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## Making A Home Away from Home: A Qualitative Study of African Students' Practices of Integration in the United States

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Making A Home Away from Home:  
A Qualitative Study of African Students' Practices of Integration in the United States

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Over the last two decades, the population of international students in the world has significantly increased. More and more students from diverse backgrounds cross national borders to study. The observed increase in numbers and diversity has led to an uptick in scholarly research that focuses on the adaptation and experiences of international students. Most of these studies, particularly in the US, are informed by the acculturation theories and assimilationist frameworks of the 1900s. Also, an exclusive focus is placed on the host country, with few studies acknowledging the impact of the origin country on the international student experience. Such approaches limit the capacity to understand and attend to the complex problems international students face. They further overlook the agency of international students: the various strategies they use, individually and as a group, to navigate the barriers they face in integrating. Emerging research recognizes the agency of international students in their integration. The current study adopts a transnational framework in exploring how African students integrate through their homemaking practices. Analyzing data from 12 in-depth interviews with African students in the US and 54 blog entries from two websites that write on international students' experiences, I compare how home and integration are constructed and perceived at the individual and institutional levels. The blogs present an institutional narrative that perceives the home through its physicality and materiality. On the other hand, my interview participants talk of home as encompassing the domestic practices and interpersonal networks that connect them to their origin countries while also creating an attachment to the host country. I argue that while the blogs

advocate for an assimilationist approach to homemaking and integration, where international students completely take up American values and norms, African students engage in transnational practices and networks in integrating.

## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Each year, an increasing number of international students move to the United States to pursue higher education. The Institute of International Education (IIE, 2019a) reported that the number of international students studying in US higher education institutions reached a record high in 2019 at about nearly 1.1 million. In addition, data from the IIE show a 25.6% increase in the enrollments of international students since 2010 (IIE, 2019b). International students cite various reasons for choosing to study abroad. Some of these reasons include the institution's reputation, financial assistance, quality of teaching, employment opportunities post-graduation, and a welcoming community for international students (Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Diogo & Carvalho, 2019; Hemsley-Brown, 2012; J. Lee, 2008).

Increasing international student mobility is often seen as beneficial for both international students and host countries. International students gain knowledge and new experiences, and the host country also benefits economically as international students contribute to the economy (Peri & Basso, 2016). The Association of International Educators reported that in the 2018-2019 academic year, international students contributed about \$41 billion to the US economy (NAFSA, 2019). The presence of international students also helps universities create learning communities that mirror the globalizing world, providing skills and knowledge through American students' contact with a diverse population (McFaul, 2016). This benefit is predicated on international students' meaningful contact and interaction with domestic students.



However, the extant literature on international students finds that there is often minimal contact between international and domestic students. Without contact, the benefits of creating globally diverse student communities will be low as students fail to learn anything to prepare them for increasingly diverse societies. Studies on the adaptation and integration of international students in host countries found language barriers, anxiety, and inadequate knowledge of each other's culture (Lehto, Cai, Fu, & Chen, 2014; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Smith & Khawaja, 2011) as some of the reasons for the lack of domestic friends. Using adaptation models, studies have further established that such difficulties along with others, such as stress over academic performance, financial troubles, and discrimination, cause emotional, psychological, and social harms to international students (J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007; Patron, 2014; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008; Ying, 2005).

Many studies on international students' adaptation highlight their negative experiences and the barriers that prevent them from effectively controlling and shaping their integration into host countries. This perception of international students often influences recommended interventions to aid their integration. Though some of these interventions have proven efficient in improving international students' experiences, they often are narrowly focused and ignore other identified barriers international students face (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). To better highlight the agency international students have in their processes of adaptation and integration, I propose a focus on their homemaking practices as it encompasses the application of control and deliberate practices to create a sense of familiarity and stability.

The home is often conceptualized as a space where individuals exert control and feel a sense of security and comfort (Mallett, 2004). It also expresses the identity of its occupants and is filled with meaning (Blunt & Varley, 2004). However, making a home is not neutral; cultural

ideals and practices influence how we build and decorate our homes and what we do in them (Paulsen, 2013). Purposive and selective routines are adopted to make the home a familiar place. The home also functions as a site of demarcation between the public and the private (Somerville, 1997). To feel at home is also highly selective and always “entails including some and excluding many” (Duyvendak, 2011, p. 39). Hence, homemaking involves practical agentic actions.

Autonomy and control have been identified as central themes in homemaking, especially for migrant populations (Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen, 2012; Pechurina, 2020). Here, the agency of the individual is essential to control what happens within their domestic space. The individual acts on their desire through agentic actions to create familiarity and develop a feeling of comfort in the home. The requirement of control and agency in homemaking makes it an ideal focus when studying the various ways international students shape their integration. The materiality of the home is often a carefully ongoing process of discarding and keeping (Holton & Riley, 2016), which results in a collection of items that represent in part or whole the identity of its occupants. Also included are nonmaterial aspects, encompassing the practices and routines individuals engage in to make a home. Studying the homes of international students through materiality and accompanying social interactions and processes will illuminate how they try to control or shape their integration into host countries.

Chapter Two presents a comprehensive literature review on international students’ adaptation, experiences, and homemaking. I mainly discuss the unique yet understudied situation of African international students. Chapter Three discusses the methods and data I used in the research: online data from blogs and in-depth interviews. I identified the study population and elaborated on the sampling and data collection stage. I later introduce my participants and conclude the chapter with a reflection on ethical considerations and my positionality.

Chapter Four presents and discusses the online data analysis from the blogs highlighting the conflicting discourse on international students' homemaking and integration. The home of the international student is time-bound and restricted to the university space. I argue that the blogs produce a discourse that promotes American universities as ideal places for international education while sustaining the narratives that international students must return to the host country when they have completed their studies. Chapters Five and Six center on the homemaking practices of African students from the analysis of the interview data. In Chapter Five, I talk about the materiality and practices of homemaking within the domestic spaces of African students. Food, language, media from the origin country, home objects, and privacy measures are the main ways through which my participants make their homes. Chapter six looks at home at the social and interactional level. Community with co-nationals, African students, and other international students is essential in developing a feeling of home here in the US among my participants. Also, they expressed an awareness of city culture, which influences their integration. In the concluding chapter, I reflect on the findings from the two data sets and tease out the differences between how African students and the blogs understand and practice homemaking and integration.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **AFRICAN STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES – A LITERATURE REVIEW**

The home is the center of human activities and reflects the values and ideals of its occupants (Després, 1991). It is a space that encompasses different cultures, identities, and narratives that gives permanence and continuity to immigrant and transient groups. The home is explored as the everyday practices and interactions that attach international students to the host communities and countries while also keeping their connection to the origin countries. Since the primary purpose of this research is to study the homemaking practices of African students and the institutional discourses on their integration, I discuss relevant works and studies in this chapter. I begin with a literature review on the internationalization of higher education and then discuss how international students use social media and blogs to seek information in the host country. I then focus on the various models used in studying international students' adaptation: assimilation and transnationalism. Next, I turn my attention to the specific case of African students. Finally, I briefly discuss the literature on home and homemaking, where I focus on how homemaking shapes the integration of international students.

#### **The Internationalization of Higher Education**

In the past three decades, the overall number of students moving across national borders to pursue higher education in Western countries has increased significantly (Bista, 2016; Findlay, 2011; Findlay, King, Smith, Geddes, & Skeldon, 2012; França & Padilla, 2018), resulting in a much more diverse international student population (Sawir, 2013). The enrollment of

international students into colleges and universities in the United States, one of the top destinations for international education worldwide, continues to increase. In the 1950s, international students made up less than 1% of US higher education. However, as of 2017, the percentage has increased to 5.5% (Zong & Batalova, 2018). Similar trends have been observed in other western countries. International students often make up the majority in some graduate programs like computer science and engineering (Altbach, 2004). This substantial increase has led to many scholarly studies about its causes and effects. The acquisition of a distinct form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2016) that foreign education imbues is seen as one of the key reasons for the increase in its demand. Students who gain their education abroad, mainly in Western countries, come to possess a scarce and highly valued resource expected to give them an advantage in their local markets if they return to their country of origin (Findlay, 2011). Given that social class shapes access and opportunities in higher education (Bourdieu, 2016; Findlay et al., 2012), the benefits of international education reinforce existing class structures.

Findlay (2011, p. 164) argues that focusing on the motives that push demand up alone “ignores the power of those that benefit from the supply of international education.” International students contribute to the local economies of host countries and represent diversity in host institutions (Peri & Basso, 2016). According to NAFSA (2019), during the 2018-2019 academic year, international students contributed \$41 billion to the US economy. The knowledge and skills they come with also contribute to the workforce and intellectual capacity of host countries (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). As such, the attraction of international students is a concern for European and North American countries and is evident in legal structures and programs put in place to facilitate international student mobility (ISM).

Kuption (2006) discussed the efforts made at national and regional levels in Europe to attract more international students. Countries like Germany, France, and the United Kingdom embarked on active policies to help increase the enrollment of international students in their institutions of higher education. They marketed their countries as centers for quality education, provided easily accessible information to potential students, streamlined the visa acquisition process, and made it easy to combine work with study (Kuption, 2006). At the regional level, measures are put in place to facilitate academic mobility within the European Union. For example, the Bologna process initiated in 1999 sought to promote compatibility and comparability in higher education institutions among member states (Wächter, 2004) by adopting a joint credit system and a three-cycle system structure towards bachelors, masters, and doctorate degrees (França & Padilla, 2018). This process facilitates the mobility of students and staff among member states (França & Padilla, 2018; Wächter, 2004).

In North America, programs were also initiated to attract international students. In response to a declining enrollment of international students in US higher education institutions, steps were taken to make the visa application more accessible, and proposals were made to develop a national strategic plan to recruit international students (GAO, 2007). Stringent and arbitrary visa rules, increase in visa denials, and the implementation of the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) between 2002 and 2003 contributed to the decline in the enrollment of international students in US universities (Altbach, 2004). Similarly, the strict measures used in the admission of immigrants and international students after September 11, 2001, are associated with the decline in international students in the US (Bhattacharjee, 2004). However, programs like the Optional Practical Training (OPT), where international students can work for up to a year after graduation, are implemented to make the US an attractive destination

for international education. In Canada, international students can work on and off-campus without a work permit for up to 20 hours a week. They are also eligible for a 3-year Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP), enabling students to work in any Canadian industry (Gopal, 2014).

Such efforts show the need to examine the increase in ISM from both angles: the factors that influence demand and the benefits and strategies offered by host countries to attract international students. Such a comprehensive view will increase our understanding of the factors that shape the experiences of international students.

ISM has impacted university cultures and local and national communities. At the institutional level, universities have to make changes to accommodate diverse student populations. The monolithic cultures that characterize higher education institutions in the West can no longer serve all students sufficiently (Sawir, 2013). Changes in instruction and teaching strategies were adopted to fit the needs of students and adequately prepare them for the globalized world. To adequately meet the diverse needs of international students, universities must design curriculums with a focus on intercultural perspectives through the inclusion of international elements and learning activities. This attempt by universities to embrace a global approach in instruction and learning is termed the internationalization of higher education, “a process that prepares the community for successful participation in an increasingly interdependent world” (Francis, 1993, p. 5). Kirpitchenko (2017) further argues that the internationalization of higher education alters the traditional ways by which knowledge is transferred, created, and exchanged in academia.

Universities have taken steps to prepare their students for a globalizing world. The University of South Florida, for example, implemented the Global Citizens Project in 2013,

intending to produce students that can “engage meaningfully and effectively with diverse people, places...” (“Global Citizens Project: USF's Quality Enhancement Plan ”, 2015). However, the efficiency of universities in meeting the needs of a culturally and nationally diverse student body has been questioned (George Mwangi, Changamire, & Mosselson, 2019; Sawyer & Chen, 2012). Even as internationalization goals are set and echoed by universities, little is being done to prioritize international students in such plans. In a study on African international graduate students in the US, participants believed that campuses lacked the basic infrastructure to provide the needed support and resources to international students once they are admitted (George Mwangi et al., 2019).

For universities to function appropriately in a global sense, there is a need to diversify their student and faculty populations and design effective ways to prepare students to be competent in the global world. One significant way of achieving this is to ensure that international students actively participate in teaching and learning activities and interact with domestic students. Sawir (2013) raises the concern of undervaluing and underutilizing international students' cultural benefits to local communities. This occurs because the diversity that they represent is often problematized. Lim and Pham (2016) noted that the presence of international students in the host country is often perceived as a threat to locals. This hampers international students’ adaptation into the host society. In the host country, international students are discouraged from practicing their cultures and instructed on how to take up those of the host country. The solution has been to encourage international students to fully adopt the cultures of the host community or create unique spaces where international students can “be themselves.”

The discussed literature highlights the various factors that influence international student mobility and the need to include the pull factors from receiving countries in such analysis. It also



underscores the impact of the internationalization of higher education on Western universities. The next section of the review discusses how international students seek information in the host country and the increasing use of social media and blogs as sources of information.

### **The Blogosphere and Information Sharing**

Joosten (2012) defined social media as “virtual spaces where people share” (p. 6). Social media includes blogs, social network sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, discussion forums, customer review sites, and wikis (Fujita, Harrigan, & Soutar, 2017; Sleeman, Lang, & Lemon, 2016). Social network sites, for example, allow international students to create large social networks and establish meaningful connections with host students (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). The use of social media has been found to mitigate the stress associated with integration among international students (Park, Song, & Lee, 2014; Yu, Foroudi, & Gupta, 2019). However, Sleeman et al. (2016) called attention to how cultural orientations can negatively impact international students’ use of social media. For instance, Yu et al. (2019) argued that with Chinese students coming from a collectivistic culture, the use of social media could discourage their interaction with people from other social or national groups. The assumption here is that with ease of social media use, international students are more likely to interact with friends and family back home or those from their home country, reducing their need to integrate into their host countries.

Migrants and sojourners usually use media as a means to know more about their host countries. Through media consumption, sojourners learn more about the host country’s histories and current issues, learn the host country’s language, and become abreast with various cultural cues and norms (Hwang & He, 1999; Raman & Harwood, 2016). The media become a valuable tool that sojourners use to navigate an otherwise confusing time getting to know about

appropriate behaviors, values, and ideologies in their host countries. High consumption of the host country's media is associated with higher levels of acculturation. In a study on the role of media in the acculturation of Chinese immigrants in the US, Hwang and He (1999) found that those who consumed more media in English develop better English speaking skills. Similarly, Raman and Harwood (2016) observed a positive relationship between the consumption of American media and acculturation in their study of Indian professionals who have migrated to Silicon Valley. However, these ways of measuring acculturation tell us nothing about the sacrifices that immigrants and sojourners make regarding their discarding or keeping their home cultures while acculturating into their host countries. In a study of media use by new immigrants in the US, findings showed that post-immigration consumption of native language print media was negatively associated with the preference of the English language (Dalisay, 2012). Dalisay (2012) further finds that consuming media in the native language of immigrants results in more political knowledge about the US than those who consume English language media. This indicates the need to develop a complex approach to studying how media use in the host country impacts integration.

With the influx of social media use, more migrants, especially younger ones, use social media to seek information in their host countries because of the ease of acquiring desired information (Ranjit, Lachlan, Basaran, Snyder, & Houston, 2020; Yu et al., 2019). Bukhari, Hamid, Ravana, and Ijab (2018a) argue that the different backgrounds international students come from make their needs and questions unlike that of local students. International students need information on legal, transportation, cultural, financial, and personal issues, and these are more difficult to find than information relating to academic needs within the university (Sin, 2015). Primary sources of information in universities and colleges like the library are limited in

their ability to answer questions about moving to a new place (Ishimura & Bartlett, 2014). Hence international students tend to result to (social) media to look for information that satisfies the questions they have.

Increasingly, higher education institutions and centers on university campuses that serve international students are using social media to reach out and interact with students. Their presence on social media allows students to have access to information that is more accurate. Investigating international students' engagement with their university's social media platforms, Fujita et al. (2017) found that students are less likely to engage actively with their university's social media content through commenting and liking. However, they see these social media pages as valuable sources of timely information and prefer social media posts to university emails. Through these social media pages, international students interact passively with the university and create a sense of identity and belonging as students of their universities (Fujita et al., 2017).

Information derived from the internet is large and massive (Junyi & Min, 2013) and often uncatalogued. Using social media networks where international students have more control over what they include on their pages and in their networks can streamline the information they receive to be relevant to their questions and needs. Hence, with information seeking, international students deliberately seek out social media accounts and websites that provide relevant and valuable information and begin creating a network where they can exchange information, advice, opinion, experiences, and recommendations (Bukhari et al., 2018a). In a study on international students' information-seeking behaviors in Malaysia, Bukhari, Hamid, Ravana, and Ijab (2018b) found that international students prefer social media to face-to-face settings and online search engines.

International students often experience stress in adapting to their host countries, which impacts their academic performances, social life, and health status (Lehto et al., 2014; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). The identified causes of stress among international students correlate to the issues about which international students seek information. In a review of the literature on the information-seeking behaviors of international students, Hamid, Bukhari, Ravana, Norman, and Ijab (2016) identified four main issues on which international students seek information; academic, finance, sociocultural, and health. Given that international students are less likely to use university resources like counseling and international services (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), the information they receive through social media highly influences how they adapt to their host countries and develop a sense of belonging.

### **Blogs as Sources of Authentic Experiences**

Weblogs (blogs) have steadily gained popularity over the last two decades (Garden, 2012). The forms that blogs take are constantly changing (Hookway, 2008; Jean Kenix, 2009), making it difficult to provide an appropriate definition of blogs as they evolve with technology (Garden, 2012). Garden (2012) questions whether a consensus on the definition of what a blog is matters, arguing that from a constructionist approach, the need for a definition becomes irrelevant. However, some scholars have tried to provide a working definition of blogs. Hookway (2008) defines the blog as “characterized by instant text/graphic publishing, an archiving system organized by date and a feedback mechanism in which readers can ‘comment’ on specific posts” (p. 92). Whatever the definition for blogs, the fact remains that their use is on the rise.

Blogs originally began as online tools which users mostly used to keep online journals where personal information is shared (Dearstyne, 2005; Ojala, 2005). However, they have evolved and have become significant ways to distribute information (Dearstyne, 2005; Hsu &

Lin, 2008). Even though blog readership is significantly low compared to that of mainstream media, Farrell and Drezner (2008) note that there is a consensus that blogs play an increasingly important role as a forum in public debate and discussion. For instance, bloggers undermined claims of US presidential candidate John Kerry as a Vietnam war hero and reported on fraudulent documents about President Bush's National Guard service (Dearstyne, 2005). This and the adoption of blogging by huge multi-national companies and elite institutions of higher education like the London School of Economic (LSE) blog made blogs significant sources of information that are seen as unfiltered and unedited (Dearstyne, 2005).

The preference for blogs stems from their dynamic nature and their use of hyperlinks which leads users to relevant information (Farrell & Drezner, 2008; Jean Kenix, 2009), the required inexpensive and easy to use software, and the "fresh" insights and opinions they provide (Dearstyne, 2005). Also, blogs can be on any topic (Jean Kenix, 2009), and they are often focused on a single issue or demographic (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). This means blogs attract particular readerships and can become echo chambers (Jean Kenix, 2009). However, when run well, they can impart knowledge and can advance beyond short entries to "full-blown, thoughtful essays" (Ojala, 2005, p. 270)

Dearstyne (2005) classified blogs into five categories: individuals' personal news and views; news, commentary, journalism; advertising, promotion, marketing, customer service; business, professional issue commentary, and insight; and internal knowledge sharing, knowledge management applications. This categorization of blogs applies more to the organizational adoption and use of blogs. Also, it is worth noting that these categories often overlap; few blogs operate purely within a particular category.

Given the capacity of blogs to influence behavior mainly because they are perceived as sincere, unedited, and personalized (Jean Kenix, 2009), it is necessary to examine the content of the information on blogs that target the international student community. The often informal tone used in blogging is likely to make them highly attractive to international students. Also, with stories of other international students shared on these blogs, international students may feel they are understood and develop a sense of community using those websites. More importantly, the fact that the blogs are portrayed as run by experts on international students' issues gives weight to the information shared on these sites. International students seeking information may take what they receive from these blogs as tried and tested; they are likely to adopt the advice and recommendations they read on these blogs and use them in settling and integrating into their host countries. The lack of research on these blogs creates a gap in knowledge on the content of information that international students receive from alternative "authoritative" sources. Next, I discuss the various models applied in studying the experiences and adaptation of international students.

### **Acculturation and Assimilation of International Students**

Adaptation occurs when groups from different cultures come into contact leading to changes in either or both groups, suggesting changes in both incoming and host groups. Berry (1997), however, notes that in reality, one group is often required to accommodate more changes than the other. He further identified the strategies of acculturation, including assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration. Assimilation occurs when non-dominant groups discard their cultural identity in favor of the dominant one. Separation involves maintaining one's culture while rejecting interaction with others, and marginalization arises when new arrivals reject their cultural identity and do not participate in the dominant culture. Integration

occurs when newcomers maintain their cultural identities while participating in the dominant culture. As higher education institutions grow more diverse and attract increasing numbers of international students, there is a need to ensure that international students properly integrate into their host communities to benefit from the diversity they bring. Initial research presented the adaptation process to be uni-dimensional, resulting in an exclusive focus on migrant groups. However, current studies have favored a bi-dimensional understanding of the adaptation process (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Such a shift provides a more detailed account of how interactions with locals shape the adaptation of international students.

