objects requiring interpretation and explanation, rather than as potential sources of highly plausible explanation that we are more likely to call "scholarship." The point is especially telling for verbal or written statements presented as quotations. An interview with an illiterate African midwife revealing wisdom gleaned from a lifetime of systematic empirical observation arguably represents "scholarship" as much as it does "data."

Pressing beyond questions with which the transnational vital events study began, then, we

searched for new material, whether our own or that of others and whether it came from interviews, online discussions, or conventional ethnographies. Each new realization led to yet more questions and to yet more forays into the subject area. This effort was greatly facilitated by the Internet technology. In some ways, in fact, our open-ended, iterative searches replicated the flow of contemporary information across regions and boundaries, with information moving far more easily than those who produce it can cross those same regions and boundaries, a phenomenon that has allowed even the most highly dispersed members of families to remain in touch (Mazzucato & Schans, 2008).

The ease with which relevant sources from the Internet can now be discovered was in part what led us to extend the scope of the study beyond Europe to the abundant materials from North America, mainly the United States, where West African populations have grown rapidly in the last decades and where theories of ethnicity and integration have been extensively developed and debated (e.g., Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Including material from a wide geographical scope in some ways simply follows the lines of a conventional literature review that places a study in the context of previous studies. At the same time, using material from different places, with their very different immigration histories and policies, also carries interpretive risks. In both Europe and North America, for example, most children from West African families are likely citizens or legal residents, but because birth in the United States automatically conveys U. S. citizenship, far more children are probably citizens of the new country than in Europe, where citizenship is assigned according to the citizenship. In Europe, the status of "immigrant" can be carried for generations.

The forms that this legality takes and how they are understood seem quite different. "Legal residence," for example, appears most often in discussions of West Africans in Europe, whereas "citizenship" is mentioned much more in the United States. At the same time, we have identified some striking thematic consistencies across the continents. Among the sharpest and most unmistakable are concerns with the risk that youths' troubles with the law can generate, not just for children but for their families, both back home and in the new place. Pursuing recent sources in particular has persuaded us that in this post-9/11 world, concerns about legality have

suffused every aspect of life among immigrant families whose members have been “legal” for some time. Broadening the comparative eye, in sum, has compelled us to step back from the overly broad generalizations about West Africa immigrant life we might have drawn had we looked only at the United States, but also to be more confident about those generalizations we do venture.

### *Literature and Cultural Context*

Well before social science research began to focus on transnationalism as an explicit theme, scholarly opinion about the impact on children of separation from parents was divided. Outcomes for older children were said to be mixed, though students of the family usually linked their health as well as economic and emotional well-being to physical proximity to parents, especially to mothers. For African children, authors such as Ainsworth (1967) and Thomas (1981) linked separation from parents or mothers to higher risks of mortality and morbidity, whether because these children were weaned too soon, making them vulnerable to nutritional deficit or infectious disease, or simply because they slipped through the cracks of health programs targeting mothers and their children (Bledsoe, Ewbank, & Isiugo-Abanhe, 1988).

Recent studies of the consequences of parent-child separation have taken a more explicitly political and economic orientation. Studies influenced by theories of globalization and transnationalism have tended to see detriment to children in the wake of the global rise in demand for low-cost transnational domestic service. Anderson (2000), Salazar Parreñas (2001), and Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2002), among others, pointed to a “caring gap” among the children of women who left to care for children of the affluent in other countries. Similar observations have arisen within Europe, where thousands of parents from the former Soviet bloc, as soon as their countries were accessioned into the European Union, left to work in wealthier places, sometimes leaving children with relatives or simply to fend for themselves (Bilefsky, 2009). In the Philippines, the source of much recent research on the impact on children of international labor migration, authors such as Battistella & Conoco (1998), D’Emilio and colleagues (2007), and Reyes (2008) have

suggested that although parents’ work abroad can alleviate familial poverty and improve children’s chances of survival, children left behind are at risk of emotional distress, faltering physical development, disrupted school progress, and abuse. The same may well apply to older children sent home from Europe or North America. Spending these years in poor educational conditions would appear to put them at a sharp competitive disadvantage for future employment opportunities in the West, where their parents nearly always want them to be able to make an adult life. Reporting on her research in Spain, Farjas i Bonet (2002) mentioned the frustration of Spanish school officials whose Gambian pupils were sometimes sent back to Africa for extended periods; these officials complained that the students, when they returned, had lost ground in their academic and language training and suffered a general cultural disorientation.

