

Ethnographic Report: Liberian Refugees in the US

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### Observation

I attended a Liberian church service for my observation. There is a significant Liberian population in a nearby town and one local church recently hired a Liberian pastor. This pastor, John\*, and his wife, Evelyn\*, live next door to my parents, and this is how we met. I attended the Liberian worship service on Sunday, November 12, 2017.

I arrived shortly before the 9:00 service time (the Liberian congregation holds their service concurrently with the main congregation's first service) and found the chapel where the Liberian service is held: a medium-sized room across from the main sanctuary. The furnishings in the chapel were plain and simple: about 40 tan cushioned chairs, round white laminate tables at the back of the room, and a stained-glass window at the front of the room with Jesus depicted carrying a lamb. There was a drum set, but no other instruments were visible.

Pastor John, who was dressed in a suit, greeted me with a smile and a handshake (not firm) and introduced me to the other church leaders (all men) who were also dressed in suits (with the exception of one man who wore a traditional embroidered shirt). About five adults (including the pastor and leaders) were in the chapel when I arrived. John mentioned that the snow might result in lower attendance. I found a seat in the back row and waited for the service to begin. The chapel was quiet with no background music, and the leaders talked to each other in English in the front as they waited.

Gradually, more people started to arrive. Over the next 40 minutes or so, people continued arriving until there were approximately 26 adults and about the same number of children present. Most women were dressed in brightly-colored traditional dresses with matching

*\*Names have been changed*

headwrap scarves. Many of the men wore traditional-style embroidered shirts. The women arrived carrying dishes of food which they set on a table in the back of the room in preparation for a potluck after the service. By the end of the service, there were more women than men in attendance (about 16 women and 10 men). Almost all the men sat on the left side of the isle and most of the women sat on the right side.

A man opened the service around 9:15, and following the opening prayer he led in a song, "It is Raining." Someone played the drum set, accompanying the song with an upbeat rhythm. Members of the congregation clapped and sang loudly in full harmony. A woman introduced as the worship leader arrived after a couple of songs and came to the front to continue leading the music after placing her food on the table. No song lyrics were displayed, and no song books were used. Most of the songs were in English but were not familiar to me.

As more people continued to arrive, Evelyn organized the children at the tables in the back of the room, where they were kept busy drawing and coloring. Once I saw her scold some children for playing on their phones and made them put the phones away. Every time someone entered the chapel door, many of the members of the congregation would turn their heads to look back.

There was a testimony and prayer request time with a time limit given ("1 minute for prayer requests, 2 minutes for testimonies"). A woman in the congregation led a 'welcome song' in another language and accompanied it with a *saa saa* (a type of maraca with bead netting on the outside). As the congregation joined in singing the song, they moved around the room greeting each other with a hug. Everyone appeared to know what to do, as if this was a normal part of the service, and they seemed to be trying to greet everyone in the room. A song was also sung in another language during the offering time, as well as right before Pastor John got up to

preach. He translated the words of this last song (presumably for my benefit): “The coming of the Lord is already here; let us be awake.”

Pastor John gave a message about Passover. He mentioned that the different congregations at this church (there is also a Spanish-speaking congregation) all preach from the same Scripture passage. Once, during the message, John gave a gentle scolding: he asked people to hold up their Bible if they had brought it and then asked, “can you imagine a soldier who goes into battle and forgets to bring his gun?” Twice, when a child was making a distracting noise he asked, “can someone please take that toy away from that kid?”

After Pastor John finished preaching, he called two families to the front for a baby dedication. One of the women came with her husband and another woman, presumably a friend or relative. After John asked which woman was the mother he said, “in African culture, one child has many mothers!” He prayed for the babies and asked the church members to promise to help raise the children in the ways of God: “raise these children like your own children.”

After the service, everyone gathered around the table in the back to fill their plates with the food the women had brought. There was *rice cake* (which tasted similar to banana bread), *kala* (a fried bread similar to a donut), fried plantains, and a chicken and rice dish. While I was eating, I struck up a conversation with a young woman sitting next to me. I asked her a few questions which she answered very quietly with one-word answers while looking down nearly the whole time we were conversing. After I finished eating, I thanked John and Evelyn and said goodbye.

**Questions:** (A complete list of interview questions is included in Appendix A.)

- Are there distinct tribal/people groups in Liberia? What is the relationship between these groups?
- Do most Liberians speak English when they arrive in the US?
- Do men and women typically sit on different sides of the room for church service? Are men and women separated for other activities in Liberia?
- Is it common for women to help each other take care of children in Liberian culture?
- Have you noticed any difference in the use of eye contact between Liberian and US culture?

### **Interview Analysis**

I arranged an interview with Evelyn for the week following my observation. I met her in their home on November 17, 2017. Evelyn is a Liberian woman in her mid-50s. She was dressed casually in sweatpants and a sweatshirt. We sat in the living room (Evelyn sat on the couch and I sat in an armchair) for the interview.