Given that cultural norms and practices shape individual behavior, it is worth studying individuals who re-establish their lives in different cultures (Berry, 1997). Such movements are fraught with challenges and experiences that influence the processes of adaptation (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). The move to study in a foreign country has been associated with various difficulties. These difficulties even begin before their departure to the host country. The challenges and complications during the applications for visas and the separation from their local communities and social networks were major challenges international students experienced pre-departure (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016). Once international students arrive in their host countries, they experience culture shock, face language barriers, financial problems, anxiety due to their separation from loved ones, and loss of social networks, among other issues (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yeh & Inose, 2003). The difficulties they face disorient them and complicate their process of adaptation.

A review by Smith and Khawaja (2011) on the applications of acculturation models in studies on international students highlighted the major difficulties they experience in host countries, including language barriers, sociocultural stressors, and discrimination. Language

differences affect the social life and academic performances of international students. Language barriers are negatively related to interactions with local students and academic performances (Lehto et al., 2014; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Sherry et al., 2010). For international students in English-speaking countries, this difficulty is not only experienced by those who speak and learn English as a second language. Students from English-speaking countries also find it hard to understand the local dialects used in everyday interaction in host communities (Lehto et al., 2014). Confronted with different teaching styles in higher learning institutions, international students often complain of experiencing stress and anxiety over their academic performance (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Western teaching techniques emphasize critical thinking, which contrasts with the typical learning style used in other regions. A change in their conventional ways of learning puts intense pressure on international students to adjust quickly (Townsend & Jun Poh, 2008), given that knowledge acquisition was the primary motive for moving (Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

Moreover, international students also feel inadequately equipped to function well in the social settings of their host countries. This could result from a mismatch in their expectation and actual experiences (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Also, differences in cultural norms could make interaction with locals more difficult for international students, leading to loneliness (Sawir et al., 2008). Participation in leisure activities and establishing social networks are positively associated with the social adaptation of international students (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Students from regions where alcohol use is frowned upon, for instance, find it difficult to bond with locals since meeting for drinks is one of the main avenues for interacting with local students in the West (Othman, Buys, & Aird, 2014).



Studies that measure how cultural norms impact the acculturation process often focus on the difficulties international students face in adapting to the host communities' culture. Few have explored how the misunderstanding and lack of knowledge about foreign cultures on the part of the host community contribute to this difficulty. For instance, in their study on the experiences of international students, Sherry et al. (2010) found that 60% of research participants felt domestic students did not understand their culture. This has implications on the experiences of international students and often leads to covert forms of discrimination. Lehto et al. (2014) also found that both groups, international and local students, hesitated to reach out to the other to learn about each other's cultural norms. In research focusing more on helping international students fit in with host cultures, the implication is made that international students need to assimilate to the dominant Western culture (George Mwangi et al., 2019).

As a collective, international students face discrimination; however, the very forms this may take are shaped by students' social, cultural, religious, and racial and ethnic backgrounds. For example, in the US, students from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East are more likely to be targets of discrimination and racism than their European counterparts (J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), signaling that region and country of origin shape the experience of discrimination. Religion can also make students easier targets; Muslim female students feel that wearing the hijab leads to exclusion in the university community (Gregory, 2014; Sherry et al., 2010). A study of international Muslim students in Australia also found that participants felt the need to compromise on their religious customs to fit into Australian society (Othman et al., 2014).

Aggression towards international students also occurs in areas outside the university boundaries. Yan and Pei (2018) researched how international students handled negative

experiences in the US and found that participants were unfairly treated at shopping centers and airports where preference was given to the locals over them. International students get the feeling they are not equal to natives through such experiences. Instances of discrimination can lead to international students assimilating to limit their exposure to such occurrences or separation when they form an exclusive group and refuse to interact with locals (Pruitt, 1978; Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003). International students are also often categorized together by the host country without much attention paid to the many ways that they differ. Such pan-ethnic identities such as Latin American or African students are embraced by international students (Lê Espiritu, 2019).

Much of the research on the experiences and adaptation of international students take a pro-active stance and recommends solutions that can be implemented to aid the integration of international students. Such recommendations often come in the form of proposed structural changes and interventions to accommodate the needs of a diverse student body. The Excellence in Experiential Learning and Leadership (EXCELL) program and other interventions, such as the Cultural Orientation Excursion (Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, & Kashima, 2010), tend to focus on instructing international students in the adoption of the host community's culture. These interventions had varying degrees of success (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), with students interacting more with local students. Though institutions have considered such interventions successful, Smith and Khawaja (2011) point out that the sacrifices international students increase their interactions with host students are overlooked. Moreover, such interventions make no effort to encourage domestic students to accommodate foreign cultures, indicating that international students must endure more changes to adapt to the host country's customs. This occurs because the cultural norms and perspectives that international students possess from their origin countries are dismissed when acculturation and assimilation models are applied in studying them. More

critical frameworks like transnationalism consider the prior experiences of international students before coming to the host country. Transnationalism recognizes that cultural norms and events in the origin country impact international students' adaptation in the host country. The following section reviews studies that apply transnationalism in studying international students.

### **Transnationalism**

In studying international students' experiences, the origin country is often overlooked (Binaisa, 2011). Typically, the sole focus is on how the host country impacts the identities and self-perceptions of students. Nevertheless, despite the erasure of the origin country in most migration-based research, migrants and sojourners lead transnational lives by maintaining their connection with people in the origin country while building new networks in the host country (Heil, 2015).

Transnationalism rose as a response to the inability of dominant migration theories and frameworks to adequately address the migratory processes and networks that traverse national borders (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 2005). They define transnationalism as the “processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (p. 8). Advancements in information and communication technology further foster the cross-national networks and activities of migrants (Owusu, 2003). Transnational social spaces emerged out of the connection between the origin and host countries, eventually including non-migrants in both countries (Binaisa, 2011). Through such spaces, migrants engage in practices that connect them to their countries of origin. However, these spaces are not exclusionary, only available to migrants. They also include elements and networks from the host country, highlighting the dynamic and constantly mutating nature of transnational links (Faist, 2000).

Transnational social spaces are characterized by their material and symbolic forms (Binaisa, 2011). That is, these spaces are filled with objects imbued with meaning and having symbolic values from both origin and host country. Within these spaces, transnational communities that encompass immigrants who share common identities emerge. This indicates that communities and networks that migrants are involved in include others who might not be associated with either the origin or host country. Hence, African students create and participate in transnational communities beyond their origin countries and the US. They interact and build networks with other Africans and international students. In his study on Black continental African immigrants in Canada, Mensah (2014) found that African immigrants' integration and identity formation in the host country are influenced by the transnational practices they collectively engage in.

Transnational theory deemphasizes the nation as the unit of analysis and questions methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) since the communities that migrants build extend far beyond to include a myriad of connections from various nations. By decentering the nation-state, research that employs a transnational framework can study migrant experience at various levels; the micro, meso, and macro levels (Binaisa, 2011). Transnational activities are influenced by the individual-based interaction between the migrant and their origin country, the larger networks and institutions that migrants are involved in, and national-level policies and events (Owusu, 2003). Also, a transnational approach recognizes that the spaces migrants inhabit and their networks in both origin and host countries undergo changes through the transnational processes. The host country is then not immune from the impacts of migrant activities, challenging the dominant narrative that immigrants are passive receivers of the host country's culture.

The processes that migrants are engaged in lead to the formation of relationships that are simultaneously here and there: a bifocality of their investments in two places at the same time (Vertovec, 2004). Scholarly focus on the forms of investments migrants make in their origin countries to maintain their connections and ties are mostly economic and material (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013; Owusu, 2003). This is explored through remittances sent from the host country and overlooks other forms of exchanges that sustain their connections to the origin country (Vertovec, 2004, 2009). Other exchanges do occur between the host and origin country through migrants' transnational networks. Levitt and Schiller (2004) called these other forms of exchanges social remittances; they include the changes in behavior, norms, and values that occur from established transnational connections. In studying African international students, it will be much more helpful to study the bifocality of their transnational activities through the concept of social remittances. International students are less likely to send money home and maintain their connection through material investments in the origin and host countries. Instead, they will utilize their social networks and practices informed by both cultures to build and sustain their connection to the host and origin countries.

França and Padilla's (2018) paper showed the benefits of studying international students in less mainstream countries. Focusing on the experiences of international students in Portugal, França, Alves, and Padilla (2018) argue that situational circumstances, such as colonial and historical ties, shared language, geographical proximity, scholarships, and funding opportunities create distinct experiences worth examining. In addition, the inclusion of groups often overlooked in academic inquiry helps to create a more accurate understanding of the complexities involved in the globalization of student mobility. The next section of the review

discusses the need to include African international students, a group that has been widely understudied, in academic research.

### **The Case of African Students**

Even though the majority of international students in the US come from Asian and Latin American countries (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005; George Mwangi et al., 2019), the enrollment of African students continues to increase (George Mwangi et al., 2019; Inyama, Williams, & McCauley, 2016). For the 2018-2019 academic year, international students from sub-Saharan Africa made up 3.7% of the total international student population in the US (IIE, 2019b). Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya contributed the highest number of international students from the continent (Constantine et al., 2005). Inyama et al. (2016) further argued that the pursuit of higher education in developed countries is a significant factor in transborder migration from Africa to European and North American countries.

Even with the increasing number of African students in universities in the Global North, little attempt has been made to analyze how their unique cultural, regional, and national backgrounds shape their adaptation to Western societies (Boafo-Arthur, 2014; George Mwangi et al., 2019). In many studies, they are combined with US native-born Black students or with other international students (George Mwangi, 2016; George Mwangi et al., 2019; J. Lee & Opio, 2011). The lack of this proper distinction obscures the experiences and narratives that are peculiar to African students. The unique historical, colonial, ethnic, and socio-economical contexts of each African country shape African students' socialization and life experiences. Overlooking these differences overshadow and obscure the complex and diverse experiences of students in the host country.

Before coming to the US, African students have lived in societies where Black skin and Black identity are the norm (Bagley & Young, 1988; Constantine et al., 2005) and are accepted and appreciated (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). As a result, they are less likely to have experienced any form of discrimination based on their racial identity or the color of their skin. However, upon relocating to the US, race issues often become salient and noticeable to African students, which exacerbates the difficulties they experience in adapting to a new culture (Constantine et al., 2005; J. Lee & Opio, 2011). For instance, in a study on perceived discrimination and homesickness among American and international students, Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) found that international students from Europe report lower levels of perceived discrimination than students from other regions. In addition, a study on the experiences of African student-athletes in the US found notable differences in reports of perceived discrimination by skin color; White African participants did not experience race-based discrimination (J. Lee & Opio, 2011). Boafo-Arthur (2014) argues that sudden exposure of African students to racism in the US leaves them stranded as they have not yet developed tools to cope with race-based prejudice and discrimination.

Such experiences result in culture shock for many African students (Boafo-Arthur, 2014) as most students were not prepared to face racial-based discrimination and prejudice (George Mwangi et al., 2019). Furthermore, Western stereotypes and false assumptions about Africa influence the adaptation of African students (Inyama et al., 2016). Their challenges are compounded by host society members' notions about their countries of origin and cultural backgrounds. Notions of Africa as backward, under-civilized, and poor result in African students being treated as less intelligent and as a group to be "saved" (Constantine et al., 2005; George Mwangi et al., 2019; J. Lee & Opio, 2011). As noted by George Mwangi et al. (2019), African students, especially at the undergraduate level, tend to come from families with high status in

their countries of origin. Most at the graduate level have strong academic credentials.

Experiences in the US that imply their inferiority in terms of status or ability highly contradict how they perceive and value themselves.

African students are subjected to discriminatory acts from White Americans, Black Americans, and other international students alike (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). This can be attributed to the lack of knowledge about African cultures and negative stereotypes (J. Lee & Opio, 2011). In a study by Constantine et al. (2005), African students report that other international students discriminated against them. For example, one participant reported that her Asian roommates asked to be moved because they did not want to live in the same room with an African. Blake (2006) also found that African students in historically Black universities were discriminated against by their student colleagues and instructors and that their accents were often mocked. Participants also believed that Americans thought they were better than Africans, presumably based on what they see in the media about Africa (Blake, 2006). Similarly, George Mwangi's (2016) study of African students in a historically Black College found that Black Americans had preconceived notions about Africa, which they mostly received from the media.

Other challenges African students face include difficulty acquiring a visa (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016), financial concerns, separation from friends and family, and clash in cultural values, among others (Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Constantine et al., 2005). However, studies have shown that African students develop mechanisms to cope with these challenges. African students who experience discrimination tend to withdraw themselves from American culture (Pruitt, 1978). This is supported by recent findings where African students interact and socialize more with fellow Africans and kept contact with friends and family from home (Blake, 2006; Constantine et al., 2005; George Mwangi, 2016). George Mwangi et al. (2019) found that



African graduate students organized themselves to share information and help each other out with issues like looking for housing, providing temporary accommodation, and donating items to other African students in need.

African students' experiences in the US are shaped by factors that are unique to them. Mainly, stereotypes and negative attitudes about their racial, cultural, and regional backgrounds complicate their adaptation process. They are also aware that they are expected to drop their cultural identities and beliefs to fit into American culture (J. Lee & Opio, 2011). However, they are able to navigate these problems through keeping in contact with friends and family both back in their countries of origin and their host countries.

### **Home and Homemaking**

The home is often conceptualized as a space where one feels safe and secure, has a sense of privacy and comfort, and has control and autonomy (Douglas, 1991; Mallett, 2004). It is material and symbolic; it is imbued with meaning, experiences, emotions, and relationships (Blunt & Varley, 2004). Hence, the availability of a dwelling in itself does not necessarily imply home (Douglas, 1991). The home is not only a physical construct but also a psychological and social construct, and its creation results as a combination of these in a single process (Somerville, 1997). The physical structure needs to undergo certain processes to be considered home by its occupants. Such processes are dictated and shaped by cultural ideals and norms. As expressed by Kusenbach and Paulsen (2013), "the home is not neutral" (p. 5); cultural ideals influence how we think of home and how we make it. The design of the building, the trends in decorations, and the allocation and use of space are all determined by social norms making the home a site for the reproduction of social norms (Paulsen, 2013).

The feeling of home extends beyond the physical dwelling and can include the community and even the nation. (Després, 1991; Duyvendak, 2011). Various scholars have identified and discussed key aspects of the home. For example, Després (1991) identified and classified the meanings people attach to their homes, from seeing it as a place of control and security, an expression of one's ideas and values, a center of activities, to a refuge from the outside world among others. Three key concepts – privacy, identity, and familiarity – were also identified by Somerville (1997) in writing on the construction of the home. Duyvendak (2011) further summarizes the various aspects of home into three dimensions: familiarity, haven, and heaven.

Familiarity involves “knowing the place” (Duyvendak, p. 38), where the individual develops sufficient knowledge about the house, locality, et cetera. It includes simple things like knowing where the saltshaker is located in the kitchen or where to go to replace a flat tire in the neighborhood. Familiarity brings a level of comfort and contributes to developing a sense of belonging. Haven involves feelings of security and relaxation. This is equally important in achieving home, especially to migrant groups, as the home serves as a place of retreat. Relying on Goffman’s dramaturgy, the home functions as a backstage where individuals get to reassess the social roles they play outside.

Home as heaven occurs when individuals express and realize themselves in public. This aspect of the home is more social and involves the ability to be one’s self in public places without fear. For international students, achieving home as heaven could mean they can effectively associate and communicate with locals in their university and neighborhood without forgoing their cultural identities.

Duyvendak's (2011) third dimension of home bears similarities with the concept of belonging. Belonging comprises more feeling at home within a particular locale and establishes a meaningful "relationship between a person and a socio-spatial environment" (Kusenbach, 2019; p. 2). It is helpful in analyzing migrant homes and their making because it can connect the micro experiences to macro structures (Kusenbach, 2019). Duyvendak (2011) explored this micro to macro link and shows how feelings of home or the disrupted feelings of home impact national notions of belonging.

Immigrants create highly selective boundaries, physical or otherwise, that mark the limits of their homes (Boccagni & Brighenti, 2017; Duyvendak, 2011). These boundaries, like walls, doors, curtains, et cetera., also shield the home from the surveillance of the public gaze (Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen, 2012; Othman et al., 2014). However, the social forms of these boundaries are not rigid and static; they are porous and are constantly being crafted, contested, negotiated, and redrawn (Boccagni & Brighenti, 2017). Boccagni and Brighenti (2017) define the porous boundaries in homemaking as the thresholds of domesticity and see it as crucial in analyzing migrant homes. The thresholds of domesticity encompass the physical boundaries and various practices that migrants use to demarcate their private spaces. Through these thresholds, they can control who gets into their spaces and what happens within these spaces. Boccagni and Brighenti (2017) further argue that the boundaries migrants use to demarcate and control their spaces are not static; instead, they reflect the changes in the dynamics of interactions and networks of immigrants. There are similarities between their conception of the threshold of domesticity and perception of the home as providing privacy. However, the threshold of domesticity shows the different ways newcomers and natives mark boundaries. The selective

process of admittance into the home “entails including some and excluding many” (Duyvendak, 2011, p. 38).

Making a home involves routine and repetitive activities that create a feeling of familiarity and control, a process of “doing” (Bowlby, Gregory, & McKie, 1997; Kusenbach & Paulsen, 2013). Through doing home, the individual develops a sense of attachment and belonging to the space they inhabit. Similarly, Boccagni (2016) proposes that the home can be understood as “a processual and interactive experience ...” (p. 49). The processes and practices involved in homemaking also function to reflect the identity of the individual. The material objects that make up the home have meanings attached to them, and they serve as clues to locate its occupants within certain social hierarchies and communities (Jacobs & Malpas, 2013).

In a recent article, Pechurina (2020) found that objects from the country of origin and food preparation are vital in making a home out of one’s living space for Russian immigrants in the UK. Material objects serve as cultural links and also as connections to people in our lives. For instance, her participants kept some objects because they were given to them by friends. The presence of objects brings fond memories, like kids playing with the ‘Khokhloma’ (Pechurina, 2020). “Khokhloma” are wooden objects painted and styled with national ornaments, mostly with flowers and leaf patterns, and the Firebird, a character from Russian fairytales. Ecuadorian immigrants in Italy also arranged the interior of their homes to mirror their connectedness to their country of origin through the display of national flags and symbols, pictures, and objects of everyday use (Boccagni, 2014). The origins of material objects and their use in past times give them meanings, and their presence in the home help make it more familiar as they represent places and relationships that immigrants are used to. However, migrants’ display of material objects communicates something about the occupants' identities, be it national, ethnic, gender, or

religious, among others. A home with images of Jesus Christ and a crucifix can be thought to be inhabited by Christians, just as one with golf trophies on the shelves and framed pictures of people playing golf can be considered to be housing a golf enthusiast. In short, objects express and reinforce personal identities.

These material and symbolic dimensions of home are essential to international students' practices of making a home in their host countries. Othman et al. (2014), in a study of Muslim international students in Australia, found that her participants employ strategies to organize their domestic spaces to function similar to homes in their country of origin. Participants often used the home as a place of privacy to pray and perform ablution rituals. Female participants were very concerned about neighbors and housemates seeing them through windows when they were not covered.

So far, very few studies focus on the homemaking strategies of international students and how they impact their integration process. Those that do focus on the general housing choices and housing experiences of international students. Obeng-Odoom (2012) explored the choice of housing, housing problems, and the levels of satisfaction of international students in Australia. The result showed that international students are more likely to be treated unfairly by landlords through unexpected price hikes in rents. In such cases, international students exercise their agency by moving to houses or apartments that suit their expectations and why they are treated better. Students strive for satisfaction with their housing. In another study on female international students in New Zealand, Anderson (2012) revealed that even though feelings of home and sense of belonging in New Zealand are shaped by the experiences of social interactions and institutional and political designs, participants showed agency and creativity in the ways they experience home and make place. Schmitt et al. (2003) found that international students tend to

relate more with other international students in instances where perceived prejudice is high, leading to the creation of minority identities. This further shows that international students are not passive in achieving integration as the acculturation literature assumes. Examining homemaking among international students has the potential to highlight their agency in determining how they integrate into the host society.

### **Summary and Research Question**

With the increasing enrollment of international students into US higher education institutions, it is necessary to study how they adapt to American culture. They are mainly presented as a homogeneous group resulting in one fit all interventions. For instance, African students' experiences are shaped by their race, historical and current global political position. Most intervention has focused on encouraging international students to adopt the culture of the host country. However, research has not examined the stress and dissonance international students endure when they adopt practices that conflict with their home cultures. Some studies investigated the coping mechanism international students use in the adaptation process. Students are portrayed to easily resort to maladaptive coping mechanisms (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) like substance abuse, disengagement, denial, and self-blame (Yan & Pei, 2018). Often their agency in integrating into the host culture is overlooked.

While studies on international students have stressed their vulnerability (Lehto et al., 2014; Patron, 2014; Sherry et al., 2010), other scholarship has problematized a view of international students as passive receivers of host countries' culture and argued for the inclusion of their agency in the examination of the experiences of international students (Anderson, 2012; Boafo-Arthur, Attah, Boafo-Arthur, & Akoensi, 2017; Brown, 2009; Gregory, 2014; Othman et al., 2014; Schmitt et al., 2003). Rejecting the passive and limited identities imposed on

international students, Koehne (2005) proposes that international students' identities must be considered hybrid and fluid, informed by their past and current experiences in foreign cultures and the cultural norms of their countries of origin. Similarly, Tran and Vu (2018) call for scholarly studies to utilize agency theory in studying international students.