The overall impact on children of separation from their parents is far from clear, though. Few would disagree that arranging for care by a nonparent can be good for a young child in situations of “crisis fostering” (Goody, 1982) such as the death of a parent or pregnancy for a girl whose return to school a baby would jeopardize. Sending young children elsewhere is also a common strategy for removing them from tensions arising in the wake of a divorce. For young children, most people declare, being out of sight and mind is usually far better than staying behind in the care of a woman who may have been instrumental in driving their mother away. Such practices can also bring benefit to extended family members. In West Africa, relatives commonly give a barren woman a child to rear. Even more commonly, a woman with a new baby may leave her newly weaned toddler with an elderly “granny,” whether her own mother or a fictive one, so she can work on her farm crop or try to conceive a new child.

As these observations suggest, the plights of some children living away from parents must be kept on the same page with highly ordinary child-care practices in West Africa and elsewhere (Leinaweaver, 2008; Madhavan & Townsend, 2007; Mazzucato & Schans, 2008; Panter-Brick, 2001). In the past, parents seeking protection for the family from enemy raiders frequently sent children to a powerful chief (Murphy & Bledsoe, 1987). Boys were expected to become his bodyguards or servants and eventually take up

arms for him, whereas girls, trained in domestic work by senior women in his household, would become wives for him or one of his clients. (For parallels in Western history, see Demos, 1970; Laslett, 1977, p. 111; McCracken, 1983.) In the present, children continue to be expected to be grateful for such opportunities and to work hard, produce and market goods for their guardians, perform domestic chores, and so on (for Ghana, see Coe, 2005, 2008; Etienne, 1983; Goody, 1982). Consequently, guardians across the social spectrum see much to gain from taking in outside children. Especially for a promising child, simply giving him a meal when he is hungry could lay the basis for future claims on a powerful patron.

For older children in West Africa, who are charged with helping their families to advance, cultural epistemologies of achievement are pivotal. Linking advancement and wealth to properly approved personal struggle, they have held that valued knowledge is not free but is owned by others. In the past, acquiring such knowledge required children to earn it through "training" or morally disciplined struggle; children were exhorted accordingly with phrases like "No success without struggle" (Bledsoe, 1990). Such struggles required them to fulfill obligations to benefactors and accept with gratitude whatever costs or conditions their benefactors might impose. For ambitious children, moving away from the comfortable yet confining homes where they were born might be the best thing they could do. Not only did the outside world offer them contacts and sophistication, but more distant guardians were regarded as less likely to tolerate disobedience or insolence. Headstrong, impertinent children might be dispatched to a remote village and placed under the authority of an Arabic master renowned as much for his exacting discipline as for his command of the mystical powers of the Qur'an, to which properly trained children might be allowed access (Aluaigba, 2009; Bledsoe & Robey, 1986).

The child training ideology thus provided that deserving children, steeled to hardship, would rise to the surface regardless of the situation. Stories abounded of chiefs who, when seeking close counselors, brushed aside their own spoiled, bickering sons in favor of young men from humble roots who had proven their unflinching loyalty in the face of harsh adversity. Further, patrons who had seen a child's merit

shine through challenges might send him on to his own patrons in larger settlements, and so on, in a seamless trajectory of geographical, social, and ritual advancement. Alternatively, children who were not made to submit to discipline at the hands of their benefactors, who were pampered and fed to satisfaction, were sure to grow up lazy and arrogant. Becoming a burden rather than a blessing to their families, they would be lost to any useful good for the family (see also Coe, 2008). They would hoard gains for themselves, leave their families vulnerable to enemy predation and impoverishment, and earn the family's curses. All the knowledge and patronage they had gained would come to naught.

