

# AFRICAN AMERICAN

## Immigration

The African American society has a migration story and can trace their origins to one or more migration experiences. The arrival of a Dutch ship with what was claimed to carry the first slaves in 1619 was not really the origin of the existence of African Americans in North America as is commonly believed. A century earlier in the 1500s, African Americans came from Mexico and the Caribbean to the territories of Florida and Texas and other parts of the South.

The term "African American" has a great meaning to the vast majority of its people. It does not only describe the group's culture and roots, but bring them a sense of belonging to their motherland "Africa". One could go deeper and ask the reason for looking for identifiers among many groups of Americans.

## Culture

- African American history places the Caribbean, and contemporary African Americans in the fabric of the society even if they came from Saint Dominguez in 1791 to Louisiana or from the Bahamas in the nineteenth century to Miami and Key West Florida, or more recently from Nigeria to Texas.
- African Americans are the offspring of diverse ethnicities and therefore they represent the most diverse population in the United States. They include in their genetic makeup European, Native American, and Asian.
- These varied backgrounds and migratory experiences have produced a unique population whose music, food, style of clothes, arts and sense of identity all reflect the diversity brought about by centuries of migrations.

## Religion

- Prior to the American Revolution, very few slaves were Christian. Most planters feared that Christianity would provide the slaves with the notion of equality and freedom.
- Today religion plays a significant role in the African American culture. Seven historically black dominate denominations comprise what is known as the "historic black church:" The Church of God in Christ, The African Methodist Episcopal Church, The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, The National Baptist Convention, The Progressive Baptist Convention of America.
- Although, many African Americans belong to one of the traditionally black churches mentioned above, a significant number of African Americans also belong to predominantly white denominations such as Methodist, Baptist, and Roman Catholic.
- Many African Americans are converting to Islam; about 20 percent of American Muslims are African American.

## Agriculture and Staple Foods

- "Soul Food" is a term used for an ethnic food cuisine traditionally prepared and eaten by African Americans of the southern United States, which originated during the period of American slavery. It also refers to soothing comfort foods that bring back memories of family dinners.
- Today, food is celebrated as a source of community and family pride. Food taboos are rare. Pica, the consumption of nonfood items such as clay or dirt, has been described in rural African American communities. Corn starch consumption is not uncommon in both urban and rural settings. Accurate data on the prevalence forms of pica are not available.
- Recent cookbooks and websites have highlighted southern African American dishes.

## Health Beliefs, Practices, and Concerns

- Health beliefs include religious orientation, social support networks, and informal health care systems
- A common method of treating health concerns within the family and community is through prayer. Support systems that provide health advice include mothers, sisters, partners, friends, neighbors and extended family members. They play a significant role and are needed in times of stressful situations.
- Discrimination, cultural barriers and lack of access to health care have been identified as factors contributing to poor health outcomes among African Americans.
- Life expectancy is four years less for African Americans compared to the average American. The 5 leading causes of death for African Americans are heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes and unintentional injuries. Additionally, African Americans have disproportionately high prevalence of hypertension, infant mortality, and tuberculosis.

- Health conditions among African Americans related to dietary patterns include obesity, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes and some cancers
  - African Americans are 1.6 times more likely to have diabetes than non-Latino whites; 25% of African Americans between the ages of 65 and 74 have diabetes; one in four African American women over 55 years of age has diabetes - Diabetes is commonly known as 'having sugar.'
  - Over 40% of African Americans have hypertension
- Typically, African Americans rely on the public and private health care systems for care; however nontraditional remedies may also be needed.

#### The Effects of African American Traditional Cuisine on Health

- Traditionally "Soul Food" is often high in fat and calories. Highly suited to the physically demanding lives of laborers, farmhands and rural lifestyles generally, it is now a contributing factor to obesity, heart disease, and diabetes in a population that has become increasingly sedentary and more urbanized.
- As a result of this, more health-conscious African Americans are using alternative methods of preparation, eschewing trans fats in favor of natural vegetable oils and substituting smoked turkey for fatback and other, cured pork products. Limiting the amount of refined sugars in desserts; and emphasizing the consumption of more fruits and vegetables than animal protein.
- 2.4 fast food restaurants per square mile compared to 1.5 restaurants in predominantly white neighborhoods. This creates a difficult environment to maintain weight and prevent obesity.

#### Major African American Celebrations

- Besides the major holidays observed by the majority of Americans, African Americans have some specific to them.
- Juneteenth is considered the oldest nationwide celebration of the commemoration of the end of slavery. The observance of June 19<sup>th</sup> as the African American Emancipation Day started in Texas in 1865. Currently, Juneteenth celebrates African American freedom with accents on education and achievement. The length of the celebration varies from place to place; it can go from a day to a month marked with family gathering, presentations etc. It is a time of joy and reflection.
- Black History Month is the celebration of African American contributions to the world. Originally it was started by a black fraternity and was called "Negro History Week". With the help of Carter Woodson it gained more popularity and became a month of celebration.
- Kwanzaa is celebrated from December 26 to January 1 and is focused on improving family, community and cultural life. Kwanzaa was created by Dr Maulana Karenga in 1966; today it is observed by people of African descent throughout the world. The feast brings a mixture of different kinds of cuisines from the African Diaspora.
- Additionally there are regional celebrations: Mardi Gras, jazz and gospel festivals, and special Caribbean festivals.

#### Communication Style and Assumptions

- Communication patterns differ within the African American culture from region to region or among ancestry
- Many accounts of communication styles maybe considered assumptions rather than authentic depending on the group and like other Americans, African Americans communicate through emotion, touch, eye contact gestures verbal and nonverbal communication.
- An example of eye contact may explain the variations and interpretations observed among different groups. Direct eye contact for one could mean, that one is engaged in inappropriate behavior and it should be stopped immediately (a parent and child and/or caregiver).
- Another example of lack of direct eye contact may be viewed as disrespect between an elder and a younger person. When a person in authority speaks you must look steadfast in the eye as a sign of respect and acknowledgement.