I further argue that the home – as a collection of the material, symbolic, interpersonal, and everyday practices – can provide a lens to examine agentic practices of international students in integrating into host societies. This is because the home embodies the past memories, present experiences, and future expectations (Blunt & Varley, 2004; Douglas, 1991). For migrants and international students, making a home involves practices from both the origin and host countries. Therefore, they employ transnational practices that cannot be situated wholly within the context of a single country or culture. Through a transnational framework, the home can be studied as a site imbued with memories and nostalgia, future aspirations, and current experiences. In this study, I conceptualize home as a site of routine agentic practices informed by the past, present, and future. Such a conceptualization helps study international students as a population at the nexus of two cultures and does not deny them their capacity for purposive action.

The study's main purpose is to explore how African students at the individual level integrate through the process of homemaking while also investigating how corporate institutions shape the discourse on international students in the US. To investigate if the homemaking practices of African students impact their integration into host societies, I ask the following question: How do African students make their homes in the host country and environment? Duyvendak's (2011, p. 38) three dimensions of home – familiarity, haven, and heaven – inform the understanding of home in this study. The practices that international students engage in will acquaint them with their new spaces while ensuring that they can feel comfortable and secure

within those spaces. They also gain control and autonomy over these spaces, even if not completely. Homemaking then includes the communities in their localities and neighborhoods. They interact with community members and participate in events within the locality. Such an understanding of home expands its scope beyond the domestic space or physical building to include the various interpersonal dynamics that directly influence the integration process and feelings of belonging.

For this research, home is understood through two lenses: first, its materiality and domestic practices, and second, symbolic interpersonal practices. Hence, the study will look at how the material and interpersonal practices of homemaking shape international African students' integration and belonging in their host countries. Through this lens, I can explore the connection between home practices at the individual level as well as the integration efforts at the societal level. Furthermore, a transnational conception of the home reveals the various ways that integration and belonging get untangled from geography. That is, processes of integration and a sense of belonging can simultaneously exist in more than one geographic location. Finally, I also compare and analyze the discourses that companies that provide services for international students have on homemaking and integration with the actual understandings that African students have on their homemaking.



## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **METHODS AND DATA**

For my thesis research, I adopted a qualitative, social constructionist approach where the study's findings will be directed by the accounts of the research participants (Loseke, 2017). Such an approach was necessary to gain an in-depth and rich understanding of how African students actively accomplish their integration into host societies through agentic practices of homemaking. Accordingly, I collected data through a two-step qualitative process: first, blog entries from two websites run by companies that provide services to international students, and second, in-depth interviews with African students enrolled in US universities and colleges.

#### **Online Content Analysis**

In collecting data from online blogs, I downloaded blog entries from *the International Student* and *Study in the USA* websites. Unfortunately, there is currently no comprehensive directory to access all blogs available online (Jean Kenix, 2009). This prevents any random sampling of all blogs that focus on international students' issues. Also, as mentioned by Hsu and Lin (2008), it is difficult to maintain an active blog as it requires constant updating and attracting an active readership. As such, most blogs have been abandoned after their creation (Hsu & Lin, 2008). I chose two websites that keep a blog on international students' issues and experiences – *International Student* and *Study in the USA*. This is because they are run and maintained by organizations that provide services for international students, ensuring that they are constantly updated and possibly attracting a large enough readership. Though their main motive for having

and keeping a blog may be to attract more student customers and not be centered on sharing information or influencing international students' integration, the contents of the entries on the blogs nonetheless provide information that could impact how international students integrate into their host countries. To narrow down and find entries that are relevant to homemaking, integration, and belonging, I searched for keywords like "home", "belonging", "housing", and "coping" on these online platforms using the search key.

I included only entries written by staff and experts from both websites. In total, 54 blog entries were analyzed in this study: 36 from *Study in the USA* and 18 from *International Student*. The topics discussed in these entries were mainly on integration into the US, including various aspects like language and accent, US holidays, interaction with host students, and homesickness. I downloaded the blogs in pdf format for analysis. The average length of an entry is three pages, and most include pictures, with few comments made by readers. Appendix A contains the list of all the blogs used in the analysis.

*International Student* is a website hosted at [www.internationalstudent.com](http://www.internationalstudent.com) (International Student, About Us) and is a part of the *International Student Network*. It is owned by *Envisage International Corporation*, "an international education marketing company serving students and schools around the world" ("Envisage International,") which is located in Florida. They provide services, information, resources, and products for international students. Some of their services include international student loans, student health insurance, scholarship tools, and travel information to help international students prepare for their studies abroad. Envisage also work to recruit international students for universities at a cost. The packages start at \$2,495 a year to advertise universities to international students (Envisage International, International Marketing for Colleges and Universities). The International Student website has 9 million visitors a year,

and 8 thousand new user accounts registered every month (International Student, Advertising Options). In addition, the website has a “socialize” page where blogs on international students’ experiences are posted.

An initial review of the blogs showed that they mainly provide information about schools and programs. Notably, they are geared towards those seeking admissions into Western universities. Some blog entries are written by international students who share their experiences as international students in the US. Others are by staff who are described as experts on international students’ issues. The entries focus on experiences and ways to cope with difficulties during the study period. While entries written by international students share their experiences, those written by the staff tend to provide advice on issues that international students face. A preliminary search for keywords returned entries that advise international students on how to feel at home and belong for international students. Even as these are not actual experiences of international students but a “how-to” guide, they are powerful as they inform students of the standard cultural attitudes expected of ideal international students (Paulsen, 2013).

*Study in the USA* is an organization that aims at recruiting international students into North American universities. It is noted on their “About” page that they offer tools and technologies that connect universities in America and Canada to qualified students around the world (Study in the USA, About Us). *Study in the USA* works with colleges and universities to target and promote their schools and programs to (potential) international students. Their packages that advertise universities include sending email blasts to potential applicants, posting about the school on their social media accounts, sponsored contents like interviews with students on their blogs (Study in the USA, Solutions: Reach your goals). The packages start from \$625 per month. In addition, they publish magazines that target particular markets like *European*

*Edition, Indian Edition, Portuguese Edition*, et cetera. Their website has a blog section where both international students and their staff write entries. 7.6 million unique visitors log onto their website annually, and they distribute 1.4 million magazines per year (Study in the USA, Making Connections, Transforming Lives). A search for keywords shows blogs mainly about students' experiences which are often positive on campuses. Because they primarily advertise schools to international students, they tend to highlight positive experiences and advise on how to have similar experiences.

Using the search function on these websites, I searched for keywords associated with home and belonging: home, homemaking, decorating, belonging, homesickness, room, housing, holidays. The search initially returned over 200 results ranging from the early 2000s to 2020. Some entries were updated over time and appeared multiple times in the results. Those that were duplicates were all deleted but for the most recent version. The entries were written by staff and international students. For instance, on the *Study in the USA* website, a distinction is made between entries written by staff and experts (as articles) and those written by international students (as student voices). *International Student*, on the other hand, did not make such a distinction. However, they described their international student blog as providing students with up-to-date news on a variety of topics related to studying in the USA.

### **In-Depth Interviews**

I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with international students from African countries enrolled in US universities and colleges. Interviews are best suited for the study because they allowed research participants to express their thoughts, feelings, and how they give meanings to their experiences and practices (Meanwell, Wolfe, & Hallett, 2008).

I conducted 12 full interviews from October 2020 to January 2021, and they were done through video conferencing applications, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom. They were semi-structured and conversational; I used an interview guide, but the participants' responses drove the conversation. The guide helped to ensure that all the major themes were discussed during the interviews. The interviews lasted from 46 to 93 minutes. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and later transcribed for analysis. All but two of the interviewees had their cameras on during the interview. Both had their videos on when they log on for the interview but decided to turn their cameras off when I informed them that I would be recording our conversation for transcription and analysis. Seeing my participants and they seeing me was important as it helped build rapport and made it easy for them to open up to me. Also, I was able to catch those visual cues that could not be verbally articulated. Interview questions included several topics such as participants' reason for studying the US, their experiences in their universities and domestic spaces, practices in the home, personal networks, their perceptions of the city they live in, and future aspirations. The complete interview guide used is attached as Appendix B.

I recruited participants through a multiple snowball sampling technique. I initially planned to do face-to-face interviews with African students from a large public university in Florida. I sent out recruiting emails through the university's *International Services Office* and *African Students' Association*. Recruitment emails are attached as Appendix C. However, the university closed down and moved all instructions online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I moved my interviews online to prevent exposing myself and my participants to the virus. With students away from campus, I received only a couple of responses from interested participants. Therefore, I expanded the population of the study to include all African students in the US.

Students were reached through the social networks of African students at various universities and colleges across the US. Requests for participation were sent to the target populations through African students' social organizations on campuses and various universities' offices of international services. Also, African students were asked to reach out to their contacts who qualify to ask for their participation. Students who responded were considered for the study. Using multiple entry points for recruitment, I hoped to get a diverse sample which is crucial for understating the complexities in homemaking within a population.

Only African international students enrolled in an American university or college were recruited to participate in the study. I defined an African international student as a student who is a citizen of an African country and is in the US for education purposes. Those who have American citizenship or permanent residence permit were considered for the study as long as they still maintained their citizenship with an African country. I did not include students who are on exchange programs in the study. Though they are also classified as international students, they typically spend only a semester in the US. Their time here is often far too short to engage actively in homemaking.

I completed 12 interviews with 13 participants; I had one interview with two participants at the same time. They lived together and were both available at the same time to do the interview. All the interviews were conducted through a video-conferencing application.

My sample included seven women and six men. One is an American citizen and another a permanent resident. Their stay in the US ranged from a little under a year to two decades. Only one is married, and none of them have children. Eleven of my participants are from Ghana, one from Ethiopia, and one from Nigeria. Four are at the undergraduate level, six are at the master's

level, and three are in Ph.D. programs. My participants reside in eight different states. See Table 1A in Appendix D for the demographics of the interview participants.

All my participants have not visited any of the blogs I analyzed in the thesis. They were not aware of such companies and the blogs they run. However, some did mention that they utilized the services of agencies in the origin country to help them in their application to schools. They also relied on these services during their visa application process. My participants may not have utilized the resources provided by the two blogs I analyzed mainly because their services are not advertised to African students. For example, *Study in the USA* has several magazines that target potential international students in different regions of the world like East Asia, Europe, and Latin America. However, there is none for Africa. This could explain why my participants did not know about these companies, their products and services, and the blogs they run.

My analysis, therefore, linked two different perspectives of homemaking and integration of international students in the US. Though the blogs do not primarily target African students and African students too do not read these blogs, it is crucial to explore how both groups perceive homemaking and integration. The narratives of the blogs form part of the larger discourse on international students' integration in the US. Their contributions, in terms of their blog entries, can indirectly influence the structural conditions within which African students integrate.

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews were all conducted in English, recorded, and transcribed verbatim for analysis using the Nvivo program. The first six interviews were transcribed manually using Microsoft Word, and the remaining six were initially transcribed using Otter AI and later edited manually. Otter AI is an online recording and transcription service. Interviews were transcribed and edited by listening to the audio and typing or editing the scripts accordingly. I rechecked the

transcripts a couple of days after the initial transcription. This also helped me become more acquainted with the interviews during the analysis.

The analysis was done by coding the data in Nvivo. I repeatedly listened to the interviews and read through the transcripts of both the interviews and online data until themes and categories began to emerge (Brown, 2009). Recurring and similar words, phrases, events, and ideas in the interviews were coded into themes. While coding, I attached labels to segments of interviews that captured and summarized salient, essential, and evocative parts of the interview (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2013). Labels that were recurring through the interviews and blogs generated the themes used in the interpretation of the data (Merriam, 2009). Sub-themes were then grouped into broader themes. Analyzing the data in this way revealed the common and key homemaking practices that research participants engage in.

I reread the transcripts of the interviews and blogs several times to refine the initial codes and themes. This helped compare different narratives and eventually link codes into larger themes to develop a storyline (George Mwangi, 2016; Merriam, 2009). The main themes that emerged across the data were used in the interpretation. This method also allowed me to be reflexive in analyzing the data through memo writing. I noted down my personal reflections on interview conversations and blog entries (George Mwangi, 2016; Saldaña, 2013). This is a vital aspect of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009) and helped me reflect on my researcher identity through self-examination and self-disclosure (George Mwangi et al., 2019).

Several cycles of reading through interview transcripts and downloaded blog entries also helped check the validity of the data collected. Rereading revealed consistencies not only in individual stories but in the collective stories of participants and the websites. By reading over and over again, I began fleshing out the larger themes and narratives from the individual stories



of my participants and single entries from the blogs. In addition, it allowed for cross-comparison to show the common thread that runs through the homemaking experiences of African students.

My process of analysis ensured that looked out for similarities and difference between the interviews and online data. I began by analyzing the data collected online because they were readily available. When analyzing the interviews, I constantly reflected on my initial analysis and looked out for connections between them. After the major analysis of the interview data, I went back to reanalyze the online data. There was a significant difference between how African students talked about their homemaking and the blogs' discourse on home. I went through several cycles of back and forth analyses to critically reflect on the observed gap. This cyclical way of analysis allowed me to tease out the main differences between African students' and the blogs' practice and understanding of homemaking.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Since home involves feelings of privacy and control (Douglas, 1991; Mallett, 2004), collecting data on homemaking included personal information. Though I did not anticipate collecting sensitive information, my participants divulged personal information and personal opinions. Some reiterated that they could only tell me the stuff they did because I promised them confidentiality. No major ethical issues came up during the interviews. However, there were emotional times when students talked about their experiences, especially concerning their experiences of discrimination and racialization, and feelings of isolation heightened during the pandemic. They also talked fondly about their families and friends in the origin country and the events they missed. However, none of my participants expressed discomfort or decided to quit the interview. Before beginning the interviews, I read the consent form to my participants and received their consent. The verbal consent form is attached as appendix E. I also adequately

informed participants on how the interview may cause discomfort and immediately end the interview should such a case arise. International students are covered by FERPA laws which prohibit the disclosure of students' information. As such, I informed all participants of the confidentiality of their discussions and the steps I would take to protect their identity and information from becoming public.

I began my interviews after I received approval from my institution's IRB. Participants were not offered any incentive or reward for their participation. To make sure that those who expressed interest in participating were fully aware of the study, I sent them a document detailing the specifics of the study. Also, I talked to most of the participants either through a phone or video call to clarify any questions they have before the interview. Though this had the benefit of familiarizing myself with my participants and breaking the ice before we sit for the interview proper, it was mainly to answer any questions they had about the study. Except for four people who could not participate in the main interviews due to timing issues, all those who expressed interest were interviewed.

I used pseudonyms for participants during the interpretation and presentation of analysis and edited quotes that contained identifiable information. My discussion of findings did not reveal any information that can be traced to participants. With information on online discussion forums and blogs, it was necessary to take out usernames and words that could reveal their cyber identity. Though such information is public and can be accessed by anyone, those who post them were not aware their discussions were used in research studies.

### **Positionality**

I am a Black African from Ghana and a 26-year-old Christian male. These identifying characteristics have implications for how people interact with me. Being an international student

from Africa, I have an insider status which more than likely made participants comfortable talking with me about issues that might be considered private. Especially with current public debates about national belonging, interacting with someone participants see as one of their own created a feeling of comfort and made them less elusive about their processes of homemaking and integration. With homemaking partly shaped by cultural norms (Othman et al., 2014), participants may not have revealed those practices they engage in that are unconventional in an African sense.

On the one hand, my insider status helped build rapport with my participants. Language was crucial in establishing a connection with my participants. Abina spoke Twi with me during our initial call to schedule the interview. Similarly, I spoke Ghanaian pidgin with Ekow, Essien, Jojo, Kojo, and Kesse when I reached out to schedule their interviews. Language then helped to not only recruit participants but also establish a rapport with them. Nationality also influenced my recruitment and the conversations I had with my participants during the interview. During the initial call with one participant, he told me he is willing to participate because he will be helping his Ghanaian brother out. The Ghanaians who took part assumed shared solidarity between us simply because we come from the same country.

On the other hand, being an insider is not without its problems; the interviewer can easily influence the data collected. Bulpitt and Martin (2010) advise researchers to practice reflexivity during interviews. I achieved this by recognizing my position and perspectives, being non-directive, asking open questions to allow participants to express themselves, and giving them time to answer questions (Bulpitt & Martin, 2010). Most participants assumed I understood the things they talked about because we shared an identity as African students. They often injected their responses with “you know...” convinced that we shared a common understanding. I had to

constantly follow up with questions that required them to make their points fully. Also, I employ silence as a way to get them to go on. By being silent after the end their responses with “you know”, they continue to talk more about the issue or experience.

Because the study involves students from various parts of Africa, it is worth noting that participants interpreted my status differently. Gender, class, religion, and nationality did influence and shape the discourse that occurs during interviews. For instance, Ebo and Ada, who are not Ghanaians, explained things and events they referred to that people outside their origin countries might not know. Fati, a Muslim, and Ebo, who practices Ethiopian Orthodoxy, elaborated more on issues that were impacted by their religion. Whereas the women in my study emphasized the domestic practices they engaged in, like cooking and decorating, the men displayed little involvement in domestic practices of homemaking. Gender expectations of homemaking could have influenced how my participants portrayed their domestic practices.

It was important to my participants that I am an African international student. They assumed that I shared in their experiences, which is true. Nevertheless, I realized my position as a researcher during the interviews and employed strategies to manage the barriers that my insider status could cause during the interviews.

**CHAPTER FOUR:**  
**CONTRADICTING ADVICE ON HOMEMAKING – INSTITUTIONAL**  
**UNDERSTANDING OF INTEGRATION**

International students experience many challenges when they move to their host countries to begin their education. In addition to adjusting to new educational environments and teaching styles, international students also need to learn and adapt to their host communities' cultural systems and norms. Some rely on existing international communities in their schools and within their localities to help them navigate the new cultural and social terrain. Also, universities provide services on campus to aid international students in integrating into the school and their community. Beyond these available resources are also the increasing presence of websites, blogs, and social media accounts that furnish international students with knowledge about their host countries: providing experiential or expert advice to ease students' integration.

This chapter examines the institutional narratives of two online blogs on the integration of international students in the US. I illustrate that the blogs present two seemingly contradicting narratives about students' integration. First, they highlight the temporariness of international students' stay in the US. Second, they encourage students to make a home in the US. I argue that international students are seen as capable of making a home in the US at the structural level, but this is limited mainly to their universities, the communities, and neighborhoods they are associated with, and only within the time frame of their studies. Beyond this, home cannot be assured to the international student in the US. Home then is strongly connected to university

spaces. By conflating the international student's home in the US with their universities and associating their capacity to integrate to their status as international students, the blogs are able to advertise American universities as ideal homes for international students while simultaneously underscoring the temporariness of their stay. This supports American universities' goal of internationalization while also encouraging students to return to their origin countries after their studies.

### **Make the Most of Your Time: Highlighting International Students' Temporary Stay**

Blogs are often tailored to specific audiences and can be significant sources of information that influence readers' behavior and perceptions (Jean Kenix, 2009; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). In seeking information about their host country, international students are more likely to use social media in searching for answers as university resources are often not adequately equipped to address students' issues on moving to a new place (Ishimura & Bartlett, 2014). The often informal tone used in blogging is likely to make them highly attractive to international students. Also, with stories of other international students shared on these blogs, international students may feel they are understood and develop a sense of community using those websites. More importantly, the fact that the blogs are portrayed as run by experts on international students' issues gives weight to the information shared on these sites. The resources that *Study in the USA* provides in the form of articles are offered to international students as a site to "learn about American culture and education direct from our experts at *Study in the USA*." International students seeking information may take what they receive from these blogs as tried and tested; they are likely to adopt the advice and recommendations they read on these blogs and apply them in settling and integrating into their host countries.

The need to return to the origin country foregrounds the discussion of international students' issues. It is ever-present as a time ticking clock in almost every piece of advice given to students. The host country is depicted as a place where students do things they would not have done home, a sort of away from home freedom. Hence, the countries of origin of international students are equated with home, whereas their time in the US is depicted as a vacationing period. From this perspective, international education is portrayed as a form of educational tourism. Such sentiments are implied in the following statement on the advantages of studying abroad:

If you are still questioning why to study abroad, you should know that studying in a different country offers many new activities and interests that you may never have discovered if you'd stayed at home. You might find that you have an as-yet undiscovered talent for hiking, water sports, snow skiing, golf, or various other new sports you may never have tried back home [10 benefits of studying abroad].

The host country becomes quintessentially not home; a place that is not necessarily anti-home but also not what the international student will call home. It is a place to be adventurous, pick up new interests and hobbies – a place to do the things one would not have the opportunity to do at home. The home is tied to international students' origin countries. In contrast, the host country is linked to the exclusive focus on self and devoid of much of the dynamics and back and forth processes of homemaking. Students studying abroad are presented with the chance to have “a great time to pursue other interests that take the back-burner when at home” [How to feel at home as an international student, 2014].

Referring to the need to go back home, students are encouraged to explore and take in as much as possible as their time in the US is “valuable and ... short-lived” [How to feel at home as an international student, 2014]. Being in America is an experience that students must savor and revel in to the best of their ability. In providing tips to deal with homesickness, *International Students* cautioned students as follows:

Mind over matter. More than likely your time studying abroad is limited. This means you only have a few weeks or months to enjoy your host country, but the rest of your life to enjoy where you come from (if you'll be returning after your trip). If you don't enjoy your time abroad due to being homesick, think about how you'll feel once you do return home—more than likely pretty upset that you didn't enjoy your journey to the fullest. [Homesick as an international student, 2013]

The imminent departure of students is used to encourage them to take up activities and immerse themselves in US culture. Their time here is often portrayed as a period of exploration and vacationing. Students are largely considered as tourists (Abdullateef & Biodun, 2014; Asgari & Borzooei, 2013), and the form of integration pushed is superficial. A blog entry that discussed the reasons for studying abroad stressed that the “biggest reason you should consider a study abroad program is the opportunity to see the world”, giving students the “opportunity to see new terrains, natural wonders, museums, and landmarks of your host nation” [10 Benefits to Studying Abroad]. Though there is a significant difference between students on study abroad programs and international students, the blogs conflate the two. This further highlights their position that international students are here in the US for a limited time. In presenting the host nation as a space to be explored, the notion that international students are educational tourists comes to be central. Students are considered moving to the host country to acquire knowledge (Donaldson & Gatsinzi, 2005) and are seen as potential contributors to and participators in the domestic tourism market (Payne, 2009). Payne (2010) argues that international students can contribute millions of dollars to domestic tourism in the host country. By urging international students to explore America, the blogs promote local and national tourism.