Training was seen as quite different from formal schooling, which continues to be regarded in West Africa as necessary but insufficient for lasting success. The problem with modern schooling, especially government-supported schooling, according to many, is that it dispenses valued knowledge too freely, eroding proper channels of personal obligation and respect toward those who impart it. Untrained school children, even those with the most impressive educational achievements, may thus fail to rise beyond their present conditions. If Western schooling is a weak link in the chain of discipline, however, it is above all grandmothers who are seen as most ruinous to child training and discipline (Bledsoe & Isiugo-Abanihe, 1989). Grandmothers are notorious spoilers of children, doting on them, feeding them on demand, indulging their impertinence, and allowing them to play while elders work. Children raised by grannies are seen as incapable of coping with hunger and hardship. If they are later given the chance to go to a guardian to attend school, they will spend their school hours daydreaming about home cooking. Worse, they will complain about hunger and the hard work demanded of them. A child who displays such an appalling lack of gratitude to his benefactor will be sent home by his disgusted benefactor.

In the West African cultural sense, as these descriptions suggest, "child development" refers less to children's passive acts of physical maturation than to adult efforts to help them advance in skills and knowledge so that they can, in turn, further "develop" the family. Such efforts might be most facilitated by arranging for children to be trained by those who are better

placed to develop their potentials. In contrast, therefore, to the Western convictions that a person needs one stable set of parental figures throughout childhood and that sending a child to distant guardians is necessarily damaging, most West Africans would probably argue the opposite: Such a child may be the one upon whom family hopes rest. Indeed, particularly for boys, a rural child who has not been fostered out to a guardian of higher status or to a more urban area is viewed as either unworthy or dull.

None of this is to say that discipline or any other ideological recipe for raising children actually produces the results it promises, at least any more than it does elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, probing the cultural frames surrounding these intergenerational relations provides insight into how people try to cope with the precariousness of economic and political life and why squandering the future of a promising child is described as such a loss for the family.

#### FINDINGS

##### *Opportunity and Risk for West African Children in New Lands*

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, West African families are arguably even more vulnerable than before to the vicissitudes of economic, political, and ecological fortune. Family welfare rests more than ever on new generations' successes in establishing a strong foothold in the knowledge, skills, and contacts of the outside world. Still, it seems to make little sense to send older children back from the West to West Africa at precisely the moment when they should be preparing most intensively to enter the labor market. What might West African parents find so objectionable about such otherwise desirable places that they would send children away at such a critical phase of life?

Getting to the West to help to ease the burdens of family members back home is certainly hard enough. So is being able to stay there. West African immigrants confront an increasingly contentious world of struggle over rights to enter and work in Europe and North America. Most parents would like to stay long enough to see their children safely through a good education and build a house back home where they can eventually retire.

To keep their return options open, immigrants, regardless of their educational or professional achievements, must try to maintain ties of good will with families back home, whether through remittances, phone calls, or visits or through sponsoring other people to come (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Mazzucato, 2008). In the United States, post-9/11 concerns about foreigners and security have raised entry controls to unprecedented levels. In the European Union, where citizens of any member state can travel, work, and live freely in other member states and where American tourists can enter with only a passport, restrictions on the movements of citizens of less favored countries have escalated. Economic troubles have only intensified these challenges. In Spain, for example, the national economy until recently generated more than half of all new EU jobs (Tremlett, 2006), attracting hundreds of thousands of immigrants each year to work in the booming real estate, tourism, and construction industries. But with growing global recession, tourists were leaving, property owners were defaulting on mortgages, and construction jobs were disappearing. By May 2009, Spain's unemployment had reached 18.7% (Eurozone unemployment reaches 15 million, 2009). Many observers believe these economic troubles have heightened suspicion of immigrants, exposing them to increased risk of harassment.

West African immigrant parents living in the West want their children to succeed abroad. These new places, however, rife with what immigrants see as drugs, crime, sexual licentiousness, rampant violence, and contempt for adult authority, present a most unpromising environment for successful childrearing. Western influences corrode youths' moral fiber, in the views of their families, posing formidable challenges for trying to keep children on track to meet the obligations that family members on both continents expect of them.

In both France and Spain, African immigrant families sometimes say that children who have experienced their formative years in Europe become *vacas locas*, in Spanish (*vaches folles* in French) or "mad cows," a direct reference to the bovine encephalopathy that first surged to world attention in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Compared to children trained in good manners and discipline, *vacas locas*, most of whom have been born in Europe and have not been back to the home country, are said to

be far more vulnerable to leaving school and joining gangs that roam the streets, uncontrolled and confrontational. They also form the front lines of what their parents see as an unsettling new hostility toward the older generation of immigrants.