### **National Identity & Connection to US**

Evelyn described the history of Liberia in great detail, starting from the time of its founding by freed slaves from the US who resettled along the coast. Although Evelyn belongs to one of Liberia's native tribes, not the Americo-Liberian people descended from the freed slaves, she seemed proud to point out Liberia's connection with the US through its first American-born presidents (Appendix B, line 26), flag (730), names of cities (738), Pledge of Allegiance (736), and seal that states, "the love of liberty brought us here" (26). She also recounted how the government's historical ties to the US incited the coup and civil war that ensued as the native

tribes rebelled against Americo-Liberian leadership. The native people came to the point where they felt, “No! We were here! The ‘love of liberty’ did not bring us here!” (42). According to Evelyn, “most of the refugees here [in the US] are not children of the free slaves” (339) because the Americo-Liberians had maintained US citizenship and were airlifted out of the country when the conflict began (342).

### **Family/Community vs. Individual Identity**

Evelyn frequently referenced the close-knit relationships within families and communities in Liberia. She talked about marriage traditions in Liberia in which a woman is given to a whole family, specifically to the groom’s father (147). “It’s a whole family thing, [it] is not an individual thing,” Evelyn commented (163). “It prevents. . . divorce [and] it protects the children (152)” because a man cannot simply decide to send his wife away without involving the rest of his family.

She said that for Liberians, it is expected that you will discipline your friends’, neighbors’, and relatives’ children without consulting the parents: “‘it takes a village to raise a child,’ that’s how we say [it] in Africa” (508). Friends and neighbors help care for each other’s children; “back home you don’t need a babysitter” (530).

Evelyn identified this lack of community as the biggest cause of culture shock after she came to the US: “I [was] used to being outside and visiting, and playing around, and talking to people and doing a lot of things. . . that was a tough experience for me” (667). Several times she pointed to loneliness as the most difficult part of her transition: “I was really, really lonely then. [I thought], ‘I’d rather go back to the war [at] home than to be so lonely with no family, no friend and then stay in the house [and] the TV is your only friend. No!’” (663)

## Parent-Child Relationship

Evelyn related some of the difficulties that Liberian parents face as they are raising their children here in the US while trying to balance two cultural identities. She laughingly told me, “my three oldest children. . . have half of the Liberian thing in them. And my two last kids, they are Americans! They talk to me like Americans talking, but my. . . older kids will speak to me like Liberians” (410). She mentioned a **greater respect for parents in Liberian culture: “‘obey your parents’ is part of the African rule. It’s hard to tell your parents ‘no’ if they ask you to do something”** (430). While her younger children have no qualms telling her ‘no’, Evelyn recognizes that **“for them, it’s not disrespect, it’s just expressing yourself”** (422).

Liberian parents also have different expectations for raising children; for example, discipline methods are more severe by US standards (386, 505) and attending sports or school events is not considered part of a parent’s duty. Instead, “if we love our children, we provide their needs! We don’t have to be running to your game and everything!” (394)

## Respect for Elders

Evelyn talked about a respect for elders that is ingrained in Liberian culture. Titles are always used for older people, and she said that she had a very hard time violating this internal rule after arriving in the US (586). **People will often say ‘mom’, ‘sister’, ‘aunt’, or ‘Miss’ to an older person (579) rather than calling them by their first name, which “is so much of a disrespect for us” (581).** She was happy when her son-in-law (who is American) asked if he could call her ‘Mom’— “[he] just adopted out system!” (620). Evelyn also mentioned that **direct eye contact is not acceptable, especially with elders: “we don’t look directly at somebody. [If] you look directly in somebody’s eyes [it] is almost like a disrespect” (563).**

## Gender Roles

Men and women traditionally have clearly defined, separate roles in Liberian culture. Evelyn stated, “there are certain jobs that men don’t normally do in Africa. . . . Men would not cook. That’s a woman’s job” (472, 476). Women also generally handle duties related to caring for the children (478) while men are in charge of the heavy farm work (482). She recounted a visit to an American couple’s home where the husband told them, “my wife is going to entertain you guys while I go. . . cook” (694). Liberians would respond to this story with incredulity—“and she was comfortable sitting there?” (697)

## War Trauma

Evelyn also spoke about the trauma refugees have lived through during the war has impacted their identity. “It’s just hard to explain to anybody what you go through when there’s a war. . . unless somebody [has] walk[ed] through it. . . and it’s painful to. . . rethink it” (232). Evelyn believes that the most important thing for refugees to successfully adapt to life in the US is to have someone who will listen to their story (317) “to pour out all his hurts and everything that he has gone through” (296). Counseling played an important role in the healing process for Evelyn and John’s older children (305) and although at the time she insisted that she didn’t need counseling herself (322), she later regretted not going through the process (312) because “after three, four years. . . I saw myself, the choices I made, the things that I did, and I remember[ed] that, ‘oh. This is because of what happened, what I saw’” (322).

## Discussion

### National Identity

Question: *Explain to me what problems led up to the civil war in Liberia and why it was necessary for many Liberians to flee the country.*

Evelyn displayed a strong national identity, discussing Liberia's history and symbols at length. At the church service, several members of the congregation seemed eager for me to try the traditional Liberian dishes and wanted to know what I thought of them. Jackson (2014) states that "national identity can be a great source of pride and provide individuals with a sense of belonging" (p. 150) and this seemed to be the case judging by the observation and interview. Evelyn seemed particularly keen to help me understand the history of Liberia's connection with America, and this seemed to be a source of national pride.