Whether classified as long-stay or inbound tourists, the very portrayal of international students as tourists limits their ability to integrate and prevents them from generating a feeling of home in the host nation and within their communities. This is more so when temporariness is



associated with the need to explore. On dealing with homesickness, students are told to treasure their time in the US:

Being an international student is great – you are able to see important landmarks, try new cuisine, meet new friends, learn a new language and more than likely just have a great time in general. [Homesick as an international student, 2013]

This is highlighted in how students are encouraged to deal with homesickness; by going on adventures to “truly try to explore the city they are studying in” [What to do when you get homesick, 2020] and creating memories to take back home. Here, the host country is a place where students can be away from home (White & White, 2007), a place where they can experience as tourists do. However, the centering of temporariness will not necessarily mean that students are exempt from integration. Long-stay tourists less and less partake in tourist activities as their attraction to host destinations dwindle (Anantamongkolkul, Butcher, & Wang, 2019). Thus, over time, international students will shift from tourist activities to routine activities that reflect home comforts and share their cultures with host residents (Anantamongkolkul et al., 2019; Somerville, 1997). It is, however, crucial to underscore the effects of the blogs on students’ integration practices.

The websites also tap into the financial potential of international students to local economies by advertising tourism products and advocating for travel behavior. Students are encouraged to favor cities like Reno, Nevada when considering colleges and universities in the US because “it’s full of events, scenery, and outdoor activities you can experience while you are studying in Reno.” International students can “take a break from studying to visit Lake Tahoe’s stunning beaches, ski resorts, and various hiking trails” [Reno, Nevada – the biggest little city in the world, 2020].

Beyond discussing international students as educational tourists, the blogs also advertise products and services that underscore the temporary status of international students in the US. For instance, students are encouraged to use a rental service, CORT, to furnish their apartments. Furniture rental is argued to be a sure way to “save money, move with ease and change your style as you go” [Adjusting to college life in a big city, 2020]. In addition, renting “provides flexibility... and takes away the stress, hassle and cost of buying these items” [Study abroad move-in essentials, 2020], and also ensures “eco-friendly option to ensure your apartment has the proper furniture while also having an impact on the environment [Tips to make your space eco-friendly, 2020]. Since students will be in the US for a while, the blogs claim that it makes no financial sense to purchase furniture and helps reduce their impact on the environment as the things they used will not be disposed of but rented out to the next user.

Nevertheless, the acquisition of material objects and personal effects are crucial in making a home. Renting can prevent any personal investment into the items international students use as they know they must be eventually returned. Though objects inherently produce meaning (Jacobs & Malpas, 2013), the meanings that emerged from renting furniture and other material objects in the home might not be conducive for homemaking. There might be restrictions in how these items are used or marked as renters could incur further charges if they are not returned in good conditions. Advising that students rent the bulk of the material aspects of their home reduces these items to only their utility and functional values with little meaning attached to them.

Both lived and imagined, memories are central to the homemaking process (Douglas, 1991; Mallett, 2004). Life events can influence perceptions and understandings of home; one’s past and expected future can shape how a home is made (Després, 1991). The experiences

international students have in the US and the memories they collect impact their perception of home and even their decisions to stay, return, or move to a different country after their studies. However, the websites interpret these memories and experiences, whether cherished or dreaded, as the token of an adventure, souvenirs of their exploration of the US to show family and friends back in their origin countries. Students are admonished to document their experiences so they do not fade from memory. Discussing what students need to pack when coming to the US, *Study in the USA* writes:

If you have a camera, take most of your photographs of the USA during the first two or three weeks of your stay, when your surroundings look new and different to you. But wait to buy gifts to take home until the last two or three weeks of your stay. By that time, you will have a better idea of value. You also will know which items truly represent your stay in the USA [Planning and packing, 2020].

The experiences students have here in the US and the memories they evoke are not tied to the development of place attachment but instead talked about as keepsakes for when they return home. “Students who study abroad become explorers of their new nation and really discover the curiosity and excitement that they harbor” [10 benefits to study abroad]. Therefore, the excitements of their experiences must be carried back home, and they are provided with a “few alternate ways to carry your memories home and hold onto them for years” [Carry your memories home, 2013], which include photo journaling, starting a collection, and using snail mail.

As part of the criteria to be granted a student visa, international students are expected to exhibit an intent to depart the United States after completing their studies, further evidenced by the stamp of an expiry date on their visa. Before entering the country, international students are conditioned on the need to return when done with their studies. The temporariness of their stay is constantly brought up even in their day-to-day interactions with Americans. The blogs continue

the discourse of international students' temporary stay in the US by frequently highlighting that they must return to their origin countries after their studies. In portraying international students' time in the US as a period of exploration likened to a vacation, making a case for not purchasing and owning the material objects in the homes thereby reducing the emotional investment in making a home, encouraging students to document their experiences as mementos of their adventure, and preparing students to deal with reverse culture shock, it is stressed to readers and to the whole international student community that the desired option is to leave when they are done with their studies.

### **“This is How You Make Home”: Expert Advice on Homemaking**

“A huge part of studying outside your home country is finding your home away from home” [Student housing in the US, 2020]. The possibility of making a home and integration is not considered off-limits even within the dominant discourse of returning when done with school. Even in highlighting the temporariness of their stay, the blogs also focused on feeling at home and integrating into the US. Time impacts on the making of home (Somerville, 1997). This is especially true for achieving the familiarity and heaven dimensions of the home. It takes time to know one's environment and to build a network of community in their neighborhood. Nevertheless, transient populations do engage in varying processes of homemaking and activities of integration, even when these are not meant to be permanent. The blogs similarly encourage integration and advise students to create spaces they will feel at home within. As used by the blogs, home mainly refers to the domestic and physical spaces that international students occupy. On how to adjust to living in a dormitory, *Study in the USA* tells its students (readers) that:

Your dorm room isn't just the place where you sleep or study. It's your home. Make it as YOU as it can be. Show your personality. Put up the posters your mom never let you put up at home. Add a rug or colorful pillows. Do whatever you can to make your room a comfortable place, so you'll feel right at home [5 tips for surviving dorm life, 2019].

The spaces international students find themselves in are places they can make into their homes. It starts from choosing suitable housing that reflects the needs of the student. Housing tips to students stressed that there are various options. Students can search until they find what best suits them: “Fortunately, there are several housing options and services available to suit every student’s needs” [Housing tips for international students, 2020]. Students are furnished with typical housing options available to university students in the US. The pros and cons of each option are listed to help students make the best choice to fit their lifestyles and preferences. Homemaking starts from the very beginning process of selecting from the various options provided. Students are encouraged to move into apartments or houses that will not only meet their needs but also reflect their personalities. For instance, private housing is an ideal option for those who want to be away from the bustling college life and experience a more quiet and mature American life. “Plus, private housing is usually located off-campus in a student-friendly suburb of your university town, giving you a new area to explore and call home”[6 essential tips for finding student housing in the US, 2020].

The physical building is not necessarily equated with home (Mallett, 2004). The blogs further encourage students to undertake activities that turn their domestic spaces into a home. On housing tips for international students, signing the lease for an apartment or a house is the beginning step of making a home as “it is important to add personal touches that make this space a home.” Mostly, students are encouraged to take control and decorate their rooms to their taste. Using personal items that have meaning and value to students are considered as an affordable way to create a feeling of comfort and familiarity within their domestic spaces: “ However, little touches, such as curtains, cozy bedding and personal mementos transform a living arrangement

from an unfamiliar apartment into your very own space” [Housing tips for international students, 2020]. Students do not need to spend much money to turn their spaces into a home:

Another way to save money as you decorate your apartment is by using items you already own. Adding a personal touch to your bedroom or main living area can make your space feel more comfortable, especially when they are items with sentimental value. As you decorate, include personal touches like photos that remind you of home to brighten up the room. You can also accomplish this feeling by hanging a flag from your home country on the wall! Filling your rooms with these accessories will create a “home away from home” for you and your guests, while also saving a little money [Tips for updating your space on a budget, 2021].

Here, the multiplicity of the home is implied as students can be in a home away from home.

Home is not tied to a single geographical location, and working on making one in the US helps students ease into a new and foreign space: “Creating a space that feels like you will make you feel more relaxed and less likely to long for your room at home” [How to handle homesickness, 2020]. However, even in encouraging international students to make a home in the US, the origin country is still centered as the primary home. By decorating their spaces and surrounding themselves “with familiar items, such as photos or ornaments” [Culture shock], international students can establish a home here in the US. By reorganizing and adding personal effects to the domestic space, international students create a familiar space and engage in an iterative and interactive process of doing home (Bowlby, Gregory, & McKie, 1997). To feel at home, students must remember that:

Your Dorm is Your Castle Although it might not actually be a castle based on space- it can certainly be somewhere you enjoy coming back to after a long day. One of the best tips as to how to feel at home as an international student is to spend a few hours when you first move in to arrange your furniture the way you like and fill the space with things you enjoy like your home country flag, photos and plants [How to feel at home as an international student, 2014].

Home is marked by permanence; however, this is best understood as a continuity. In making a home here in the US, international students are not entirely starting altogether from scratch. The

material objects they bring into their spaces and the practices they engage in are all influenced by both their origin and host countries. As such, “attending school in a foreign country doesn’t mean you have to give up the comforts of home” [A taste of home to ease homesickness abroad, 2014]. On the contrary, having those objects that evoke similar feelings of familiarity and comfort and engaging in similar practices ensures students continue doing home here just as they do back in their countries of origin.

The importance of having access to a material culture one can relate to is also stressed as necessary to feel at home in the host country. In addition, the presence of services and products that cater to the unique needs of international students help to feel as having a community. For example, on living off-campus, Study in the USA writes about how:

Having access to the little things that will make your new city feel like home can make all the difference. Whether it’s a grocery store that sells specialty food, or an international market for your everyday needs, it’s important to live in an area that provides access to these items [Is off campus living right for you, 2020].

This connects to the notion of abundance and the feeling of the presence of a community that one shares their culture with in the host country (Brown-Saracino, 2018). Therefore, students are advised to think about the need for abundance when applying to schools in the US. For example, in advertising New York as an ideal place for international students, the multi-ethnic characteristic of the city was highlighted: “Approximately 47 percent of New York City’s residents speak a language other than English at home” [A New York state of mind, 2020]. Furthermore, the presence of ethnic enclaves and neighborhoods gives students the chance to experience their cultures away from home and explore other cultures not native to the US.

Chinatown and Little Italy are two of the numerous ethnic neighborhoods in the city that contain restaurants, shopping centers and other cultural offerings for anyone that would like to experience their particular culture [A New York state of mind, 2020].

The home can extend beyond the domestic space to encompass the neighborhood, city, and nation. Students are advised to get to know their new locale and university and become familiar with their new spaces. To feel at home, students are encouraged to “start by walking around campus and becoming familiar with everything your school has to offer” [How to feel at home as an international student, 2014]. Through these activities of getting to know their locales, international students go beyond vacationing and tourism. Exploration is not used here to gain pleasure but rather to get to know the place like a local would.

No matter what city your university is in, there will be many opportunities to live like a local. Skip the Starbucks and find a local coffee shop that makes you feel at home. Research local eateries and other locations where you can get a feel for the city. Volunteering with local non-profits is a great way to get more comfortable and make new connections in your new home. Spending your spare time in the vibrant communities that surround city universities can open your eyes to a new side of your city [Adjusting to college life in a big city, 2020].

International students do not only get to become familiar with their neighborhoods and cities but also interact with locals and better engage in the integration process. To battle homesickness, students are encouraged to:

Head to the other side of campus and walk around a library or academic building you’ve never been in before. Try a new coffee shop or restaurant where you can work in a new place. Find a spot with lots of sunlight to help your mood. Changing your location can feel exciting and will introduce you to new people and places [How to handle homesickness, 2020].

Together with finding a cultural connection in the cities they reside in and becoming familiar with the space they inhabit, there is the need for international students to find a community that they can fit in and belong. Through social interactions, international students can build networks that help create a sense of belonging in the host country. Fraternities and societies are suggested as a great way to find a community and develop a sense of belonging:

Fraternities and sororities are a great place to gain friendships for life. Greek organizations offer camaraderie and support during your time in college and beyond. Be sure to research



all of the different Greek life organizations so that you find one where members share your own professional and personal interests. These are societies where you can become something larger than yourself, help your community, gain lasting connections and meet like-minded friends. Many Greek organizations do community service work, host events and parties, and members gain a sense of belonging away from home [The international student's guide to getting involved in extracurricular activities, 2020].

However, the blogs advocate for an assimilationist approach when it comes to interacting with Americans. International students are expected to give up their cultures in favor of American customs in their social exchanges. For instance, to better interact with Americans and get a fully authentic experience, students are advised to do away with their accents. The American culture is described as open and allowing students to “make a temporary home that is exciting and welcoming.” However, for international students to enjoy the whole experience, they must “learn to speak North American English and reduce your accent” then people “will want to hear your story and what you want to say” [Speaking English like a North American, 2015]. One's ability to have a great experience in the US is attributed to their capability to not only speak English but to speak like an American. It is considered embarrassing and a hamper to having a seamless conversation without an American accent:

Just imagine yourself in this scenario. You know you are speaking the English language you worked so hard on perfecting in the classroom. Many people - maybe even you - have taken those classes for years and earned very high marks. You assume that communicating in the English language will not be a problem. Then, you arrive in the U.S.A. excited for your experience, but people have trouble understanding you. Your grammar may be perfect, and you've memorized the vocabulary, but your accent is just not there yet. Every person with an accent who wants to have an amazing American experience can do so. Minimizing your accent takes away the awkward pauses that exist when people try to interpret words spoken with a heavy accent. The result is that everyone can have a more interactive conversation, where everyone's message is communicated clearly and with understanding. There will be no more, "Pardon me?" You'll be heard and you'll fall more in love with your American experience. After all, your education is more than just a classroom. It's also making friends and experiencing the culture [Speaking English like a North American, 2015].

Furthermore, cultural competence and the potential to understand and appreciate American culture is associated with language: “your time in the U.S. gives you a valuable opportunity: to promote your cultural understanding and English language skills” [More than a degree – learning cultural competence, 2020]. To show that one appreciates American culture, they have to learn not only to speak English fluently but to speak like a North American. To help develop a North American accent, international students are encouraged to make American friends.

Also, keep in mind, mastering a new language is a slow process, so don't rush into it because eventually, everything will fall into place anyway. The key is to interact with more people, especially natives, and ask questions wherever and whenever needed, while you talk to them. This way, you will end up developing a better grip on the language [Studying abroad – expectations and realities, 2020].

Through interaction with host students and communities, students can be sure to pick up an American accent that will help them have a great experience. In their interactions with Americans, international students are advised to downplay their identities and cultural expressions. This indicates that international students are expected to be themselves when in their domestic and private space. It is in those spaces that they can put up cultural items that represent their foreign status. But in public spaces, they must do away with those identity markers to fit into American society.

Also, students are told to be wary of interacting more with other students from their origin countries. Associating with co-nationals is seen as a barrier to integration. International students might lose perspective of why they moved to the US if they are embedded within other international student communities. To enjoy the whole American experience, the blogs propose that international students become cautious in their interactions with their co-nationals.

International students who study abroad can lose perspective on exactly why they initially chose to study in a foreign country. Without trying, they often find themselves surrounded by people from their own country and speaking their own language. This can create an isolated experience [More than a degree – learning cultural competence, 2020].

Many students who are planning to study in the U.S. are naturally attracted to such exciting cities as San Francisco, Boston, New York, or Los Angeles. However, in these big cities, students tend to hang out with friends from their own countries, eat food from their own countries at ethnic restaurants, watch movies in their language, and essentially continue to live as they did at home, only this time they have to pay a lot of money for the experience [Small town ESL program, 2020].

In addition to making more American friends, international students are also advised on limiting their interactions with their friends and families back in their origin countries as this interferes with their experiences as international students. Constantly interacting with the networks students left behind is considered not ideal for integration and homemaking.

Depending on your length of stay in the U.S.A., some you may overuse your technological connections to home. Technology makes this very easy, but this can undermine your study abroad experience...While connection to family and friends is one of the most important factors in keeping you sane abroad, those connections should not interfere with your investment in studying in the U.S. [More than a degree – learning cultural competence, 2020].

Even within an assimilationist of integration, the blogs discuss international students' home in the US as limited to the university space. An attempt is made to equate the university to home; it is the university that will create the conditions of home for the international student. Therefore, the expanse of space available to international students to make home and develop a sense of belonging is restricted to the university space. University space here includes university campuses, off-campus apartments and residences, and other student-centered communities. In advertising the University of Arkansas to international students, it is presented as a place where students can find a home: "U of A is committed to providing the best possible environment and second home for its international students during their time at the university" [Fayetteville's home on a hill, 2019]. Similarly, international students are promised a home in Reno, Nevada; "you will find a home away from home at Truckee Meadows Community College (TMCC) located in Reno, NV — The Biggest Little City in the World!" [Reno, Nevada – the biggest little city in the world, 2020].

By conflating the university with home, international students' homemaking is limited to the university space. Such an understanding of the university as home restricts the places where students can make home and limits home to their time as international students. Hence, home can truly be found in the university setting or the communities associated with it; beyond that, nothing is guaranteed. After all, "...American colleges strongly believe that having students from many backgrounds on campus is valuable for everyone's education, and they are eager to enroll students who will bring unique and varied viewpoints to their campuses" [Enjoy the many varieties of American colleges and universities, 2020]. Yet, international students are admitted purely for educational purposes, and their desire to make a home within the larger American society is largely discouraged.

### **A Temporary Home: Contradicting Narratives**

On the one hand, international students are discussed as temporary residents who should keep in mind that they will return to their countries of origin once they are done with their studies. On the other hand, they are encouraged to integrate and make a home here during their stay. Given that home is associated with permanence, the two narratives appear contradicting. I argue for the opposite; together, they form a discourse that portrays US universities as ideal places/homes for international students while sustaining the narrative that they must return after receiving their education. This is achieved by fostering a surface integration and promoting active assimilation. Through this model, the US can attract a large international student population, significant contributors to the national economy, while creating an environment where the bulk cannot/will not stay after their studies.

By urging students to approach their time in the US as a period of exploration and vacationing, the type of place knowing that is encouraged is superficial. The focus is centered on

maximizing pleasure and excitement without much emotional labor to become familiar with place. I refer to this form of integration as surface integration. International students are treated as long-stay tourists, a valuable population not only to higher education but also to the tourism and hospitality industry. Essentially, international students are considered through transactional terms. They contribute to the economy, and in return, they are given knowledge and excitement. Some scholars have pushed for the recognition of international students as education tourists to help better account for the actual economic impact of international students on local economies (Payne, 2010). Beyond their monetary value to host countries, acknowledging that host countries often consider international students as educational tourists will allow for a more critical approach to studying how such constructions influence international students' experiences.

With a constant reminder of their temporariness, international students will resist investing too much time and energy to build meaningful networks and not engage in establishing a home in the US. Therefore, minimal work will be put towards the making of a home and integration. As mentioned before, this does not mean that international students will not engage in any homemaking practice at all. Instead, the focus will be on a home that can be easily portable and not centered on material objects. With the need to internationalize, American universities recruit international students who are expected to add value to the education universities provide. However, these students are required to leave after their education. By encouraging a surface yet assimilationist model of integration and conflating home and the university space, the blogs are able to advertise US universities as the ideal destination for international education while also sustaining the narrative that international students must leave after they are done with their studies.

Overall, this chapter examined how two blogs, *Study in the USA* and *International Student*, contribute to the larger discourse on international students' homemaking and integration in the US. The blogs highlight the temporary status of international students in the US. They publish entries that advise international students to view their time in the US as a vacation period. Hence, international students are portrayed as educational tourists and encouraged to participate actively in tourist activities. International students should become explorers of the host country and take measures to document their experiences for when they leave. Also, given that they will return to their countries of origin, they are advised not to invest much into purchasing their own material objects in the home but rather rent them. However, even within time constraints, international students are encouraged to make their homes by focusing on assimilating into American culture through picking up an American accent and limiting their interaction with their co-national students. The next chapter looks at how African international students make a home in their domestic and private spaces.

## **CHAPTER FIVE:**

### **MAKING IT AFRICAN – PRACTICES WITHIN THE HOME**

As a space of belonging, the home is a place where we attach meanings, emotions, and experiences (Blunt & Varley, 2004). We invest these feelings and meanings through the process of everyday practices and “doing” (Bowlby et al., 1997) to achieve a sense of familiarity, comfort, and certainty within the spaces we call home. The practices that we undertake in the home confer value and significance to the material aspects of the domestic space. Without these practices of homemaking, from the mundane everyday activities to the occasionally planned events, the spaces we inhabit will be just like any other. In this chapter, I discuss the key practices that African students engage in to transform an otherwise unfamiliar space into what they can call home. My participants make home through (a) cooking African food, (b) speaking African languages and consuming media from their origin countries, (c) using home objects, and (d) constructing privacy in the domestic space. Through these activities, the home African students make in the US is influenced by the culture and networks in the origin country. I argue that the home becomes a transnational domestic space: a continuation of home in the origin country.