Swept into the world of violence and illegality, these children are said to engage in drugs, theft, and, in the case of girls, prostitution and even begging on the streets. The specter is the same in the United States. In several online articles, Kabba (2002, 2007, 2008), publisher of *African Abroad!—USA*, a prominent newsletter for U.S.-resident African immigrants, blames Western media—television, movies, music, and videos—for saturating international youth culture with images of violence, insubordination, and depravity. All this, he charges, undermines children's respect for elders' authority and lures them into drugs, truancy, and sexual licentiousness (see also Scott, 2000, p. 16, on African and Caribbean immigrant parents in Ontario, Canada). Parents also point to pressure from peers from broken homes who offer negligible supervision for children (Kabba, 2008). Most of all they blame what they see as a culture of unconscionable laxity that pervades Western culture, persuading child protection authorities that children's bad behaviors should be indulged. This laxity, in their view, not only penetrates homes but also poisons public schools, transforming them into sites of institutionalized permissiveness, breeding grounds for gangs, and surveillance gateways into the home for legal authorities. Sounding almost as if he were reading the words recorded in the early 1980s of Sierra Leoneans who complained about the havoc wrought among their youth by the arrival of "White men's" schools (Bledsoe & Robey, 1986), the Senegalese man in Spain we mentioned railed against what he saw as the corrosive influences of permissiveness in European schools: "I do not want [my children] to be educated here. Education here is not good. I saw people here who lost control over the training and discipline of their children." In Swigart's (2001) Philadelphia-area interviews with African immigrants, a Sudanese refugee claimed that even refugee camp schools in Kenya were more disciplined than American schools.

Growing up in this environment, parents say, the children in whom they have invested so

much may lose both their career ambition and the enormous advantage their parents' immigration to the United States handed them to access the resources of the West. Kabba (2008) describes the bewilderment of a Nigerian-origin father in Brooklyn with three professional degrees who imagined that his three sons would grow up to be doctors, lawyers, or other professionals. Instead, reports Kabba (2008), the first son dropped out of college and began wearing braids like the other boys in the neighborhood; the second, at age 20, dismissed education as "overrated" and said he wanted to become a barber; and the third, at 16, announced his intention to become a dancer. Where, the parents asked themselves, had they gone wrong? In other cases, however, the consequences are worse. Kabba (2007) describes the case of middle-class Liberian immigrant parents in Minnesota whose 16-year-old son joined an urban gang to counter the taunts of his school mates who called him a "dumb African" and began to threaten his parents and hang out on street corners, sporting gang tattoos and bandanas. Arrested for robbery, he was sentenced to 6 months' incarceration in a juvenile correctional facility. On the day he was to be released, as he walked out to hug his mother, three armed policemen from a neighboring jurisdiction seized him, announcing that his fingerprints had turned up in a robbery in their jurisdiction, and took him in to face the fresh charges. He received another 12 months' detention.

The problem, as parents see it, is their inability to deploy the discipline required to raise their children, including, when necessary, physical punishment. Because it is likely that they were specifically delegated by the family to establish a new base of security abroad, they feel enormous pressure to protect their children from the new dangers that threaten to derail children and ruin the chances the family struggled so hard to create for them (Arthur, 2008, p. 47). Although Western childrearing authorities advocated strict discipline in the past (Ariès, 1962), warning parents against sparing the rod and spoiling the child, the situation has now changed entirely. Western authorities take a dim view of measures West African immigrants back home could deploy, especially corporal punishment and withholding food from children. Adopting the language of psychiatry and of international law, most authorities now cast such measure as abuse or as breaches of children's human rights.

For an African family, armed with the tools used by their parents to raise them, once in America those tools are rendered obsolete. In some cases they are labeled “dangerous weapons” that could not be used on a child. With the only tools at their disposal taken away, African parents are at a loss as to what to do. The [American] concepts of Reinforcement and Time Out are foreign and less effective (Kabba, 2008).

In Kabba’s view (2002), American laws go too far in tying the hands of parents who are desperate to intervene to save their children from serious trouble.

Trying to protect their children from what they see as the destructive effects of Western culture on children’s moral character can also have devastating consequences for parents. In one case, a Spanish doctor threatened to report a father after finding evidence that led him to suspect the man had beaten his 12-year-old son, a boy who family friends had come to suspect was quickly heading for trouble. Despite the parents’ efforts to control him, the boy habitually went out into the streets and came home late. When the police brought him home one night, the father beat him. The next day, the teacher saw the marks and denounced the family, and the school brought the boy to the hospital and to social services, where a file was opened on the case.

