

Ask Pact

African or African American?

by Lisa Marie Rollins

Q: *I recently met an African American woman who was really interested when I told her I had adopted from Ethiopia. The conversation was going well, but at one point it seemed the woman became offended that I identified my child as Ethiopian and not as African American. I am involved in a support group specifically designed for Ethiopian adoptees and parents, and I have reached out and made what I feel are good cultural connections to the Ethiopian immigrant community so my child will feel connected to her country and culture. On the flip side, some of the Ethiopian people I am getting to know have very disparaging things to say about African Americans and I am not sure how to respond to this. I don't really understand the issues between these communities and I am not sure how to navigate them, let alone help my daughter do so. Can you help?*

A: I meet more and more parents committed to supporting their children as anti-racist allies, and who are supporting their children's growth as self-aware, strong, culturally connected individuals. So I love these questions from thoughtful parents who are really trying to understand how complex the issues get when race, adoption and parenting collide. I will first provide some historical context for your question, then explore how that context specifically impacts adoptive families.

Let's begin by considering the term "black." Understanding black in the diasporic sense acknowledges there is a global phenomenon of anti-black sentiment, not just reserved for American Blacks, but for African, Caribbean, and sometimes simply dark-skinned people who aren't even of identifiable African descent. This diasporic blackness takes on different cultural meanings in different nations. Yet even if the "black" that is applied to a South Asian in England or the "black" applied to an Aborigine in Australia seems different, we can't ignore the many similarities in the way racism operates locally and globally. So we have to think about how stereotypical "blackness" functions as an overarching racial concept that impacts any group of African descent, immigrant or not (and closer to home, will impact your daughter).

I heard someone say that when white parents adopt internationally it is because of "racism" and for many years white Americans adopting internationally adopted many more Asian and Latino children than African children. It seems reasonable to say that these choices reflect the existing racial hierarchy in this country. At the very least, it is certainly true some white parents choose not to adopt children of African descent because they do not feel capable of dealing with the racism they know these children will confront. I thought about that comment for quite a while, and after I sat with it for a bit, I realized that, yes, racism certainly can play a part in some parents' decisions – but what kind of racism are we talking about?

Let's talk about the historical tension between African, Caribbean, and African American communities. There is an assumption that because black people share skin color that somehow we will all get along or that we all have the same political beliefs and cultural values, but of course, depending on a multitude of things—class, geography, culture, life experience—beliefs and values vary across black diasporic cultures. But what is common, as I mentioned above, is an experience of racism.

After slavery, when immigrant African and Caribbean peoples began coming to the United States, in exile or in search of work, Black Americans who had been here for generations had been living in circumstances that distanced them from African cultures. And just like most people of all races in the United States, many African Americans have limited or inaccurate ideas about Africa and its people. Similarly West Indian/Caribbean and African people have been fed images about black people in the United States that are not true. So when African and Caribbean people come to the United States they may not be privy to the complex dynamics and beauty of African American cultures and fall into the same trap as any other immigrant group who accept racist assumptions about Black Americans.

For a complex combination of reasons, including a desire to maintain their own cultural identity or the wish to avoid being targeted by racists themselves, some African immigrants in the United States have found it advantageous to distance themselves from Black Americans and Black American cultures. Further, some African immigrants perceived as “exotic” may more rapidly gain access to privileges or class mobility long denied to African Americans burdened with less flattering stereotypes.

Interestingly, there are extensive histories of Black Americans and other diasporic Africans working in collaboration with African and Caribbean peoples during the anti-colonialist movements of the early twentieth century. Pan-Africanism and Negritude are key movements in African Diasporic history. People like W.E.B. Dubois (United States), Marcus Garvey (United States/ Jamaica), the Nardal sisters (France), Aimé Césaire (Martinique), and Jessie Fauset (United States) are only some of those who participated in global African political work during this period. It is important for you and your daughter to know and understand Pan-Africanism and that the Pan-African community is still strong and doing major political and social work.

How does this history relate to adoption? The reasons prospective parents choose to look overseas to adopt a child have long been discussed in adoption circles. Many myths persist about the domestically-born children of color who are available for adoption, including birth parent drug use, poverty, “bad” family history, and, perhaps most significantly, intrusive/needy birth parents. Sometimes there is the mistaken assumption that international adoption is somehow different from domestic transracial adoption. There persists a belief that in international adoption there will be no birth family emerging unexpectedly because “all” international adoptees are “orphans”.

If we place these ideas about international adoption alongside the pattern of immigrant exceptionalism and exoticification discussed above, it changes the way parents need to think about the dynamics between

African-born (or Caribbean-born, etc.) and African American-born adoptees. If a parent hears a voice inside their head that say, MY child won't be like that, my child won't be like those other American black people then it is possible they need to confront the fact that their child is now a black person in America, and think about what kind of messages they will teach their child about other people of color. Will they reinforce stereotypical images that pit more recent immigrants who “make something of themselves” against American-born blacks who “won't get off welfare”? Or will they place the tensions between these communities in historical perspective and emphasize the common experiences they share? It's important to ask yourself, what are your child's multiple communities, how do they intersect and differ, and how can you support your daughter becoming comfortable moving in and among them? An immigrant shares many similar experiences with a native-born person of color in the United States, and adoptees of any origin share some common issues with immigrants (loss, disconnection from home). The reality that must always be acknowledged for your daughter is how Americanization and racism play out in the United States. They impact any of us with black bodies in very real and sometimes violent ways.

Ask yourself, what does your daughter have in common with African Americans, and with Ethiopian immigrants? And what about second-generation Ethiopian American children who have their own specific ethnic/cultural experiences? If your daughter lives here the majority of her life then is she a Black American?

She will be American, living in the U.S., going to school, dating, going to church, speaking English from birth (or the very young age she came to you), and having experiences that can only be called American experiences, so it will be important to make sure she feels entitled to create connections with both communities. Sometimes parents make the mistake of narrowing their children's connections by limiting them only to their child's ethnic heritage, but this can set them at odds with American-born Blacks in a way that does not serve them. Finally, what about their own comfort with the African American community leads some parents to make connections only with Africans and not with African Americans? What does it say to a child when a parent does not model connecting with people of all cultures?

So while calling your daughter “Ethiopian” isn't untrue, not acknowledging Ethiopian American or African American as parts of her identity is problematic, because it doesn't fully acknowledge all of the identities your child will hold. Because the parenting goal is to have children confident enough to move through each of these cultural groups with comfort, parents of African-born adoptees must consciously encourage and participate in relationships with African Americans as well as Africans living in America.