#### **Cooking and Eating African Food**

Food, its preparation, and consumption are heavily influenced by culture, and in turn, food becomes a prominent part of cultural identity (Crotty & Germov, 2016; Johnston & Longhurst, 2012). People make and eat food to connect with their culture while also validating

their membership in that cultural group. For international students, food plays an integral role in their adaptation to the host country while also maintaining a connection to their cultures and the people they left behind.

Abina, 27 years, recently moved from Ghana to the US to study and be with her husband in New York. Though her university is in Virginia, she currently resided in New York and attends classes virtually. She is studying for a master's degree in human resources. She stressed the importance of food in connecting with one's roots:

The food I prepare is local dishes. And it helps you to remember your roots. I mean, it's... it helps you to connect to where you come from. Anytime I eat the food, I try to remember the time I used to eat the food way back in Ghana.

She considers eating the foods she makes as a way to maintain her connection to and affirming her Ghanaian identity. For her, food is an identity marker and provides the opportunity to partake in one's culture even when geographically away. Food then bridges the distance between her and her culture and community in the origin country. Thema, a 27-year-old Ghanaian student in Ohio, similarly talked about how Ghanaian food reminds her of home. She has been in the US for more than three years and is currently a first-year Ph.D. student in a Higher Education and Student Administration program. She frequently cooks Ghanaian food to feel at home. She tells me, "...it just gives you that connection. Like, oh my God, like I really miss Ghana. I really want to go to Ghana, you know?" African students cook food from the origin country to establish a home here in the US that connects them to their countries of origin.

Ekow, from Ghana, is currently doing his second master's in Accounting in Georgia. He first lived in Florida, where he studied for his first master's degree and working before moving to Georgia. He also uses food to connect to his home and community back in Africa. He is 30 years old and had lived in the US for over five years. He tells me that "...anytime I get local food like



Ghanaian or Nigerian food to eat, I just feel I'm home." To him, eating Ghanaian or Nigerian food takes him back home in the origin country. Using food to connect African students to their origin country is also expressed by Aku, who calls her mother and sister when she cooks here in the US. Aku is a 21-year-old undergraduate student studying business administration in Minnesota. She enrolled at a university in Ghana after high school. However, she moved to join her father in the US. She lived in New York for a year before relocating to Minnesota to begin her studies. She moved to Minnesota about three years ago and is studying for her bachelor's degree. When she was in Ghana, cooking was one way her family spends time together, and she still involves her family in her food making here. So for Aku, food and cooking strongly connect here to her family back in Ghana.

For Abina, food plays a very crucial role in maintaining one's connection to the origin country. She cooks Ghanaian foods for herself and her husband all the time and barely eats American foods. Food becomes a very real and viable way for African students to build and sustain their transnational ties. She stresses the need to cook and eat food from the origin country:

So, I think as Ghanaians or as immigrants or as international students when we come here, we switch foods. I mean, we should try to eat our own food, even though it's expensive... because getting the ingredients here is very expensive. But you should try at least once in a month. If we can afford to prepare our own delicacy, it helps you keep memories alive. I mean, it's good.

The smell and aroma of food are strongly tied to feelings of home (Brown, Edwards, & Hartwell, 2010). Ebo, a 30-year-old Ph.D. student in Florida, is born to Ethiopian parents and lived in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, before moving to study in the US. He has family and friends here in the US that he visits. Ebo knows an Ethiopian home when he enters one because he recognizes the smell and flavor: "I've other family members, you go into their house, and you

could even smell the Ethiopian, right? It's full of curry and stuff.” Through sensory abilities, individuals can identify familiar smells and tastes that remind them of home and create feelings of comfort and ease within space (Brown, Farbrother, & Dazam, 2019; Duyvendak, 2011). This indicates a sensory aspect to homemaking; that is, the home can be experienced through sight, hearing, and smell. Jojo, a Ghanaian student, is a final year master’s student in Florida. He is 25 years old and is studying statistics. Prior to starting his master’s program, Jojo came to the US on an exchange student program in Boston. Now, in Florida, he visits his uncle and his family in Georgia during the holidays. He expressed a similar view that links feelings of home to sensory capacities:

Whenever I go over there, I know I am in a Ghanaian home. The way it feels and everything in the air tells you, you are home... first of all food and the way things are done around you feel like you're in Ghana because everyone is Ghanaian even though my cousins were born here... you can still feel connected to them because we are Ghanaians, so I think it's the environment and the food.

In talking about “everything in the air”, Jojo was referring to the aroma of Ghanaian food in his uncle’s home. For him, the ability to sense that he is in a Ghanaian space at his uncle’s, mainly through smell, is a huge marker of national identity. Though his cousins grew up in the US, Jojo can affirm their Ghanaian identity because they keep a home that feels and smells Ghanaian.

Given the importance of food and smell in homemaking, my participants expressed the need to cook not just any African food but to prepare it properly – to make it the “African way.” The effort is placed on getting the right ingredients, even when they are pricey, and following the same steps as they do back in the origin country. Ada, a first-year Ph.D. student in Florida, prepares and eats Nigerian foods when she misses home. Ada is in a chemical engineering program and is 28 years old. Her elder brothers motivated her to pursue her education abroad, and she decided on the US because of language similarities. Also, she has family and friends in

the US who can support her when she needs help. For Ada, it is also crucial to make the food she eats authentic:

I don't cook plenty Nigerian food. Some are difficult to make and take too much time. But there are times when I simply miss home, so I go through the trouble to cook it. And if I really want to eat Nigerian food, then I have to do it right.

As Ada's quote shows, simply cooking is not enough; the right ingredients must be used, and it is even necessary to make it exactly like it is done back in the origin country. Ada does not cook Nigerian food always because she recognizes that preparing Nigerian foods can be time-consuming. However, when she does cook, she strives to make it right. When not prepared authentically, the role of food as a connection to the origin country becomes lost.

Before she left for the US, Aku often cooks with her mother and sister. In Minnesota, she also tries to exactly replicate what they use to do when she cooks.

I tried to make the food like my mum makes it, adding the ingredients in the same order and things like that. I often think about times when we were all in the kitchen cooking and the things we talked about. Sometimes, I call her when I am cooking, and we talk too.

Not only does she need the right ingredients when she cooks, but she also tries to bring in the exact people she cooks with back in Ghana. Aku interprets authenticity as including the right ingredients and having her mother and sister with her when she cooks. She uses technology to bring her mum and sister into her food making (Lim & Pham, 2016). The act of "making it like it is done back home" is sometimes crucial in developing feelings of home. Here, moving to a new country does not necessarily mean a disruption in home and its making. Instead, African students engage in practices that enable them to almost go on making their homes seamlessly here in the US. Cooking authentic African foods that produce familiar smells allows African students to create a home identical to those they inhabited in the origin country.

Others stress the importance of getting the right ingredient to make it like it is done back home. Thema has her parents send her Ghanaian ingredients when people she knows are coming from Ghana to the US. She lists some ingredients that she cannot get in a generic American supermarket: “When I am talking to my mum, she tells me someone is coming, and she’ll send *amane* (fish) powder, *koobi* (dried salted fish), *maggi* and *onga* (seasonings).” Getting these particular food items here can be difficult and expensive, and most have to go to African shops and markets to get them. Aba, 26 years old Ghanaian student, studies in a criminology program in Montana. She has been in the US for a little over a year and lives next door to two other male friends she knew in Ghana. She cooks with them and spends most of her free time at their place. Aba and her friends in Montana found a store where they can buy some Ghanaian ingredients, “...they were just a little high. But we managed to buy them, and we cooked them.” Even when the food items from these African shops cost more, African international students prefer to buy those ingredients they feel give their food an African authenticity.

Kesse (21 years) and Kofi (21 years) are two Ghanaian undergraduate students in Minnesota who live together. They attended the same high school in Ghana and were advised by a mutual friend to apply to their current university. They have been in the US for over three years and jointly engage in homemaking. Kofi and Kesse talked about searching for a place to buy food items that are staple in Ghanaian diets when they arrived in the US.

Kesse: He [Kofi] made us go around the town and going to all the shops we can find to see if we can get some yam and the stuff we need to cook. I mean, we didn’t get everything thing we need, but we spent a lot of time search for places to get Ghanaian food. We even tried ordering from online. You know, sometimes you just want to get proper Ghanaian food to eat, and it is difficult to get it here, so you spend a lot to get what you want.

Accessibility to African food items is limited, especially for students studying in small towns or places with a small African immigrant population. When he lived in Florida, Ekow

visits the one African store in his city. And though he rarely gets food items from his origin country, Ghana, getting other African ingredients is close enough. “There is like one African store when I was in Tampa... Food is really important to me, and once in a while, I crave African (Ghanaian) food, which I don’t get... so I alternate with a Nigerian restaurant.” Thema, who is in Ohio, similarly has to go through great lengths to get African food:

I think the unfortunate thing about being Athens, not Ohio, but just Athens is that we don't have an African restaurant here. So, let's say you didn't want to cook, you just need African food, you have to travel all the way... it's like an hour and 30 minutes to Columbus to go get African food. Even with our African products like my *banku* stuff – the corn dough – I have to go all the way to Columbus to go get it.

With no African shops and restaurants in Athens, Thema still finds a way to access the right ingredients she needs to make her food. African students spend more money and time to have authentic African foods, which is a crucial part of their homemaking practices.

Essien is a 25-year-old Ghanaian student studying for his master’s degree in civil engineering. He moved to Texas about a year ago with a group of friends with whom he shares an apartment. He receives packages from his parents filled with Ghanaian spices and food items. Though there is an African market in his town, it mainly caters to the Nigerian population, so he has to have his parents ship the ingredients he needs to cook.

Yeah. It's very important. So, for example, for spices and stuff like that, we have our family send them from Ghana. So, we'd have to receive it through DHL something because here... There's a Ghanaian market, but... no, it's not a Ghanaian market. There's an African market, which is predominantly Nigerian because in Africa, it's like Nigeria. Nigerians are everywhere. So, the market is more Nigerian than, you know, African. So basically, you'd get some things that you might need as a Ghanaian to cook but most of the things you can't really relate with.

However, Abina’s experience in New York is different. In New York, there is an abundance of African communities, and she has many choices when it comes to where to shop. “...for New York, I don’t know about other states, but in New York, we have a lot of African

markets all over. So, you get to purchase local products.” In places where students cannot find the right ingredients they need, they take a much more liberal interpretation of authentic African food. Jojo, in Florida, does not necessarily need to get the right items to make his Ghanaian foods. He uses “the ingredients here to make food the Ghanaian way. It tastes a bit different, but it is Ghana food.”

The desire to make authentic African dishes exists along a gender line. The women in my interviews stressed the need to get the exact food items they use back in the origin country.

Thema reflects on why getting it right is important:

It’s so stupid, but that’s what we do. But then, we want the *onga*, we want the *maggi*, we want the *momoni* [fermented fish], we want the *koobi* [dried salted fish]. Yeah, like, that works for us. I can’t use um, you know, I don’t know like I can’t add sugar to my meat, I can’t add milk to my egg, like, I can’t do that no, no, no, no, I need to prepare it the way I want to prepare because I will enjoy it. I want to enjoy what I’m eating.

The cost and the energy that African international students spend on getting these items might seem illogical for some, like Thema noticed. But for her and others, it is worth it; they get to enjoy what they eat and also feel a connection to the homes they left behind. Ama, a Ghanaian, is a 20-year-old biomedical undergraduate student in Connecticut. Before coming to the US, she studied in an International Baccalaureate (IB) program in Singapore. She has family in the US and spends her vacations with them. Ama always uses Ghanaian spices when she cooks:

When I’m cooking, one spice I do need for sure is *maggi*. Without *maggi*, it’s not like home. Like... it’s not like a home-cooked meal. So obviously, *maggi* is something I will try and find if I’m cooking. I remember like going to the African supermarket last time I was looking for spice. I was like, oh *maggi*, there you are. I just took that, and I saw like *onga*. So, I took a bit of *onga*, which I’m not like so much of an *onga* fan, but I just took it because I wanted that homemade taste.

Abina also realizes that the right ingredients are essential and goes to the African market to get them. However, for her, making authentic African foods depends on one’s cooking skills.

“...you can make something out of nothing, but the actual feeling will come right after tasting

because it reminds you of something you've eaten before." The stuff she gets from the African markets tastes a bit different than back in the origin country.

For example, we have palm oil that is made out of palm kernel. But when you cook with it, it doesn't really taste like the real palm oil that we have in Ghana. Because it has been processed, some additives have been added to it. So, it tastes different, but by the end of the day is still connects you to your roots, and that is the most important thing.

Like the other women, Abina underscores her cooking skills and ability to prepare authentic Ghanaian/African dishes even with the limited options in ingredients. It seemed important that the women, through the interviews, highlight their cooking and domestic skills, which indicates that gender dynamics within the home from the origin country shape the homemaking practices of African students. The women usually host their other African friends and therefore feel the need to make the foods they cook right. For example, Ama shares her food with other Ghana friends and has "to make it right because they will know if it is not." Similarly, Fati, a 28-year-old sociology master's student in Montana, regularly hosts her Ghanaian and African friends in Montana and always has to "make the food, so they all enjoy it well." Fati came to the US three years ago and is currently deciding whether to continue for a Ph.D. or work after her studies.

On the other hand, my male participants downplayed the need to have the exact ingredients when cooking and often gave a more liberal interpretation of authentic African dishes. Jojo does not go through the trouble of locating an African shop or market to get his food items. He opts for substitutes that are much easier and cheaper to get. Ebo likes Ethiopian foods but mostly makes meat dishes because "they are easier to cook especially for men... I mostly eat food from home when my parents come to visit." Essien also substitutes spinach for *kantomire* (cocoyam leaves), and it tastes "different, but it's okay." The men appreciate having authentic African meals, but they also recognize the effort required to make them. At times, they simply

lack the skills to make it right, like Essien, who told me that he is aware that he is not a good cook. Ekow, who does not always get the ingredients he needs, cooks food that is not typically Ghanaian but closely resembles what he eats back in the origin country.

Both Ekow and Essien talked about the fact that they did not know how to cook before moving to the US. In Ghana, Ekow had sisters who did most of the cooking, and Essien's mother often cooked for him. And so here in the US, they make do with the little cooking skills they have, not necessarily focused on getting it exactly right; close is enough. Also, the men talked about getting more authentic African foods from other places like restaurants, families, and churches. Essien always cooks with his friends in Texas.

No, I don't cook. I do not even really know how to cook. So, I wouldn't want to eat my cooking. So, we cook as a group because it's easier and even cheaper that way. Yeah, so everyone has their individual tasks that they're supposed to do. So, all they have to do is, you know, to just go, and everyone does what... if we are blending something, we are blending something. If we are frying something, we are frying something. And we just like share it amongst ourselves. And so, we cook as a group.

Cooking together with his friends who can make more authentic and tasty Ghanaian meals allows Essien to eat food that he will enjoy.

When he was in Tampa, Ekow went to an African church and was frequently invited to the "typical extended African uncle and auntie" homes, where he gets authentic African foods. Unlike the women, my male participants do not often have friends over at their places. Even in cases where they host, cooking is delegated to the women. Aba, who moved to Montana with two Ghanaian male friends, often goes over to their apartment, where she cooks for them all to eat. Again, gender norms from the origin country shape domestic practices where men do not strive for authenticity as women do.

In the host country, food takes on a new and more significant meaning to African students. Generally, my participants noted the central role that food has acquired in the US. This



new way of perceiving and appreciating food helps African students develop feelings of home here. Ekow, who now lives in Georgia, equates feelings of home with food, stressing how food got a new meaning once he moved to the US:

Until I came here, food was not really anything I had to think about. And until I got here, then I realized the importance of Ghanaian food. So back home, you know, you like... you can literally get any local food you want to eat... So just the only food I can cook would be rice, *indomie* (a brand of noodles popular in West Africa), and those kinds of things I can find my hands on to prepare. So, food really is important, and once in a while, I crave African food... just to feel at home. When you eat, you just feel at home, and yeah, back home, I wouldn't really think about it. I think now it's really important. Anytime I get local food like Ghanaian or Nigerian food to eat, I just feel like I'm home, like I feel that happiness. You know, it's like a lottery or something.

The new meanings attached to food help African students deal with homesickness. By centering food in the adaptation to the host society, African students develop flexible strategies that they are in control of to cope with homesickness (Brown et al., 2010). Through cooking, African international students bring familiar practices, tastes, and aroma into their domestic spaces. This is one way of creating a home away from home and lessens the emotional turmoil of missing home.

In sum, this section shows how through food preparation and consumption, African international students bring familiar practices into the unfamiliar spaces they inhabit. Their focus is mainly on engaging in practices that connect them to their origin country while creating spaces easily recognizable as African, especially through smell. This emphasizes the commonality in homemaking within cultures as African students strive to have distinctively African places, easily identifiable by other African, be it through sight, hearing, or smell. Food becomes a transnational link that sustains African students' connection to their cultures back in their origin countries. It also helps to create familiarity and heaven (Duyvendak, 2011) in the home.

## Language and Media

Beyond food and cooking, African students engage in other practices like speaking African languages and consuming media from their countries of origin in the domestic space to facilitate their feeling of home in the US. These activities are heavily influenced by cultural inputs from their origin countries, highlighting the transnational nature of their homemaking process. Abina and her husband speak only Twi (a Ghanaian language) in their domestic space.

Abina: We make sure to speak only in Twi...

AL: Really?

Abina: Yes, of course. We speak only in Twi because that is the only thing that keeps us connected to our group. I don't want to change my accent because I'm in a foreign land. Sometimes when you speak, they'll be like, "what are you trying to say?" So, you need to change your accent for them to hear what exactly you are trying to say. But when I come to the house, all rules are gone... missing. Yes, just our local dialect I mean, that is helping me stay connected to my roots. And that is the only thing I can boast of for now.

Speaking in her local language becomes a way for her to maintain her connection to her origin country and culture. Here, she is aware of the process of adaptation that she is going through, like changes in her accent, and she perceives this as a threat to her connection to her culture, her roots. The home then becomes a place of comfort and privacy where she can speak like she wants to. Also, it underscores the point that home is a space of control (Després, 1991; Douglas, 1991). She and her husband can set their own rules when they get home: "all rules are gone... missing."

Likewise, Essien and his friends in Texas use language in homemaking and also as a way to perform their Ghanaian/African identity.

It's always nice because especially when you have other people from other countries, and they are like wondering because we speak Pidgin. When you... I mean, it's good to speak English, but Pidgin really makes you feel, you know, cool. It makes you..., you know when you're talking to people, and we are trying to speak English to a Ghanaian, it always feels

weird to me. So, I think you know, little things like that make you feel, you know, feel more Ghanaian, you know, it makes you feel good.

Ekow and his friends use Ghanaian or West African pidgin, commonly spoken by the youth in Ghana, to reaffirm their Ghanaian identities. Through using language to feel more Ghanaian, they create familiarity and heaven within their new spaces.

Similarly, Kesse and Kofi speak Krobo, a Ghanaian language spoken by the Dangme ethnic group, whenever they are home; “once we get here, we can speak our language. It’s just nice to be able to have someone to speak Krobo with, you know...” They come from the same town and Ghana and share an apartment in Minnesota. For them, it is crucial to be able to be themselves in their apartment, and one of doing that is to speak their local language. The home then provides a space where African students are free from the scrutiny of the public, where no one will question their language or where they do not need to drop their accents when talking.

Media also plays a significant role in connecting African students to their culture and keeping them up to date with events in the origin country. My participants indicated an increase in their media consumption, including movies, music, and news, from their countries of origin. They compared the current patterns to before they left for the US. Ekow has been in the US for about four years. He lived in Florida but is now studying in Georgia. He observed that he now consumes more Ghanaian media than when he was in Ghana.

I always listen to Ghanaian songs, whether hip hop or gospel... always my Spotify and Pandora list is full of Ghanaian songs. On YouTube, I am watching local videos. When you come here, I like watching those Kumawood (Ghanaian movie industry) movies just to take the stress off and laugh. I feel like I'm following events home. I like following politics back home even though I'm not a politics person, and that's just to know what is going on. So those are things that I do that keeps home always in my perspective... I'm actually enjoying things that in Ghana I wouldn't even listen to... maybe a Sarkodie song or a gospel song. I feel listening to stuff from home is what keeps you... that you belong somewhere while going through the process here, American culture and all that.

Ekow noted a change in his media consumption after he moved to the US. In Ghana, he preferred movies and music from Hollywood, but that changed after his move. Now, he uses Ghanaian media to connect to his culture, something he did not have to do before. Though he was not interested in politics back in Ghana, he now reads the news to keep up with what is happening, to keep his perspective on Ghana. Ekow reveals the efforts he makes to belong to two cultures and places simultaneously. His consumption of Ghanaian media is not to be interpreted as a refusal to integrate into American culture. Instead, he tries to maintain his Ghanaian identity and keep up with events there while also working on making a life here. For him and my other participants, home is capable of being in more than one place (Mallett, 2004). They work on not losing their homes, communities, and connections in their countries of origin.

Thema, on the other hand, loved Ghanaian music and movies even before moving to Ohio. She frequently listens to Ghanaian and African music in her apartment. For her, moving to the US did not cause a change in media consumption habits like Ekow experienced. Even in Ghana, she watches local movies in Ghanaian languages. On YouTube, she watches Ghanaian content, and she feels like she's "kind of in Ghana."

This section showed how language and media are used by African students to connect to the origin country and to bring familiarity into the domestic space. Speaking their local languages and consuming media from their origin countries indicate a level of control and comfort in the home. This shows how the home becomes a backstage for African students, a space where they are not under pressure to conform to American social norms and expectations of integration.