To make matters worse, child protection agencies in the United States and Europe urge children to report their parents for abuse and train police, teachers, and medical workers to look for signs of it, evidence that children may exploit in the heat of an argument. Parents who try to correct their children’s misbehavior through physical punishment risk losing their children to the child protection authorities. In Spain, our findings lay bare the contradictory demands on parents: They should go to whatever extreme is required to enforce child discipline, while simultaneously avoiding the risk of their own destruction.

Parents risk arrest or even, for those who are not citizens or permanent residents in the new place, deportation, both extremes having catastrophic financial repercussions for the extended family members who rely on those remittances. Still, some immigrants are so determined to keep their children on track that they knowingly put themselves at risk (Arthur, 2008). Kabba (2002) reports the case of a Nigerian-born computer science professor

who, to rescue his two American-born children from American permissiveness, took them back home and left them. He did so, however, against the wishes of his former wife, the children’s mother. She alerted the authorities that her husband had “kidnapped” the children. When he refused the order of a New Jersey court to bring them back from Nigeria, he was held in contempt for four years, until the remaining minor child informed the judge that she wanted to complete her education in Nigeria.

African immigrant parents badly want their children to succeed in Europe and America. Ironically, though, the good life in the West that fueled their efforts to immigrate now may undermine their ability to provide it. At just the moment when children’s opportunities seem within easy reach, the Western culture of indulging youth insolence threatens to destroy children’s ambitions, barring parents from deploying measures to bring their children back in line that they could have used back home (Kabba, 2008; see also Scott, 2000, pp. 18–19, for the case of immigrants in Ontario).

Permeating many of these accounts of the dangers Western society poses to West African immigrant families are concerns about race. It no secret to anyone, least of all to West African immigrants, that in Europe and America, Black youth are more susceptible to authorities’ scrutiny than are their White counterparts. Every Black parent in Europe or America knows that the consequences of discrimination fall disproportionately on racial minorities (U.S. National Council on Crime and Delinquency in the Justice System, 2009). Any youth can have run-ins with school authorities and the police, but White children can flaunt the rules with greater impunity than Blacks children. The problem for West African immigrants, then, is that they see their children subjected to the same forms of discrimination from employers, landlords, real estate agents, and law enforcement officers that Black youth in the United States have endured for generations (Arthur, 2008, p. 146). Vivid accounts of African immigrants’ encounters, as Blacks, with the law and legal authorities come from Ghanaian-born sociologist John Arthur’s (2008) ethnography of Ghanaian immigrants in the United States. Ghanaian immigrant youth, Arthur observes, charge that police see them as guilty of lawlessness and crime simply because they are Black. Immigrant Ghanaian youth,

according to Arthur, see a thin line separating them from cases with chilling consequences:

When we go to the mall, the police watch us with an eagle's eyes. . . . [A]s Black kids, we are always singled out and harassed by the mall security officers. Sometimes our encounter with them is fatal. Remember Ahmadou Diallo, the West African immigrant who was gunned down [in 1999] by New York City police (p. 109).

Boys in particular are said to be the targets of this discrimination. Using equally vivid cases, Kabba (2007) holds that the struggles of immigrant youth not only echo the dysfunction in general of raising Black boys in America, they are intensified by it. Taken together, he argues, the paucity of security-providing parent figures, the damage to a boy's self-esteem, and a national media that promotes violence and a disdain for the law and social authorities all "kill . . . the can-do attitude that saw his parents through the pangs of immigration" (Kabba, 2008). Terrified of losing their children to the criminal justice or foster care systems that so readily come into play in cases involving minorities or simply of watching their children's academic ambitions dissolve into apathy, many African immigrant parents charge that "the problem of rearing Black children [in general] has crept into the African family in America" (Kabba, 2007).

