

# VOICES

Buba Misawa

**W**HEN I CAME in 1983 we had a large African student population, most of whom belonged to the African Student Organization. Nigerians were the largest single nationality present. We had 200 or more Nigerians studying in this area, and a Nigerian Student Organization. African students, most of them on government scholarships, studied at a number of universities in the area — Duquesne, Pitt, Chatham, Point Park, Robert Morris, CMU, even Geneva College. We also had a fair number of adult Africans here — largely professionals, with their own organization. Today things have changed greatly. African governments don't have the funds to sponsor many students, and our numbers are much smaller. We are largely on our own, and depend on church groups for funds to study here. We have an African Students Organization, with about 80 members. In addition, we have a Pan-African Students Organization. The latter is open to all persons of the "diaspora," and so is larger and includes West Indians, African-Americans, and the like.

Today Nigerians are not the largest group of students. Most come from southern Africa and eastern Africa, especially Kenya and Uganda. Kenyans are the largest single group of students today. A number of them receive scholarships from Christian mission schools in Africa and from churches in the United States. Some Nigerians also have come with church scholarships. Many of these students attend Duquesne. Another big difference between today and the 1980s is that the graduate students are gone; most of the African students now are undergraduates.

The community of adult Africans is also very small. Among adults, Ghanaians are probably the largest number. They are mostly professionals, such as physicians and business people.

How are we treated in Pittsburgh? I'd have to say that because of our color we do suffer discrimination. I remember when I first came to GSPIA, I went out with my fellow students to a restaurant. The waiter was so very rude to me; he accused me of not paying. Fortunately other students were there to vouch for me. But he was still rude toward me; I was so disappointed I felt like getting back on the plane and going back to Nigeria. This was an overt case; usually it's not so open. Usually when Africans experience discrimination, they don't understand it as such — not like black Americans — unless it is overt and explicit. On the other hand, people tend to give Africans a little break, when they hear their accent. If you're wearing your African robes, people are curious, and may treat you a little better when they realize you're not black American. [White] people tell me over and over that

Africans are different from African-Americans, that we deal with them differently, that we are less confrontational. They say our attitudes toward life are different — more neutral, not as anti-white as black Americans.

You ask about relations with African-Americans. Well, I see three principal groups of blacks in terms of their attitudes toward Africa and Africans. Some blacks are aware of Africa and very interested in Africa, and have perhaps idealized Africa. For them, Africans almost can do no wrong, and they are both curious about us and have a willingness to associate [with us]. Then there are those [African-Americans] interested in African culture who want to learn about Africa, but they still have stereotyped views of Africans — Tarzan images, or war, and famine. This is especially true of young kids. Then you have [black] people not at all aware of Africans; this is the bulk of [black] people. Some of these are very hostile, but most are not. They just tend to treat us as though we're from Mars. For example, you go into a bar in a black neighborhood. People are somewhat cliquish; they know you don't belong. Once I was in a bar, asking questions, and someone called for people to come help me. They thought I was lost, and didn't speak English, and needed some help. It was amusing. Other Africans sometimes have such problems in African-American bars. They don't understand black American culture and language. And they complain that African-Americans treat them as someone very different and special. ☼

**Editor's Note:** Buba Misawa is a professor at Washington & Jefferson College who came from Nigeria to study in the Graduate School of International and Public Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. I conducted an interview with him in the summer of 1995, and assembled his responses into this essay about the affairs of Africans in Pittsburgh. — LG