## Home Objects

African international students also realize the critical role material objects play in homemaking. The materiality of the home is expansive, ranging from mundane everyday items like spoons and headwraps to those objects we attach meanings and value to, like paintings and jewelry. On discussions of the home with my participants, the mention of material objects in the domestic space refers to those with meanings and values attached to them. They distinguish between the objects within their domestic spaces; those that are merely utilitarian and those that hold symbolic values. The former could simply be referred to as things within the home and the latter as home objects. For my participants, things play a minor role in achieving a sense of home. Aku tells me that she has few objects that evoke memories of home. These objects she brought with her from Ghana. When I further inquired of things like clothes and earrings, she says:

They are things I use. Yes, I brought some of my clothes with me. Like I have this headwrap I use to cover my hair mostly in the mornings, it came with me from Ghana [laughs]. But I won't say it has any meaning to me. Will I be worried when I lose it? No, I will simply get another one. I just use it, and it does not make me feel any more at home, I guess.

For Aku, clothing pieces like head wraps do not carry much meaning when it comes to homemaking. They are simply things that play little role in generating feelings of home. On the other hand, home objects mark identity and help physically bring culture into the domestic space. Ebo has paintings and other material objects which he got from Ethiopia or are distinctively Ethiopian. He uses them in decorating his home. The import of objects invested with meanings into the domestic space generates feelings and attachment to the home.

For Ebo, the value of home objects is derived from their association with the Ethiopian nation. They signify his nationality and “connects with his homeland.” He also distinguishes the everyday materiality of the home, which serves functional purposes and home objects that are

invested with meanings. "... beyond the paintings and some decorations, I don't think about other things like the couch or bed."

Essien was gifted a Ghanaian flag by an American friend, and he hangs it in his bedroom. The flag becomes a representation of his Ghanaian nationality and evokes feelings of love for his home and country. Here, country and home become conflated as my participants talked about the cultural objects they have in national or even African terms. Ethnic, religious, and other forms of cultural identities converge into national identities and, at times, African identities. The nation and also Africa become central to the identities of African students. However, the values and meanings students attach to home objects are contextualized within the broader socio-cultural milieu of the host country. Essien took down the Ghanaian flags he put out in his room before the interview.

Behind me used to be a Ghanaian flag. It was given to me by a friend. Yeah, an American. I guess they wanted me to feel like, you know, I could have something back home, which was nice. But I had to take it off because I was having the interview. I don't want to look too patriotic. So, I'll definitely put it back up. But that's something that you know, it's really...it's not that explicit, you see it, and you're like hey! But there is this implicit feeling towards... your love back home when you just see it and, you know, even when you are talking with people, and they see it they'll be like: "oh, what's that? A Ghanaian flag" and stuff like that, it creates an implied feeling.

Though the flag reminds him of his home in Ghana and his love for his country, he takes it down to prevent coming across as too patriotic. He worries about coming across as a nationalist as he uses objects associated with the Ghanaian nation in decorating his room. African students are aware of the need to underemphasize one's attachment to their origin country so as not to be seen as opposed to integration. For Essien, having a Ghanaian flag around can be interpreted as him being too attached to Ghana. This further highlights the dynamic and complex homemaking process; African international students attempt to create a home in the US that equally represents

their attachment to both origin and host countries. One way of doing that is by “downplaying their African-ness” when the need be.

Here too, bringing home objects into the domestic space and the decoration of the home are gendered. The men I interviewed downplayed the need for material objects in the home. They showed an even more lack of interest in decorating. For them, home objects are for their affective values. Their role in beautifying the domestic space is not crucial. Ekow, who lives in a student apartment, does not expect beauty or too much satisfaction with his current accommodation regarding the physical unit he inhabits or how things are ordered in it. He stresses the temporariness of his stay there. For him, putting in the effort to create the perfect home will be a waste of time. The perception of permanence, especially for men, plays a huge role in bringing material objects into the home. Ekow thinks decorations and home objects are unimportant in his current apartment, but he hopes to use them in making a home when he gets a more permanent status and place.

No, It's not really important to me here. My focus in the US is more than that. So, I'm here for business. What I need is just a comfortable place to put my head. Those kinds of decorations... they're secondary matters to me. I mean, maybe it will be important to me when I am well settled, and I want to get a house in the US. That's when maybe I would want to have a taste of Ghanaian-ness or African-ness with maybe the portraits. I actually like portraits, but then I wouldn't go and buy expensive portraits and come and put them in a rented apartment... no. If I build my house and I want to have Ghanaian portraits and those kinds of African antiques inside my room... Yes, I love those ones. But my current state that I'm in, those are not my priority.

Being in a temporary state, Ekow expects he will move to a more permanent situation where he will make use of material objects in homemaking. Jojo expressed similar sentiments about having objects in his domestic space. He shares his student apartment with three other roommates and actively refuses to materially invest in his domestic space, both his bedroom and the shared spaces. He expects to move to a different state soon for his Ph.D.

For the women in the study, however, the temporariness of their status as international students has little impact on their decisions to decorate and have home objects in the domestic space. Thema equates comfortability in her space to her ability to decorate and arrange things to her taste. On the importance of having material objects in her home, she talks about the effort she puts into decorating her apartment in Ohio.

Very. So, I'm the kind of person who loves to have my own space. And I want to be comfortable. So, I don't even care if, you know, the other person doesn't want to contribute to anything. Once I am comfortable, I don't care. I will buy whatever I have to buy to make me comfortable. If I need pictures, I will do it. So yes, decorating your room is a big thing. Because you want to enter into your room and go like, oh my god, like, that's your home. Like there's this feeling like, and I love my bed. I love my room. I when I get into my room, I just feel happy. I'm in my space. I'm about to sleep, and I'm happy. And it's just okay for me. And, yeah, so decorating your room is like a big thing for me. I don't know whether for others it's nothing, but for me, it is.

Thema makes a less sharp distinction between everyday things and home objects; for her, they all come together to create an aesthetically pleasing space that she feels comfortable within.

Through her decorations and use of material objects, Thema comes to own her space. The aim of bringing material objects into the home is also to create a space that represents you.

Aku has a “couple of pictures and stuff in her apartment.” She brought some of them from Ghana and got some here. This highlights the transnational nature of homemaking as a collection of material objects from the origin country, host country, and even at times, a third country. Ama studied in Singapore before moving to the US. She currently has “some stuff” she got from Singapore in her dormitory in Connecticut. Abina also realizes that home objects mark one’s identity.

AL: Do you think those objects and decorations are important to you?

Abina: Yes...yes, they are. Sometimes it helps individuals to identify who you are, and I mean to identify a culture. For example, if I am to invite my supervisor to my home... and he sees something that he hasn't seen before and asks me about it, I'll be able to tell him about my culture and my tradition. So, I tried to bring things from Ghana to decorate my



house. They remind you of where you are from and where you are going so that you don't lose track. It will help us as international students and as immigrants to impact our generation. I mean, your kids will grow up and ask, "Mommy, I see this picture. Where was it taken?" They'll want to go to Ghana, and it helps keep the tradition and the history alive. Because without those things, how is my child going to identify their roots? It makes it very difficult for me to tell him about stories and events because he hasn't seen the pictures. But when I portray them in my house, he gets used to it. So, in case I should take him to my country, he will know those things. It will make it very easy for your child to mingle with their relatives anytime you go to your home country... makes it very easy.

Abina recognizes that home objects can be a visual representation of one's identity. In her home in New York, she talked about bringing pictures and objects from Ghana to decorate and help her keep her connection to her culture. She also expressed her desire to buy more Ghanaian artifacts to use in decoration. The stories she tells about the objects are crucial to her as they reaffirm her Ghanaian identity.

Overall, the very presence of home objects is crucial to keeping memories and traditions and can be a way to pass on those stories to others here in the host country. Material objects are imbued with meanings by my participants and these objects are significant in their homemaking process. The objects are not necessarily associated with their ethnic or religious origins. Instead, they come to be viewed as national objects. The nation becomes the primary marker of identity for my participants, and home objects are seen through national lenses. Also, African students use home objects to amplify their identities. However, they also employ strategies like taking them down to downplay their identities so as not to be seen as refusing integration.

### **Privacy**

Control and autonomy are essential in homemaking. This may be even more so with people who have migrated into different cultures. African students employ various strategies to ensure their privacy within their domestic spaces, even if they have roommates. Before moving to his current apartment in Georgia, Ekow drove to his current apartment from Florida to look at

the facilities that the complex has and make sure he will be with a roommate that matches all the preferences he noted on his application. "...once my roommate doesn't give me issues... then I am okay with my place." For Ekow, not giving him issues included not having parties in the apartment, keeping the common areas clean, and respecting each other's private spaces. The focus on these things signals the need for privacy and control within the domestic space.

In her small liberal college in Connecticut, Ama shared her dorm with another student in her first year. When she moved in, she had a conversation with her dormmate about living together. They agreed on the times that they could have others over and also that no boy is to come into their dorm room. Through this conversation, she and her roommate set boundaries not just for visitors but also for themselves. Currently, she has a dorm to herself, and she ensures that her friends inform her before coming over.

When you come and just knock at my door without telling me you are coming, I often open with a sour mood. That way, they can't stay for long and have to leave. I respect their space and tell them in advance before I go over, and I expect them to do the same. What if you come over and I am undressed?

Ama talks about demarcation in terms of respect and having control over who comes into her dorm and when they do. She expects her friends to respect her private space. Her response and lack of hospitality to her friends who come over unannounced are to condition them to respect her private space.

Ada lived with two other roommates in her old apartment, and she also had trouble controlling who gets into her domestic space. She specifically requested an apartment where her roommates will not have pets, "I put that on the application form. I am at times allergic to their fur and hair." However, her roommates brought pets to the apartment, and sometimes their friends also come to visit with their pets. That was part of the reason she had to move. Ada's story relates

to control of space and her inability to determine who gets into the apartment, be it a human or an animal.

Similarly, Fati, a master's student in Minnesota, had to move out of her previous apartment because her roommate did not respect her privacy and boundaries.

She took advantage of me. I will always clean the bathroom and kitchen, and she does nothing. And she just comes into my room and starts talking with me. I never liked that. I am not saying she should not enter my room, but she should at least knock.

Having a roommate who will not stay out of her private space frustrated Fati. She believes they became too familiar with each other. Even at her new place, she still has to deal with her coming without informing her and overstaying her welcome. Kofi and Kesse live together in an apartment in Minnesota, and they developed measures to ensure they do not invade each other's privacy and personal space.

Kesse: Even here, I cannot just walk into his [Kofi's] room like that. Sometimes I am right in my room, but I text him when I need something or want to talk. And when it's okay, I go to his room.

AL: Really? You ask before you enter his room?

Kesse: Yeah, not like officially. Sometimes I knock when someone is over. But why go to his room when I can just text him that we need to leave for church in an hour.

Kofi: Sometimes, I will shout and tell him something from my room. [laughs]. The only place we can all be just like that is the kitchen and the living room. Even when one has classmates over, the other will move to his bedroom.

Through this discussion, Kesse and Kofi reveal how they acknowledge and treat each other's private spaces. Even though they consider themselves to be close friends, they respect each other's privacy within their home. Though they spend much time together, they have their own set of boundaries within the domestic space.

African students also come to know America's norms about privacy and personal space. Essien compares the demarcation of space in the US with that in Ghana. He notes that it is not

that likely to interact with others in the apartment complex; "...everyone just does their thing. Somethings you nod as you pass each other in the hallway, but that is that. But in Ghana, you are all like family in the hostel or dormitory. Here, everyone has their own space." The cultural norms of the US begin to shape how African students perceive privacy.

The need for personal and private spaces was crucial to all my participants. However, the level and extent of personal space needed differed by level of education. For example, students at the Ph.D. level talked about needing their own apartments while the others were okay having roommates. For Ebo, having an apartment to himself is very important:

I did not want to stay in a student apartment complex. I know going for that meant more services, but I prefer to rent from a landlord. Most of those in my apartment are workers, old enough. I do not want to live with students as my neighbors.

Age, financial ability, and the status of being a Ph.D. student factor into the decision to get one's own apartment. For example, Ph.D. students may teach a class or supervise an undergraduate lab session. There is the need to mark themselves as separate from the undergraduate students they teach. One way of doing that is to get an apartment to themselves, indicating their maturity. Ebo has the means to rent a one-bedroom apartment, so he does not get to deal with roommates, particularly undergraduates who can be "childish" at times. He had to forgo the benefits that come with renting in a student apartment complex. Most Ph.D. students teach their classes, and living in student apartments will not be ideal for the status they occupy. Ebo also feels that it is just right to have a place to himself. Staying in dormitories and student apartment complexes "is for undergrads." He is old enough and is at the stage where he needs to have his place.

Thema moved out of her previous house because she felt it became too crowded and she got little space to herself. She lived with three other Ghanaian students, and she enjoyed living

there. However, with becoming a Ph.D. student, she needed to make the choice of having a place where she can enjoy her privacy.

Okay, so um... before coming to this apartment, I lived in a house which was off-campus with three other Ghanaians, and I just felt it was too crowded for me. Mind you, it was three girls [including herself] and one guy. You know, girls have a lot of things. A lot! I have a lot of things, and I love my space. So, I just felt like I needed a two-bedroom apartment. Because I just feel like four is just too much for me.

For Thema, the need for more space for herself came with getting into a Ph.D. program where she now gets a full funding package, including a tuition waiver from her department. In her M.A program, she was partially funded and had to work outside her department to substitute her income. Hence, now that she can afford more space, she moved out of her old crowded apartment.

Ada, also a Ph.D. student, plans to move into a one-bedroom apartment eventually. She recently moved to her new apartment, which she shares with two other ladies. Talking of her old apartment, she said, “when I started living there, it was okay. But it was now too small, and I wanted a walk-in closet and needed more space in my room.” She decided to move partly because she knows one of her current roommates, an African. Though she is not currently in a one-bedroom apartment, Ada thinks that is the next thing to do in terms of housing. “Living in a single room apartment is expensive,” she tells me, and she just saved and bought a car. Ada understands that there is a need to have your own space as a Ph.D. student, “you are also growing, and you need to act like it.” Ada considers age as a key reason why she needs a place to herself.

However, the temporariness of their stay in the US also conditions whether African students decide to get a one-bedroom apartment. This especially impacts the choice to get a

furnished or unfurnished apartment. Beyond not having the means to move into a single room apartment, Ada reflects on the temporary nature of her stay in Florida and the US:

If you rush and get your own house, you will buy a lot of stuff to fill it with. What happens if you have to move to a different state or even back home? I do not know what will happen after school, so it does not make sense to start acting like I am going to be here forever.

Here Ada touches on the uncertainty most international students have about their stay in the US after their studies. She thinks that getting her own house is a step towards putting down roots in a place and worries that that may not be feasible in her position. Ada believes that getting a single bedroom apartment that she can furnish will give her more privacy and control, yet she worries about how that effort and cost might be for nothing when she has to move. All my participants talked about the uncertainty of their stay impacts their practices of privacy in the domestic space.

In referring to getting an apartment where he has more space, Jojo tells me that:

You cannot make these decisions now. Who knows what will happen after school? I might move to New York or get a job in Canada. Whatever happens, it is highly unlikely that I will stay here... Why bother getting a place and buying a lot of stuff. That will make moving difficult. Imagine moving back home, and I have my own fridge, bed, and things like that. What will I do with them? I like a student apartment where it is all furnished; that way, when it is time to go, I just go.

Like Jojo, African students do not necessarily interpret privacy as getting more space to themselves. Instead, they employ strategies to ensure their boundaries in the domestic space are respected. The two participants who are not on temporary visas – Ebo and Abina – talked about ensuring their privacy and control in the domestic space by getting apartments and furnishing them. This further highlights how temporariness and permanence shape the homemaking process of African international students.

African international students need their personal space, and even in shared apartments and dormitories, they find ways to demarcate their spaces. Given that they are on temporary visas, they are wary of getting their own apartments or houses, especially as they have to furnish

them themselves. Instead, they opt for student apartments that are already furnished. To ensure that their spaces are respected, they adopt specific strategies. Like Ama, they condition their friends and colleagues by presenting a sour mood when they visit without informing them in advance. And when all that fails, they move to new apartments where they can regain control over their domestic spaces.

### **The Home of African Students**

For African students, the home comes to be an important space that serves diverse purposes in their bid to integrate into the host society. It enables them to recreate a space that is reminiscent of their homes back in the origin country. From this perspective, African students' homes in the US are transnational; the space and the collection of the materials and practices within it connect them to their origin country. They mainly engage in practices that underscore the mobility and multiplicity of home. Home is mainly expressed through the practices, the feelings, and the emotions that they evoke. Through cooking foods from the origin country, the use of their local languages, the consumption of media, and home objects, African students' homemaking embraces the cultural norms from both the origin and host countries.

This chapter focused on the ways that African students make their domestic spaces home. I discussed how homemaking practices and home objects enable African students to simultaneously sustain their connection to their countries of origin while integrating into their host communities and the US. In the next chapter, I will discuss home at the interactional and social level, highlighting how African students' communities and networks become central to their integration processes through agentic practices.

**CHAPTER SIX:**  
**NETWORKS, COMMUNITY, AND CULTURE – AGENCY IN INTEGRATION AND**  
**BELONGING**

The networks of African international students are diverse, including people from the origin and host countries. These networks and the communities that African international students are involved in create the third dimension of the home, heaven (Duyvendak, 2011). It encompasses the interactional and relational aspects of the home. This chapter considered home as embedded within the interactive practices and interpersonal relationships of international students in their communities and cities. I focus on how African international students challenge the assimilationist model of incorporation into the host nation by highlighting the purposive and agentic practices of integration.

**“Finding My Kind of People”: In Search of International Student Communities**

Community and interpersonal relations are crucial to international students as they aid in coping with adaptation and navigating their new localities. International students' communities provide assistance to one another and help create a sense of belonging in the host country that is not entirely delinked with the attachment to the origin country. In adjusting and settling into the host country, international student communities proved very useful to my participants. Thema talks about the immense support she received from the community she found in Ohio.

My experience so far has been great. That is my experience because of the community that we have here. So, when you come here as an international student, as a Ghanaian student, you don't know what to do. You don't know you have to go to the Social Security or where to go and get your social security number, your driver's license. You need your ID. You



need this, and you need that. No one is helping you. But here in Athens, when you come, you even have people who have giveaways. Like, you need a couch, they'll get a couch. You need a study table; they'll help you out. They will help you get an apartment. So, the community [Ghanaian students' community] here is so great. I had fun when I came because you always have anything you needed.

In moving to Ohio, Thema found a community of Ghanaian students that aided her in settling in. The Ghanaian community she found in Ohio, and her university was particularly instrumental during her initial stages of adaptation. Other identities derived from ethnicity and religion fade out to give way to national-based identities in the US.

African students tend to form networks with other students who are from their countries. The networks become integral during their initial stages of settling in when they come to the US. Such national-based networks and communities begin even before African students arrive in the US. Ada established contact with Nigerian students in the US before arriving: "I joined a WhatsApp group for African international students [mainly Nigerian students], and I talked to some people. So, before I got here, there were people I knew, and we became friends." Mainly, my participants relied on communication technology and social media platforms like WhatsApp to reach out to students from their origin countries. The people in the networks Ada created before coming helped her get an apartment and took her around to get her social security. Though her friend group has become diverse with students from different countries, she maintains many of her Nigerian friends.

African international students are proactive in community building as they reach out to other international students, mostly their co-nationals, before arriving in the US. Kesse and Kofi talked about the Ghanaian student community they found in Minnesota and how that has been central to their adaptation.

Kesse: You find these people, sometimes even before you arrive. I applied to this school partly because I know someone here, and she encouraged me to come... We don't think

about this when we want to have our education abroad, but after you get here, having friends and people who also come from Ghana matters. It can make all the difference. Like we do a lot of stuff together because we share this Ghanaian culture together... you know

They also began establishing their networks before they arrived in the US. For Kesse, having other Ghanaian students around matters a lot since they share a similar culture. Being in a co-national student community helps African students engage actively in transnational practices of homemaking (Brown, 2009). Kesse and Kofi anticipate that without the presence and support of a Ghanaian community, they will have to sacrifice most of the Ghanaian practices they include in homemaking.

Aku also has found a community of Ghanaian students in her university in Minnesota. She expressed similar sentiments about her Ghanaian students' community; "... they are there to help you out. It's like we have this thing that unifies us. In Ghana, we would have been strangers, but once you get here, there are other Ghanaians... who understand and help you settle in."

Beyond national-based networks, African students also form communities based on their shared African identity. African students' communities mostly rise out of the shared and unique process of racialization that African students go through in the US (Lê Espiritu, 2019). A panethnic identity is then formed in response to the simplistic understanding that Americans have of Africa. Hence, the shared identity that African students form in the US is not so much associated with the continent but rather based on their similar experiences. In talking about the racialization of African students, Essien makes the observation:

They barely recognize that we have our own issues too. That they have to be dealt with differently from African American issues. We are all Black, so we must be the same, right? So, we decided to form something little among ourselves where we will be able to be just us and be us... Because the space is different for us as international students when you go out there... that's why we decided to form our own community.

Here, Essien notes that his university in Texas aggregates students by race and ignores how other aspects of their lives, like being an international student, shape their experiences and needs. The Black Students' Union on his campus centers the voices of African American students without any due recognition of the needs of African students. For African students, the racialization process that they go through in the US does not negate their other experiences as international students.