According to Arthur (2008, p. 144), African immigrants, despite their efforts to achieve success, come to sense that irrespective of their origin or character, their black skin color may preclude them from achieving full membership in a country that proclaims itself a democracy of equals. This sense casts a shadow over their desire to remain in the United States once their working years are over. They do not "see the need to stay in America permanently only to be marginalized and exposed to the deep-seated legacy of racial tension that characterizes Black-White relations in the United States" (Arthur, p. 146). For them, the possibility of returning to Africa may in fact offer new advantages. They believe that when they go back they will be hailed as successful returnees. They also hope to benefit from the Ghanaian government's efforts to lure them and their foreign earnings back through tax breaks and housing subsidies. Using their accumulated earnings, foreign bank accounts, and networks of overseas friends and associates to start a business, they envision sending their children to

the best preparatory and secondary schools and live the life in Ghana that they might have lived abroad were race not a factor. In the words of one returnee,

I returned home because in Ghana I am treated with dignity, and I am not constantly reminded in subtle ways about my blackness. Here, my blackness does not count against me, and I am free of this poverty of dignity that America tags its Black population with irrespective of their accomplishments. Being Black in America is a lot of baggage and a heavy load to bear (quoted in Arthur, p. 146).

#### *Back to Africa: Parents' Responses to Child Discipline Troubles*

Our own data as well as the secondary sources we have explored describe a number of efforts by West Africans immigrant parents in Europe and North America to try to solve problems of discipline and build resilience in their children while avoiding what they see as harmful interference by legal authorities. These strategies effectively exploit informal channels, opening up outlets to mitigate harm to children in ways that more formal institutional practices cannot or are unlikely to enact. Studies of what are called "second chances" have focused on measures that assist individuals who have committed wrongdoings or failed in school or business, but not to the extent that would preclude their future redemption. The goal is to offer the opportunity to "get it right this time" to people who, because of their perceived youth or inexperience, may yet be able to avoid permanent stigma and discouragement. In the United States, for example, the most common form of a second chance for school failure has been the General Educational Development (GED) test of high school equivalence (e.g., Kasnitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, & Holdaway, 2008, pp. 172-344, on immigrant youth in New York City). Dispatching errant "yuppie" children to boarding school, a religious or military academy, or even a wilderness "boot camp" has drawn considerable interest in popular media. For immigrant youth, similarly, the texts we have found prominently mention the possibility of parents taking them out of public school and enrolling them, much in the tradition of European aristocratic youth, in a private school or even a boarding school, preferably one

with a conservative, even religious, disciplinary orientation. According to one of Swigart's (2001) African interviewees in Philadelphia, many Muslim parents actually prefer Catholic to public schools because they perceive that for Catholic schools, "discipline is number one" (p. 61).

Sending children back to Africa is the second-chance solution to problems of child discipline of chief interest to African immigrant parents. Kabba's articles offer particularly vivid descriptions of the struggles of middle-class professional West African doctors, nurses, writers, professors, and business owners who eventually sent a child back to Africa or who came to regret not doing so. In one case (Kabba, 2007), a Ghanaian-American couple in New York refused to let their 15-year-old son bring his girlfriend home. In revenge, the boy complained to his public school that his father had punished and molested him, resulting in jail for the father on charges of child endangerment. When the charges were eventually cleared, the parents took their son back to Ghana to continue his education, lest he bring disaster on the family. Before leaving him, however, the father gave him a thorough beating for the suffering he had caused.

Back in Africa, children are dispatched to a wide variety of settings. Some stay with a relative and enroll in whatever school other children in the family attend. In other cases, parents seek out situations that promise tough discipline, including the possibility of apprenticing them to Arabic masters, so they will be resilient enough when they return to the West to avoid trouble from gangs, violence, and police. Often, however, reports suggest, somewhat contrary to the image of immersing wayward children in harsh discipline to strengthen their characters, parents use their hard-currency income to send their children to private schools, often those patronized by expatriate families or local elites. The intent is to allow the children to continue their education in an unbroken sequence, so they can move on almost seamlessly to the next phase of schooling when they return to their parents in Europe or North America.