The racialization of African students often comes as a shock, and they are unequipped to deal with racist acts or expressions targeted toward them (Bagley & Young, 1988; Fries-Britt, George Mwangi, & Peralta, 2014). Forming communities based on their shared African identity can be a way to deal with their experiences of racism as a group. Thema became conscious of her Blackness and what it means when she got to Ohio.

There are some things that I don't think or we don't think about when we are in Ghana. When I was in Ghana, I didn't ever think that I was a Black girl. I never thought, you know, I'm a Black woman. When I came to America, that's when I started seeing that, oh, I'm actually a Black girl. Oh, is this how I actually talk? Like I talk, and someone is actually like, "Huh?" You know, they can't really hear you when you talk.

Recognizing her racialization, Thema realizes that she is not only Ghanaian or African, or even an international student. She is also a Black woman, a marker imposed on her here in the US – becoming Black shapes the experiences of African students and impacts their sense of worth and achievement.

Aku feels singled out and worries about becoming a token: an embodied symbol of racial equality. She tells me, "once they see you, all they think about is that African girl. You are nothing else but that Black girl from Africa. They seem happy that you are here and all, but it doesn't feel that good when you are nothing but your continent." Aku's experiences of racialization dismisses the other ways she identifies and considers here as simply Black. In Connecticut, Ama has also noticed that race plays a huge role in American society; "the idea of race is ingrained... into

American society”. This, she feels, has influenced how she is perceived and how she interacts and creates connections with people.

And with my observation, I realized that most White people... they still find it hard to approach People of Color. Because they just don't know how to react around us... I don't have so many Black American friends. Because, as Africans, there's still like some friction between us. Even though people would be like, “you're all Black, so you all should mingle.” No, I feel like our mindsets are different... I'm basically African.

Though Ama tells me that she associates with whoever has an open mind, she also notes how race issues shape her interactions and friend groups. Her experience of racialization has resulted in the affirmation and strong association of her African identity. In part, embracing an African identity can be a way of challenging the racial category imposed on her in the US. In opposition to the simple assumption that she is Black, she says, “I'm basically African.” By centering their African identity, African students object to their racialization and highlight how other factors like being international students result in their different and unique experiences.

The communities that rise out of these shared experiences of racialization provide resources and support to African students in dealing with their experiences of racism. Thema and her African student friends in Ohio offer emotional support to one another when they experience racism and microaggressions.

We talk to each other, and we try to understand why they will say or do those things. Some of these students here, the White kids and even the African Americans, we don't know what they're saying. We feel like it's just something normal. Why would we even get pissed off? That's like it's not really racism. They just don't know what they're doing. And sometimes it gets to us, okay. And with the experience of Africans, we are coming from a totally different background, you know. We need to be relaxed. We ask ourselves, “Can we be flexible?” Because we know that this is a totally new system, and we have to adapt to it.

Through sharing their experiences, African students try to rationalize the discriminatory acts they experience from their interactions with Americans and other non-Africans. Through these African

students' communities, my participants do not have to do the emotional work that comes with racialization alone.

There are larger aspects of the international student experiences that transcend national and continental identities. Resulting from their status as foreign students, my participants talk of the meaningful connections they have established with other international students. Ama finds it easier to have conversations with other international students: "...because we all kind of know how the system treats us, we know about our struggles coming here and we know about the different scenarios we're put in, it's easier to strike a conversation with like an international student." For Ama, international students have a lot in common to talk about, and their conversations are of interest to all parties involved. International students can talk about the process of visa acquisition, the families they left behind, and their goals for the future. From her experience, Americans are "not ready to learn and are comfortable in their bubble." This makes it difficult to interact with Americans.

Ekow, who has been in the US for about four years, reflects on the shared experiences that enable international students to connect easily.

There are challenges unique to only international students. People born here can only appreciate them from theory; they don't know in practice... the process of even getting a visa and coming all the way here, settling here, the initial shock with... So, we kind of have similar problems... we discuss among ourselves and find strategies. It is easier opening up to international students. I feel that having common issues to talk about and deal with... kind of brings international students together.

Like Ama, Ekow also believes that American students cannot fully grasp his experiences as an international student, making it a bit difficult to build relationships. Most of his friends here in the US are international students. Even after moving to Georgia, he still keeps in touch with the friends he had in Florida, "I had Indian friends and others who were from Asian countries... I still talk to them."

Fati is also friends with a lot of international students in Montana. Thinking of her friend group, she tells me that she is less likely to consider her American colleagues as her friends.

Americans are receptive as well, but at the end of the day, you kind of feel a bond with people that are in the same kind of pool with you, right? All those people are immigrants. At the end of the day, it's like you can relate well with people in the same kind of pool with you, like I said in the beginning, so it's not deliberate. But I feel connected with these people.

Fati does not deliberately seek friendship with other international students, but the everyday experiences they share foster a stronger bond than with her American colleagues. A central aspect of the communities that African students form is to be with people who understand them and share their perspectives. Aku attributes her smooth transitioning to the international students' community that helped her when she moved to Minnesota.

I did not know anybody. I have a few friends who were already here, and they introduce me to others, even some who are not Ghanaians. When you are all international students here, you get each other, and it's easy for them to help you than your American friends.

Having others who understand her experience of settling in ensured that she received the support she needed. Similarly, Jojo feels the need to interact with others who understand him. He finds it "difficult to talk to the Americans here. I mean, we can talk about class and those things, but when it gets to some stuff, they won't even understand. You need people who understand you."

My interview participants felt there are aspects of the international student experience that American students cannot understand. Abina talks about instances of microaggression that occur when she interacts with Americans and how they frustrate her.

It's very difficult. It's difficult because of the culture clashing. And I'm not saying they discriminate because they don't; it is not intentional. Sometimes you yourself feel like you're not invited. For example, at our workplace, even though everybody seems friendly, and stuff like that, I find it very difficult to socialize... I wouldn't use the word intimidated, but I feel I wouldn't be recognized, or I wouldn't fit into their friend group. Here, each man for himself, God for us all... so it makes you very it makes it very difficult for you to communicate with them. It's very weird when you're talking to them. They always ask, "What are you trying to say?" Anytime I try to tell them that I'm from Ghana, they tried to

misinterpret it to Guyana. Immediately they say Guyana, then I'm like, I don't need to go further to explain what the difference is. Because I just accept it, we'll take it as Guyana.

Like Ama, Abina also feels that Americans are not open-minded enough and make little effort to appreciate her culture. She interprets her American colleagues' lack of effort to note the difference between Ghana and Guyana as noting been interested in her. She increasingly finds herself interacting more with other international students.

Nevertheless, the communities that African international students build, be it with co-nationals, African students, or other international, are not without their internal conflicts and dynamics. Given that they are from different ethnic, religious, and educational backgrounds, they do not always share similar perspectives. Their shared identities like nationality, race, or foreign student status do not necessarily result in completely cohesive communities. Fati recently moved from her previous apartment because her roommate, also Ghanaian, does not understand her need for privacy and personal space. For Fati, the need to be close to other Ghanaian students does not trump the need for her privacy in her home.

Ebo, who has been in the US for about 15 years, has a deep appreciation for culture. Before moving for his undergraduate studies in the US, he lived in Ethiopia with his family. For Ebo, there is a mismatch when other Ethiopian/African students here in the US alienate themselves from their cultures.

I like culture. So, you could have an Ethiopian who's lived here for 30 years, and they don't really have much of the culture. And for me, that adds nothing other than just, you know, cordiality and to be an acquaintance. It doesn't add anything of value to me. So yeah, I tend to gravitate towards others who I perceive, you know, know where they're from and have a culture, this and that.

Ebo thinks that sharing a common nationality is not enough to establish a meaningful relationship. He expects African students and other international students to be able to express their cultural identities.

This observed internal difference and dynamics among African international students challenge the monolithic representation of international students. Essien addressed this when he talked about how his university in Texas puts all African and Black American students on campus into one group, Black Students' Union. "... for someone who doesn't know Blacks, they simply assume that we are all one, the same. There are differences among Africans. I don't know a lot of things that go on in other African countries." He is aware that the lack of attention to the differences among Africans creates some discord within the union. Within their Black students' Union and African students' communities, nationality can sometimes cause factions. He and his Ghanaian colleagues are trying to set up a Ghanaian students' association to cater to their unique needs.

Religiosity can also result in intra-group discord. Kofi and Kesse are religious and are conscious about mingling with the Ghanaian/African community in their university. They are members of the African students' group on their campus in Minnesota. However, some of the activities and events that the group organizes do not agree with the faith. They, therefore, are selective about when to participate.

Kesse: I will say I join them like 30 to 40 percentage of the time. They organize dances and parties where they don't dress or act appropriately. They rarely hold church programs which is surprising because we Africans, we are very religious. I get that they are in a new place and they want to have fun, but that is not my kind of fun. There are some other students who are not Ghanaians or even African that we go to church with. We hang out with them more times.

Similarly, Kofi goes to the soccer games that the group organizes but does not join them for the parties and outings. For Kesse and Kofi, Christianity is significant to their identities. They refuse to partake in the events organized by their community when they conflict with their perception of a Christian life. They do not entirely disassociate themselves from the African community; they simply are selective on when to participate in their activities.



Generally, African students tend to form communities with others who share their experiences and appreciate their perspectives. There are three main types of communities and networks that they are engaged in. First, they gravitate to students who are co-nationals. Mainly, they rely on students from their origin country for material and social support, especially in their initial stages of settling in. Some of their contacts are formed before they arrive in the US using modern communication technologies. The second type of community is based on their African identity. My participants talk of engaging in African students' communities to navigate the racialization process they go through in the US. Communities centered on their shared experiences as African students' sources of emotional support in dealing with racism. The last identified type of community is with other international students. Here, nationality and race do not feature prominently. Instead, the typical experiences common to all international students facilitate the connections that African students make. Nevertheless, these communities are not immune to intra-group fractions and discord. This indicates that shared national, racial, or foreign student identities do not mean African students form completely cohesive communities.

### **City Culture**

African international students are very conscious of the cultures of the cities and towns they live in. The choice to integrate and feel at home seems to be shaped mainly by what Brown-Saracino (2018) calls city ecology. She uses the term to refer to the distinct character of cities like the abundance and acceptance of a particular group within a locale, the place narratives, and the demography and cultural form of the city. Studying how Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer (LBQ) women perform their sexualities, she argues that city ecology "shapes what it feels like to be a sexual minority..." (p. 5) in a particular place. My participants exhibit to varying levels an awareness of the ecologies of the cities their universities and colleges are in and talk about how

they influence their choice to integrate. Choice of integration is emphasized here because they often mentioned how they do not feel comfortable with the city cultures they find themselves in and make little to no effort to integrate.

While studying for his bachelor's degree in Ghana, Jojo came to Boston on an exchange program for a year. Currently, he is in a master's program in Florida. He compares his experiences in Boston to those in Florida. He does not like the "vibe" in Florida and wishes to move back to Boston or any other place in the Northeastern region of the US for his doctoral studies. Jojo talks about the people he encountered in Boston as more informed about Africa and do not make him always stand out:

The people in Boston know a lot. I was in Tufts, and they do not act like this is the first time they are hearing about Ghana or Africa. There is also a large African community over there, so I won't always be the odd one out. I don't like the way things are run in this area. Maybe I just do not fit in. I do not have a lot of people who have things in common with me, and that's a big deal to me.

Jojo looks at the general culture of the city to determine if he can make a home there. He talks fondly of Boston and portrays it as a city where he can fit in. He stresses that he does not necessarily need to have other Africans around, but just other people who share similar interests. Nevertheless, he does not deny that the visible presence of an African community in Boston and the anonymity that such a community offers is a pulling factor. The ecology of Boston makes it more like home. For Jojo, there is an abundance and acceptance of African students in Boston; Africans feature in the narratives of the city so much that Bostonians possess a fair knowledge about Africa; within the larger demography of Boston, he can find people with whom he shares similar interests with. As he puts it, "I like the weather in Orlando, but Boston feels much like home because I found a community there that I share many similarities with."

Ebo, like Jojo, also feels that Tampa is not the right place for him. He will settle down here if he must, but it will not be his first choice. He has lived in other cities in the US before moving to Tampa for his doctoral studies.

Austin is by far the greatest city; the culture is kinda laid back. Austin feels like it's closer to home, and the geography is similar.

He later tells me that Austin has a culture, "you know what it means to be someone from Austin." This is similar to his city in Africa, which has a culture that all share regardless of ethnicity or religion. That is not the case in Tampa; there is no identifiable culture around which daily life is built. For Ebo, he far prefers Austin and will really like to get a job there after school. Ada likewise talks about how the weather in Tampa is perfect for her. She visited her family in Canada once and hated the cold. She tells me that she does not know Tampa enough to decide if she would like to stay here after school.

Living in Tampa before moving to Georgia, Ekow finds it challenging to integrate into his current town. He loved the cityscape in Tampa and felt it has a large Black and foreign student population. He describes his current town as a "pure college town where everything is built around the university." Given the choice, he would be in Tampa: "I love Tampa. I still drive down there to meet my friends and enjoy the city." Ama also feels like she knows enough about Hartford, and she has decided not to stay there. She also does not like the vibe in Hartford,

There is a form of race thing going on here. People associate by race, Whites with Whites and Blacks with Blacks. Me, I find myself being more with other international students and only have a few Black American friends. That was not how things were in Singapore. I was able to be friends with everyone.

Ama studied for her international baccalaureate (IB) in Singapore before coming to the US. She compares her experiences in Singapore to those in Hartford. For her, Hartford is very divisive,

mainly in terms of race. She goes on to tell me, “I have been to other cities in Connecticut, and I like them much better. I might want to stay in New Haven than here in Hartford.”

This shows that international students are very much aware of the cities and towns they live in and, to some extent, make conscious choices to integrate or not. Most studies on international students measure their social networks to determine their level of integration (Brown, 2009; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; McFaul, 2016; Rui & Wang, 2015), but little attention is paid to how city cultures influence integration. For example, Jojo explicitly stated that he has no friends in Orlando. When asked what the reason might be, he tells me that he does not want to make a home in Orlando. This shows that international students can prevent or limit their attachment to a place, especially when they feel they cannot fit into the culture. Even though Jojo is the only one who actively refuses to integrate and make friends, my other participants' perception of the cities their universities are situated in shapes their integration and homemaking practices.

### **I Choose How I Integrate: African Students' Agency in Integration**

In discussing international students' integration, their agency is often overlooked (Tran & Vu, 2018). The host nation and its institutions assume a paternalistic approach where international students are perceived as very willing to integrate at all costs. My participants stress their self-awareness in integrating. They employ various strategies to pace their adaptation process and ensure that they do not entirely lose their cultures. The home practices in themselves are strategies to create a transnational form of integration, resulting in a space where African students can actively participate in their origin and host cultures. They also choose who is included in their networks and control the boundaries of their communities.

By establishing an association that will be just for Ghanaian/African students, Ekow and his friends are instituting a collective voice that will articulate the issues and experiences peculiar to them. They plan to be officially registered with the university and become recognized as a group different from African American students. Their efforts exhibit the consciousness of African students when it comes to their incorporation into the host society. It also highlights their need for a space to be “just us”; a space where they can collectively engage in transnational practices of belonging without any form of external pressure to conform to American norms.

Even individually, African international students take charge of their integration. Not finding a community in Orlando, Jojo is focused on moving to Boston or a similar city where he can fit in. Abina also disassociates from people she sees as intolerant to her culture. She refers to New York as having a large population of international students and immigrants and feels like she has options in how she integrates. She can choose her community and limit her interactions with others who belittle her culture and national identity. In a city where she hopes to start a family, she takes control over who is included in her network.

My participants consider their future plans when engaging in integrative practices. Often, they refrain from acquiring material objects that mark permanency, like renting unfurnished apartments. The temporary status of international students and the uncertainty of where to go after school influence African students' integration. Temporariness informs the decisions they make in integration and the forms of integration they pursue. They focus on more relational aspects rather than the material indicators of incorporation into the host country. They also create communities and guard the boundaries of those communities to have spaces where they can engage in transnational practices. Finally, they are aware of city ecology and decides if they want to put in the effort to acclimate to their host cities or towns.

In this chapter, I discussed communities and networks that African students build in the US. The three main types of communities – co-national, African, and international student – all indicate that African students engage in communities that encourage a transnational approach to homemaking. For instance, through their association with co-nationals and other African students, they engage in activities that connect them to the origin country. The very fact that African students are more likely to associate with other international students also highlights the heaven aspect of home (Duyvendak, 2011). Their social networks enable them to be themselves, interact with people who understand and appreciate their perspectives. African students are also conscious of the cultures of the cities they reside in and assess their fit into those cultures. Their perception of city culture greatly impacts how they integrate. This further exhibits the agency of African students in integrating.

I have so far demonstrated that for the African student, the home is embedded in the practices and networks they engage in. Unlike common assumptions, they take charge of their integration. Through a transnational approach to homemaking, they integrate into the US while also maintain meaningful connections to their countries of origin. In the following chapter, I will summarize my analysis and conclude with a reflection on the different understandings of homemaking and the integration of international students in the US.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN:**

### **CONCLUSION**

The current thesis aimed to uncover how African international students at the individual level integrate into the US through the process of homemaking while also investigating how corporate institutions shape the discourse on international students in the US. For the purposes of this research, I defined homemaking through its materiality, routine practices, and interactional aspects. I applied a transnational framework where African students rely on cultural norms and practices from both the origin and host countries to make their homes. In this chapter, I summarize the key findings from my analysis. I conclude the thesis by reflecting on the divergent understandings of home comparing international students and corporate institutions. Finally, I discuss the study's implications, its limitations, and directions for future research.

#### **Key Findings**

In this thesis, I explored how African students integrate and develop a sense of belonging in the host country through homemaking. I interviewed 13 African students enrolled in US universities and colleges. Beyond that, I studied the institutional discourse on international students by analyzing the contents of 54 online blog entries on websites run by two companies that specialize in international students' issues. My research focused on the agency and consciousness of international students in their homemaking and integration. I also examine the discourses that these institutions have on international students' homemaking in the US.

I began with an introduction that provided an overview of the study and detailed the outline of the thesis. I discussed the relevant literature in chapter two and discussed the methods used in the study in chapter three. I present the findings from my online content analysis in chapter four. The 56 analyzed blog entries stressed the limited time international students have in the US, encouraging them to explore the country and take in as much as possible. Here, international students are mainly discussed as long-term tourists and urged to document their experiences to help remember them when they return to their origin countries. Temporariness is, however, not seen as a complete barrier to making a home or integrating. The blogs provided instructions on how international students can integrate, emphasizing the need to limit their involvement in their own culture and take on an American way of life. Tips are provided on how to talk like a North American and how to have authentic American experiences. The blogs carry two main narratives that are conflicting. First, international students are expected to leave after their studies and, as such, do not need to establish a home here in the US. On the other hand, the second narrative encourages students to make a home even within their limited time in the US. I argue that these two seemingly contradicting narratives form a larger discourse that pursues American universities' goal of internationalization. The narrative that international students can make a home in the US portrays American universities as perfect places for international education. Once arrived, the narrative on temporariness discourages the development of any meaningful attachment of international students.

In chapter five, I discussed the strategies that African international students employ in making their domestic spaces feel like home. They engaged in transnational practices to develop familiarity and create haven (Duyvendak, 2011) in the domestic space. Food and cooking played a significant role in feeling at home, highlighting the sensory aspects of the home. Through smell



and taste, the domestic space becomes familiar and a place of comfort. The ability to speak one's language and consume media from their origin country also contributes to the homemaking process. Material objects that are relevant to feelings of home are classified as home objects, showing that objects in the home have more than just functional values; they also hold affective values and are crucial in the meaning-making process of the home. Home objects also serve as (national) identity markers, and bringing them into the domestic space is associated with permanence. Creating boundaries and controlling who gets into the domestic space helps African international students gain control and generate a feeling of safety. Gender also shapes how the home is made. There are gender roles and expectations associated with homemaking. Women are more likely to prepare "authentic" African dishes. They also feel the need to decorate and have home objects that evoke emotions. In comparison, men do not feel the need to prepare "authentic" African foods themselves; they turn to restaurants, family and friends, and church members for such foods. Through these practices and home objects, African students do not only make the domestic space feel like home but turn it into a home.

Chapter six focuses on the more social and interactional dimensions of the home. Community and networks in the host country were identified as important in feeling at home by all my participants. They express the need to have a community that understands and shares their experiences. Hence, they gravitate to co-national, African, and other international students. The communities African students form also helps in dealing with their experiences of discrimination and racialization. Finally, African international students expressed a sharp awareness of the cultures of the cities they live in. Their perception of city culture and their fit into it influences how they integrate, if at all. Of crucial significance are the presence of a sizable African community and a positive city discourse on Africans and other international students. Through

selective integration practices and the temporariness of the stay in the US, African international students pursue a form of integration that is not tied to a particular geographical place.

### **Individual and Institutional Understandings of Home**

The discussion above indicates that African students perceive home very differently from the blogs. Notions of home and how it is constructed individually and culturally impact integration and feelings of belonging. At the societal and national levels, international students are excluded from permanent homemaking in the US. This form of exclusion begins even before they arrive in the country. International students are expected to show proof of attachment to their origin country during the visa application process. However, the experiences and narratives of African students indicate that even within this restrictive framework of homemaking and integration, international students engage in homemaking through different means. I identify and discuss three main points at which both groups – African international students and the blogs, diverge in their approach to home and integration.

First, the blogs talk of home as rooted in place, whereas African students conceive of home as a set of practices and networks. At the institutional level, the home is perceived as permanently anchored to a geographical place and cannot be moved. The home is contextualized through its physicality and materiality. The sheer collection of the material aspects of the home makes it bulky and not conducive to constant movements. Hence, the blogs encouraged international students to rent the material objects in their domestic spaces as they are limited in their ability to make a home attached to a place in the US. However, for international students, the home is a collection of those practices and networks that create feelings of comfort, control, and security (Després, 1991; Mallett, 2004). They focus on the practices that establish familiarity (Duyvendak, 2011) and invest in the social networks and communities they have. The home then

becomes mobile and can go with them everywhere they decide to be even more so with the advances in technology (Lim & Pham, 2016). They refrain from acquiring material objects that can limit their mobility since they are often undecided on their future migration trajectories. For African students, going back or staying are both options they consider and will decide when they can make the best decisions at the end of their education. They, therefore, do not rule out making a home in the US as they may decide to stay. They also engage meaningfully with their networks and communities in the origin country since it is likely that they will return. To achieve this, they detach home from geography and materiality. They perceive it through the practices and networks that connect them to both the origin and host countries (Binaisa, 2011, 2013b).

Also, the issue of the singularity versus the multiplicity of home contributes to the different understandings of home. The blogs discuss home as singular, only occurring at a particular place and at a particular time. For international students to make a home here in the US is to unmake their homes in the origin country concurrently. However, African international students recognize that home can be in multiple places simultaneously (Mallett, 2004). Therefore, they engage in practices to establish new homes here in the US (Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen, 2012; Othman et al., 2014) and preserve the homes they left in the origin country (Binaisa, 2013b). African international students are able to keep and sustain their homes in the origin country while also making new homes here, homes that are often mobile. Therefore, their ways of homemaking do not indicate that they will inevitably remain in the US after their education but rather allows them to choose where to go. If the home can be in multiple places, they can return to their origin country, stay in the host country, or even move to a third country.

The main point of departure between the two groups is that the blogs promote an assimilationist approach when discussing the incorporation of international students into the US

while African students perceive home through a transnational lens. At the institutional level, making a home is equated with permanence. The blogs fail to recognize that the permanence of home is also expressed through its continuity, where individuals use practices and relationships to continue the homemaking process even when they move (Després, 1991). Hence, the temporariness of their stay in the US will make it difficult, if not impossible, for international students to make a home. In cases where students engage in homemaking practices, they must fully adopt American cultural values and norms. To make a home is to stay permanently in the US, and students who do that must fully immerse themselves into American culture. Hence, students are taught and coached on how to become American. The adopted assimilationist approach, which is common in American migration literature and policy (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013), dismisses the diverse cultures of international students and centers American values and customs in their incorporation into the host society. However, African students perceive their integration as influenced by both origin and host country cultures (Binaisa, 2013b; Owusu, 2003). Their integration into the US does not lead to their disintegration from or even necessarily lessen their attachment or involvement in their origin countries (Collyer, Hinger, & Schweitzer, 2020). They maintain their connections to and networks in the origin country while simultaneously pursuing integration in the host country. For African students, national borders do not prevent their involvement and attachment to various places and communities. Transnationalism as an analytical framework and system of practices that shift focus from the nation to other units that defy national borders is a more appropriate research tool in studying the international student experience, especially at the micro-level (Basch et al., 2005; Levitt & Schiller, 2004). The overwhelming majority of studies on international students in the US apply

acculturation frameworks (Tran & Vu, 2018), but they are unable to adequately capture the complex experiences of their subjects.

These different understandings of home and integration can impact international students' experiences, educational performance, and general well-being. Previous studies have shown that international students are prone to isolation and homesickness, resulting in adverse outcomes (Patron, 2014; Yan & Pei, 2018). Attempts to aid the smooth settling in and adaptation of international students center American values and norms without any due consideration of their needs (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The observed gap between African students and the blogs in how they perceive home and integration further proves that the voices and experiences of international students are not seriously considered even in issues that directly impact them. The expert positions that the staff of these companies take put them in vantage spots to influence the larger discourse on international students' issues and experiences in the US. The assimilationist understanding of home and integration can limit the integration and sense of belonging of international students. This is because integration options provided to international students will be "all or nothing." To fit into US society, international students must let go of their cultures. Given the temporary status of international students, and their willingness to hold onto their cultures, such assimilationist approaches could further isolate them. Therefore, it is crucial that the gap between them and international students be bridged so they can offer services and interventions that are more helpful to international students. Scholarly works on international students will significantly benefit from transnational theories and the centering of the agency and consciousness of their subjects.

This research challenges the taken-for-granted assumption that international students lack agency and cannot actively pursue integration (Koehne, 2005; Tran & Vu, 2018). Studies that

measure the adaptation of international students use American standards. This almost certainly results in international students being portrayed as incapable of navigating the barriers they face in integrating. But my findings show that African students develop their own strategies in dealing with the barriers they face. By applying transnational theory in studying international students, the often overlooked ways of shaping their own integration will be highlighted.

### **Implications**

For international students, the primary motive for relocating to a new country is to study. However, the lives and experiences of international students are not limited to the classroom or even just the university. Through their interactions and everyday activities, they engage in other modes of learning and knowing, an experiential form of learning that spans various geographical scales. Therefore, researchers must acknowledge the vast, though constantly restricted and bordered, landscapes within which international students live and learn in studying international students. My research considered the home as a major site of integration and belonging, concepts that are critical aspects of the international student experience. By studying the homemaking practices of international students, the findings of my study contribute to and challenge some assumptions in sociological and migration research.

My research contributes to the theoretical conceptions of the home as a site of control and agency; the home as shaped by cultural values and norms; the home as performed and lived; and the home as multi-sited. Douglas (1991) wrote on the home as “bringing some space under control” (p. 289). Similarly, Després (1991) conceived the home as a space where individuals have control to act upon and modify their dwelling to reflect their taste and values and the agency to express their identities. In studying African students, the home comes to be perceived as a place under their control and where they can express their African identities without any

pressure to do otherwise. The home then becomes a crucial space for the international student. It is a space within which they have the power and freedom to simply be themselves. Even with constraints imposed by the physical structure of the building, or the social expectations of international students, African students engage in practices and use material objects to indicate their control of space (Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen, 2012). The cultures of the origin country, both material and non-material, inform the homemaking practices of African students in the US. This illustrates how the cultures of migrants and mobile populations impact their experiences in the host country (Boccagni, 2014; Pechurina, 2020). The home becomes an in-between space (Alarcón, 2014; Ortega, 2010) representing both origin and host cultures.

Given the influence of culture in homemaking, African students make home to meet certain cultural ideals. Gender roles particularly shape how African students make home and what they consider crucial in homemaking (Anderson, 2012; Othman et al., 2014). African students perceive the home as a continuity (Després, 1991). Hence, moving to the US does not disrupt their homes; rather, they continue engaging the very practices that make and sustain home. My work advocates that in studying the homes of migrant and mobile groups, their movement should not necessarily be seen as an indication of an interrupted home. Instead, their homes must be contextualized as embedded within their domestic practices and interpersonal networks, allowing them to go on making home seamlessly in the host country.

The study of immigrants and international students in the US is dominated by assimilation theory (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013). Even with contemporary reiterations of the classical assimilation model, these studies and the policies they inspire privilege an American way of life (Boccagni & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2021). International students are assessed by their ability to immerse into American culture without much attention paid to the role that their cultures from

the origin country play in shaping their adaptation. Transnationalism as a theoretical and methodological tool in studying international students can shift the focus from “ways to become American” to the social, political, and geopolitical conditions that shape international student mobility (Findlay, 2011). It also will take a holistic approach in analyzing their experiences and realities as situated and influenced within two or more cultures/nations (Binaisa, 2011; Owusu, 2003). This shift is crucial as it steers away from the positioning of international students as a group that is offered better opportunities in the host country. Also, such a shift centers on the experiences and voices of international students rather than the portrayal of international students as a group that must be spoken for.

A major theoretical implication is the need to perceive international students as a group that embodies two distinct cultures. International students maintain their connections to their cultures through their everyday practices and interactions while integrating into the host nation’s culture (Binaisa, 2013b). The accounts of my interview participants indicate that African students actively engage in transnational activities. Sociological studies and migration research on international students need to adopt transnational frameworks, which will allow researchers to capture the back-and-forth processes that international students engage in the origin and host countries. A transnational approach in studying international students will include the importance of the origin country and its cultural norms on the international student experience. Also, it will not undermine the impact of the host country in shaping international students. Through their education, international students come to possess a vast wealth of cultural capital that allows them to fit in two or more cultures perfectly. As mentioned above, international education is not limited to the classroom but encompasses the whole international student experience that often spans the host country's borders.



In studying international students, measures of their integration in the host society have focused on their educational performance, reported mental and physical health, and their satisfaction with their host experiences. Though such works contribute significantly to understanding the realities of international students, they assume an objective and one-way measurement of integration. By studying the homes of African students, I highlight the varied and complex nature of integration. My findings show that the integration of international students is processual, occurring through their everyday interactions and activities. My approach centers on the agency of international students in integrating. I contribute to the works of Koehne (2005) and Tran and Vu (2018), who account for the agentic ways through which international students shape their integration. Acknowledging the agency of international students has various implications for scholarly research.

Beyond highlighting the strategies that international students employ to navigate the barriers they face in the host country (Boafo-Arthur et al., 2017), centering their agency also shifts attention to the lack of effort on the part of domestic students and communities in their interactions with international students. African students talk of their American colleagues as lacking a basic knowledge of Africa and its cultures. Work by scholars and attempts by universities to build strong multicultural and global student communities should focus on preparing domestic students with the skills to appreciate foreign cultures. Attempts to facilitate the integration of international students are often uni-dimensional (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Such interventions put the full responsibility of adaptation on international students.

Finally, my research brings to the fore the importance of place and place narratives in the integration of international students. Though the home need not be necessarily rooted in a fixed place, it is always located in space (Douglas, 1991). Whether imagined or real, the home is sited

within a place, indicating that individuals become connected to place through homemaking (Binaisa, 2013a; Sandu, 2013). African students exhibited a keen awareness of the narratives and cultures of the cities they reside in and assess their fit in these cultures during the integration process. A mismatch between them and the cities' cultures often leads to them pacing their integration. In studying migrant and mobile groups, place attachment to the host city is a better measurement of their social integration (Lin, Wu, & Li, 2021). Brown-Saracino's (2018) concept of city ecology is crucial in examining the impacts of city culture on international students' integration. Further, this finding indicates that scholars need to study international students beyond the university spaces; they must consider the broader contexts of the cities within which students live (Patil, 2015).

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

A limitation of this study is that my analysis and findings are based on only a small sample of African international students, and almost all participants came from only one country. This makes the findings not generalizable to the entire African student community in the US. By applying a transnational lens to studying African students' home and integration, the current research uncovers key findings that can be useful starting points for future studies. Such studies need to sample more African students to investigate if similar conclusions can be drawn. The sample is heavily skewed with one Nigerian, one Ethiopian, and eleven Ghanaians. This greatly restricts the applicability of the findings to the larger African student population in the US.

Further, there were few variations in the identities of my interview participants, which also limited the generalizability of my findings. All participants reported to be from middle-class families, and except for one, all are Christians. They are all from Anglophone countries in Africa and identify as Black Africans. These similarities might have impacted my findings. Though

most international students are from families with relatively high socioeconomic backgrounds, the lack of diversity possibly resulted in one-sided stories. Future research should recruit participants from different African socio-economic, cultural, ethnic, religious, and national groups.

Furthermore, my gender identity could have influenced how my participants talked about homemaking, especially within the domestic space. Homemaking is socially perceived as feminine, and me being a male researcher could have influenced the interview conversations I had with my participants. A possible account for this gender bias is to collect a large and diverse sample in future studies.

Finally, I solely focused on companies that sell their products and services to international students at the meso-level. Such an operationalization does not completely capture the entirety of organizations, institutions, and agencies that make up the meso-level structures of the internationalization of higher education. Though this use of meso-level structures, a focus on corporate institutions, provided a new understanding of the role of these companies in developing and sustaining discourses on international students, it is necessary to consider the entire structures that form the industrial complex that rose out of the internationalization of higher education. This complex includes research institutions and advocacy groups like NAFSA: Association of international educators, and others. Scholars should expand the scope of the meso-level structures to include these groups to capture the multifaceted ways these groups and organizations influence international students' homemaking and integration.

The number of African students in the US and the Global North is increasing, and they form a significant part of the higher education institutions in these countries. They contribute economically to the universities and the cities they reside in. Beyond that, they also bring unique

perspectives that enrich the educational experiences of all students. They are faced with barriers in the host country that are peculiar to them, like racialization and lack of respect for their cultures. To ensure that the voices of African students are heard and their needs understood, attempts must be made to study them from a transnational perspective. By situating their integration process within their homemaking practices, I have highlighted some of the ways that African students have taken charge of their adaptation. To better serve the African student population, universities and stakeholder institutions must make an effort to appreciate their agency and implement programs that will facilitate their agentic practices.

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## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix A: List of Blog Entries

<b>Title</b>
<b><i>From Study in the USA:</i></b>
5 Tips for Surviving Dorm Life
6 Essential Tips for Student Housing in the US
A Guide to Holiday Traditions in the US
A New York State of Mind...Exploring the City That Never Sleeps
Adjusting to College Life in A Big City
College Move-In – What to Leave at Home
Enjoy the Many Varieties of American Colleges and Universities
Experiencing America Outside the Classroom
Finding a Place to Live in the US
Homestay – Living with an American Family
Housing Tips for International Students
How to Handle Homesickness
How to Host a Party or Gathering in Your Apartment
How to Host an American Thanksgiving
Is Off-Campus Living Right for You?
Learning English in the USA
Living in the Dormitory – Everything You Need to Know
Living Large in Small Spaces
Meet Americans to Learn English Quickly
More than a Degree – Learning Intercultural Competence
Planning and Packing
Reno, Nevada – the Biggest Little City in the World
Simple, Healthy Cooking for Students
Six Aspects of US Culture International Students Need to Know
Small Town ESL Program +American Family = Happy Students
Speaking English Like a North American
Study Abroad Move-In Essentials
Studying Abroad – Expectations vs. Reality
The Cost of Living in the U.S. (and How to Save Money!)
The International Student’s Guide to Getting Involved in Extracurricular Activities
The Pros and Cons of Living Alone
Tips for Updating Your Space on a Budget
Tips to Make Your Space Eco-Friendly
Welcome to the Windy City! Find Your Home in Chicago
What to Do When You Get Homesick
When You Miss Your Country’s Food
<b><i>From International Student:</i></b>
10 Benefits to Studying Abroad

A Taste of Home to Ease Homesickness Abroad
Accommodation Options for US Schools
American Culture
Carry Your Memories Home
Celebrating Halloween During COVID-19
Culture Shock
Etiquette When Going Home with Friends for the Holidays
Fayetteville's Home on the Hill
Going Home with a Friend During Winter Break
Guide to Developing a Social Life in the USA
Homesick as an International Student
How to Feel at Home as an International Student
International Student Homestay Programs
Returning Home After Graduation
Student Housing in the US
Thanksgiving in 2020
Thanksgiving in the United States!



## Appendix B: Interview Guide

- I. Background
    - a) Can you tell me a little about yourself? Where were you born? Where did you grow up? Where did you go to high school/college?
    - b) How did you come to study abroad/ in the US?
    - c) Have you ever been to the US before (or a foreign country)? If yes, tell me about it.
    - d) What are your goals for studying in the US?
  
  - II. Accommodation
    - a) What type is your accommodation (a house, an apartment, etc.)? On or off-campus?
    - b) How did you come to know about it? How long have you been living there? Do you think you will move soon? Are you renting it?
    - c) Do you live alone, or do you have roommates?
    - d) Do you like your accommodation? Dislike?
    - e) How different or similar is your current accommodation with where you lived in [country]? Which do you prefer?
    - f) Do you interact with your roommates?
  
  - III. Homemaking Practices (materiality)
    - a) Do you have decorations in your room? Other objects? Tell me about them
    - b) Have you made any changes to your room since you moved in?
    - c) Do you cook? What foods do you cook? Are they [country] food? Do you cook often?
    - d) (If they have roommates), how do you share the common spaces and chores like the kitchen and living room?
    - e) Do you invite/have friends and colleagues over?
  
  - IV. Social Networks
    - a) Tell me a little about your friends? Are they also international students? Do they speak your native language?
    - b) Have you made new friends since you arrived?
    - c) Do you keep in contact with people from your country?
    - d) Do you have American friends?
    - e) Do you feel part of the community in your neighborhood? Do you join in community activities like game nights? Do you use the communal facilities in your neighborhood?
- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about being an international student that we haven't discussed yet?
- Any referrals? Who else do you think I should talk to? Can you make this contact for me?
- V. Final Questions (Demographics)
    - a) What year were you born? You do not ask anything about their families: parents' education, socio-economic status, occupation, where they live (urban vs. rural), etc.

- b) What is your major? Do you have any minors? What is your level?
  - c) What do you consider to be your ethnicity? Religion? Gender?
  - d) Do you have a partner or spouse? Children? Are you living with them? If not, where do they live?
  - e) What are your sources of income or financial support? List all.
- Last question: Is there anything you want to ask me?

## Appendix C: Recruitment Emails

Dear ...,

My name is Alphonse Opoku, and I am a graduate student in the sociology department at the University of South Florida. I am conducting a research for my thesis on the integration processes of African international students through their homemaking practices. I am writing to kindly ask that you circulate the information to international students to help me recruit participants for the study.

The study focuses on how international students from Africa make their homes in the US and how it impacts their process of integration into their host communities. The project hopes to add to the growing knowledge on the agency of international students in integration, and the results can inform programs that aim to facilitate their integration.

The study seeks international students from Africa on an F1 or a J1 visa (or other visa types that apply to international students) either at the graduate or undergraduate levels. Data will primarily be collected through interviews which will be done virtually, and interviews are expected to last for about an hour.

Members on my thesis committee include Dr. Margarethe Kusenbach, Dr. Beatriz Padilla, and Dr. Jammie Sommer, all in the USF sociology department. The IRB has reviewed and approved the study.

Students who are interested can reach me through my email [aopoku@usf.edu](mailto:aopoku@usf.edu). In addition, I have attached a flyer of the study to the email. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Alphonse Opoku

## Appendix D: Interview Participant Demographics

Table 1A: List and Characteristics of Interview Participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Degree Being Pursued</b>	<b>Program/ Major</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Nationality</b>
Aku	Female	21	Undergrad	Business Administration	Minnesota	Ghanaian
Ama	Female	20	Undergrad	Biomedical Engineering	Connecticut	Ghanaian
Kesse	Male	21	Undergrad	Computer Science	Minnesota	Ghanaian
Kofi	Male	21	Undergrad	Engineering	Minnesota	Ghanaian
Aba	Female	26	Masters	Criminology	Montana	Ghanaian
Abina*	Female	27	Masters	Human Resource	New York	Ghanaian/ Permanent Resident
Fati	Female	29	Masters	Sociology	Montana	Ghanaian
Ekow	Male	30	Masters	Accounting	Georgia	Ghanaian
Essien	Male	25	Masters	Civil Engineering	Texas	Ghanaian
Jojo	Male	25	Masters	Statistics	Florida	Ghanaian
Ada	Female	28	PhD	Chemical Engineering	Florida	Nigerian
Thema	Female	27	PhD	Higher Education	Ohio	Ghanaian
Ebo	Male	30	PhD	Political Science	Florida	Ethiopian/ American

Note: \*Married

## Appendix E: Consent Form

### Script for Obtaining Verbal Informed Consent

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study.

**Title:** The home-making practices of African international students in the U.S.

**Study #** STUDY001553

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**Overview:** You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this document should help you to decide if you would like to participate. The sections in this Overview provide the basic information about the study. More detailed information is provided in the remainder of the document.

Study Staff: This study is being led by Alphonse Opoku who is a graduate student in the sociology department of the University of South Florida. This person is called the Principal Investigator. He is being guided in this research by Drs. Kusenbach and Padilla, both professors in the USF sociology department. Other approved research staff may act on behalf of the Principal Investigator.

Study Details: This study is being conducted at the University of South Florida and will be submitted as a thesis project. The purpose of the study is to explore how African international students make home in the United States and how the process impacts their integration. Interviews and participant photography will be used to collect data for the study. Interviews are expected to last for an hour and will be recorded for analysis. Recorded interviews will be kept on a password-protected device. Photographs to be submitted will include parts of the home like the kitchen, sleeping space, workspace, and other objects like decorations within the home that are meaningful to participants. Photographs will be submitted through email or text message, whichever is more convenient. Identifiable features like faces in photographs will be blurred.

Participants: You are being asked to take part because you are an African international student enrolled in a US university or college. The discussion we will have will be of great value in helping understand how homemaking influences integration among international students.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate and may stop your participation at any time. There will be no penalties or loss of benefits or opportunities if you do not participate or decide to stop once you start. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your student status, course grade, recommendations, or access to future courses or training opportunities.

Benefits, Compensation, and Risk: We do not know if you will receive any immediate benefit from your participation. There is no cost to participate. You will not be compensated for your participation. This research is considered minimal risk. Minimal risk means that study risks are the same as the risks you face in daily life.

Confidentiality: Even if we publish the findings from this study, we will keep your study information private and confidential. Anyone with the authority to look at your records must keep them confidential. Your identifiers will be removed from your private records. Your information could be used for future research studies without additional consent from you.

Confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. No guarantees can be made regarding the interception of information sent via the Internet. However, your participation in this study involves risks similar to a person's everyday use of the Internet.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this study, email Alphonse Opoku at [aopoku@usf.edu](mailto:aopoku@usf.edu). If you have questions about your rights, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact the IRB by email at [RSCH-IRB@usf.edu](mailto:RSCH-IRB@usf.edu).

Would you like to participate in this study?

Yes

No