Situations that combine these agendas appear to be ideal. A 2007 story in the London *Sunday Times* entitled, "African cane tames unruly British pupils" (McConnell, 2007) provides a riveting example. According to

this article, scores of British schoolchildren of Ghanaian parentage who return to Africa are sent to institutions such as the Faith Montessori boarding school in Accra in hopes that they will exchange truancy and gangs for traditional teaching and strong discipline. Faith Montessori's director, when queried, traced the troubles of British pupils of African descent in London to a lack of good role models and of adult supervision. With most Africans in the United Kingdom having jobs requiring them to be out of the house all day, he asserted, "the devil finds work for idle hands" (see also Kabba, 2008). By contrast, the director related, youth in Ghana are surrounded by serious Black professional lawyers, doctors, and so on, who can inspire youth to higher achievements. The other problem with London for children from African families, he went on, involves gangs, stealing, and violence. All, he believes, incite parents of recalcitrant youth in London to send their children home. Getting back on track toward the rigorous education they lacked in Britain, the children may become so polite, articulate, and accomplished that they can return to Britain to compete in A-level exams for a university place, as many in his school have done, or for jobs in business, industry, and theater in the United Kingdom. He attributes the success of his graduates who were sent back from London to the extraordinary discipline he applies, to a degree that has fallen out of favor in Britain. "I believe in caning," he declared. "I tell the parents: if you don't want your child punished, then your child doesn't belong here."

So desperate are some parents to remove their children from the context of failure and violence that they may even send their children back to a homeland that is embroiled in war. An article in the *New York Times* entitled "Exiled to a war zone, for his safety" (Barry, 2007) reported that a Liberian refugee mother in New York made an agonizing decision to send her oldest son back to what was then a war zone in Liberia to protect him from what she saw as a worse situation in the United States. Their neighborhood had filled with waves of refugees over the last 30 years, many of them from Liberia, and African immigrant youth daily encountered the lures of drug dealers who sought them as conduits, knowing they were less liable to legal sanction than adults. Ugly turf wars had arisen with a nearby neighborhood

of African Americans, and by his teen years her son had joined a gang and was pushing drugs. Promising to bring him back from a summer visit to relatives, his mother took him to Liberia and left him with her brother. She knew very well, according to the article, that her thoroughly Americanized son would face an empty belly and the possibility of capture and maiming by warlord gangs. In her view, though, he was better off in a Liberian war zone than in their Staten Island neighborhood. Even when he found himself in the crossfire of battle and begged to come home, she did not relent until she saw clear signs of change—4 years later.

In cases of children sent back to Africa, some returnees stay for just a few months; others for much longer. Arthur (2008, p. 48) reports that children of Ghanaian descent who are U.S. citizens may even stay in Ghana for the entirety of their primary and middle school years, coming back only when it is time to start high school, an observation paralleled by some of Smith's (2007, p. 177) observations of Mexican youth and U.S.-born people of Mexican origin living in a small village in southern Mexico. Smith showed that a small but apparently growing number of these youths had been sent back to Mexico from New York in hopes that family members in Mexico would discipline them or at least "calm" them by giving them a job and a safe space in which to mature.

Such importance is now placed on the option of sending children back to avoid trouble that parents may "strike early," sending their children back well before they reach adolescence. Other parents now refuse to bring children in their formative years at all. The Senegalese man in Spain we referred to earlier offers a case in point. Although he could have brought his 13 children to live with him, he saw living in a place that promoted such undisciplined laxity among children not as a blessing for them but as potentially career-ending. Although he fully intended to bring them later, he had left them in Senegal with their respective mothers to attend schools that followed the French curriculum, well known for its rigor and excellence. Equally noteworthy in this case, however, were the exceptions: two of his children did live in Spain with him, where they were being looked after by a female relative he had brought from Senegal for this purpose. The mother of these children, he explained, had

died, and he deemed them safer with him rather than with one of his co-wives back in Senegal, who were caring for their own children. Were it not for this extraordinary circumstance, he asserted, he would not have brought them to Europe at all.

Observers such as Kabba (2002) see the need to send children back to Africa for disciplinary purposes as becoming so important that the practice has intensified in recent years. Again, reliable quantitative estimates are few. In Farjas i Bonet's (2002) study in Spain, however, in which nearly one third of the children of Gambian origin had been sent home for significant amounts of time, Farjas i Bonet commented that most of the older ones who had been sent home appeared to have been sent for discipline. Less direct, but possibly equally telling, is a study by Whitehouse (2009) of West African labor migrants in Brazzaville, Congo. Whitehouse reported that 39 out of 99 of his respondents reported they had sent small children back home. Moreover, they explained their actions as an effort to shield their children, before they reached an impressionable age, from what they saw as pernicious influences in the host society. In offering this explanation, of course, Whitehouse raises the provocative possibility that migrants everywhere may see their host society, no matter how desirable its appeal for work or education, in ambivalent terms. In their view, it may offer a better livelihood than they could earn back home, but at the cost of corrupting children in whom proper cultural foundations have not been laid.

## DISCUSSION

This paper began with two questions. The first was why West Africans living in Europe or North America, places often identified as the global centers of safety and opportunity for children, might suddenly find these places so objectionable that they would send their children back to live in one of the poorest regions on Earth. The second was why they might send children to West Africa at a crucial moment in their educational trajectories, when the children should be preparing most intensively to succeed in the new home their parents have tried so hard to create for them. The materials we have found, despite the diversity of their sources, tell

a remarkably consistent story of West African immigrant parents' despair at being denied adequate disciplinary means to protect their children from what they see as the destruction that Western society's indulgent attitude toward children can precipitate.

For African immigrant parents caught in a catch-22 that threatens to undermine the goals for which they came, it should not be surprising that they might send their children away from the places where they so urgently want them to succeed and back to the home country, where appropriate disciplinary action can be taken. Nor should it be surprising that they should do so despite the hardship they know their children will surely confront back home, but specifically to ensure that they will confront it. Even more important, perhaps, children who are sent home to Africa can simply age out of the phases in which Western society is most inclined to expect trouble among Black youth. Rather than see their children become uncontrollable *vacas locas* within a normative system they see as encouraging youth delinquency but as interpreting it very differently for Black and White youth, many West African parents prefer to send their children back to Africa before serious trouble can even occur at all. Sending children back to Africa, in sum, is seen not as disrupting children's progress toward a career back in Europe or North America, but as an attempt to keep it on course.

Much as they did in the African past, African families living in the West today must prepare their children to confront an external world that, although it may offer them far greater possibilities than their parents had, is also fraught with dangers and unequal playing fields. It is notable, then, that what appear to be the same cultural emphases on hardship, privation, and discipline that are associated with rural African philosophies of raising children have not disappeared among West African families now living in the United States and Europe. In our view, however, these patterns do not represent simple carryovers from African "traditions," but highly strategic attempts to cope with structured discrimination in the new places.

Certainly some African children growing up in Europe and North America achieve success, some possibly by taking advantage of the assistance programs established for native ethnic minorities, as the findings of Massey, Mooney,

Torres, and Charles (2007) may imply for the United States. West African immigrant parents in both Europe and the United States, however, as hard as they struggled to clear their children's path to Western education and the benefits it promises, now perceive a more complicated trajectory. For them, protecting children from the risks posed by the forces of discrimination that have long plagued Black groups in the West may only be possible by sweeping them temporarily out of the way of the authorities who would deny parents the means to control them.

The possibility that African families must try to protect their children in the West by sending them away underscores the need to probe beneath vague rationales of sending children back home to know their kin or to become familiar with the traditions of the homeland. It also underscores the daunting odds of a Black child succeeding in the West. In a cultural milieu that both tolerates their children and yet can be so ambivalent about them, West African immigrants living in Europe and North America have every reason to fear trouble.

Many authors have emphasized the role of second chances for youth after earlier bouts of trouble or failure or for shielding them from the most stringent penalties of the law. It is well-known that a native-born Black child who drops out of school or runs afoul of the law will almost certainly find second chances harder to come by than White children, whose misbehaviors may be so casually dismissed as manifestations of what Western culture sees as the temporary *Sturm und Drang* of adolescent turbulence. It is less recognized, however, that they find second chances harder to come by than Black children whose families maintain close ties back in Africa. Insofar as they have such a readily available "exit" alternative, therefore, the children of West African immigrants share with many children of recent Mexican origin in the United States an enormous advantage over their African American counterparts: They can simply leave the country. Once the likelihood of trouble has abated, whether because of discipline or simply because of the elapsing of time, they can return to an unblemished record and a very strong likelihood of success.

In a similar way, for their parents, the escalating border control and security measures that Western authorities devise in order to exclude—the same factors that can strain

and distort families by enforcing unwanted separation—also hold a paradoxical advantage. Parents who can take advantage of viable “exit” options like these for their children to return to Africa effectively turn the tables, exploiting the same forces of exclusion and separation to avert serious problems altogether.

#### NOTE

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