### Social Identity

Question: *What was it like for you coming to the US? What was the adaptation process like for you?*

Evelyn discussed the deep loneliness she felt after coming to the US and being removed from the social support network she was accustomed to. According to Jackson (2014), "our social identity can provide us with a sense of self-esteem and a framework for socializing" (p. 137). With the social identification of relatives, neighbors, and friends removed, Evelyn sank into depression: "I would cry and say, 'why? I really want to go back home, it's too lonely!'" (189) Over time, she was able to reconstruct her social identity through new friendships (199), which she credits with her successful adaptation (194).

Although social identity is important for people from any cultural background, it is perhaps especially pronounced for someone like Evelyn coming from a collectivist culture. Jackson points out that in collectivist Asian, African, and Latino societies, “family tends to dominate, and children are generally encouraged to view themselves in relation to others” (p. 131). Losing this community would deprive someone from a collectivist society of their most basic frame of reference and could cause a deep sense of insecurity and loss.

### **Eye Contact**

Question: *Have you noticed any difference in the use of eye contact between Liberian and US culture? For example, would it be respectful for Liberians to look down or look away when talking to certain people?*

Evelyn described a similar expectation for eye contact in Liberian culture as the one depicted for North Asian cultures in Jackson (2014): “children are expected to look away (e.g. downward) to show deference to their elders” (p. 116). The expectancy violation theory (Burgoon 1978) explains how cultural misunderstandings can occur when our expectations for appropriate nonverbal behavior (e.g. eye contact) are violated; “as nonverbal communication often takes place at a subconscious level, we likely have little awareness that we are making positive or negative judgements about others based on their violation of our expectations” (Jackson, p. 125).

I experienced this toward the end of my observation when the woman I was talking to avoided eye contact during our conversation. I came away from that encounter feeling that she was being unfriendly and rude, when according to her cultural norms she was demonstrating

deference and respect. Evelyn commented that “[maintaining direct eye contact] was one of the things we ha[d] to learn when we came here” (564).

### **Respect for Parents & Elders**

Question: *What are some of the differences you notice between younger and older generations of Liberians here in the US?*

Jackson (2014) asserts that “intergenerational conflict. . . between middle-aged immigrant parents and their children may arise due to differences in language practices, values, beliefs and behaviors” (p. 255). Evelyn articulated some of these differing values between her and her younger children who have spent most of their lives in the US, specifically in the area of respect for parents: “if. . . [my mother] calls me on the phone and. . . [tells] me something that I don’t like, I have to say [it] in a real decent and nice way. I’m not going to be telling her, ‘No, Mom! That’s not right!’ That is very disrespectful for our people” (387). Although conflicting cultural values can be a cause of strain on parent-child relationships, Evelyn seems to have come to peace with the fact that her youngest two children don’t show the same level of respect for elders that is expected in Liberian culture. She maintains a sense of humor about the cultural differences and accepts them as the Americans they are (412).

### **Effect of Trauma**

Question: *What kind of trauma have Liberian refugees experienced before coming to the US? Do they talk to you about what their life was like before? How has trauma affected their ability to adapt to life in the US?*

Jackson (2014) outlines the importance of considering sociopolitical and historical factors within a critical approach to intercultural communication (p. 38). In light of this, it is helpful to

take into account Liberia's history--and the war and violence in recent years in particular--when studying Liberian culture. According to Jackson, "refugees may. . . face more stress and uncertainty" than voluntary migrants, and the trauma they have experienced can factor into the difficulty of their transition process (p. 183).

Evelyn emphasized refugees' need (whether recognized or not) to "pour out" their stories and the painful experiences in their past in order to heal and move forward with their transition to their new life in the US (314). The effect of war trauma on refugees' adaptation process cannot be underestimated and if not dealt with in a healthy way, it is likely that coping difficulties will emerge later on, as happened in Evelyn's case (322).

### **Application**

Through this project, several themes emerged that could be incorporated into class instruction. I will focus here on three of the main topics that surfaced in the interview: *identity awareness*, *respect for elders*, and *eye contact*. Listed below are suggested activities that could be used within the context of a low intermediate community adult ESL class in the US where the focus is conversational English and life skills.

#### **Identity Awareness**

The teacher can explore themes of national and social identity with learners through the following activities:

- Use the following questions as a discussion, writing or journaling prompt: 'What things make you proud of your country? What things do you like better about your home country? What things do you like better about the US?'

- Have learners prepare a presentation about their home country. Have them discuss history, politics, daily life, food, language and other aspects they would like their classmates to know.
- Have learners interview a classmate and discover as much information as possible about their country of origin as possible within a given time limit. Have students introduce the classmate they interviewed to the class and share what they learned.
- Have students make a list of the people they felt closest to in their home country and a separate list of people they feel close to here. Discuss as a class: Are the two lists the same or different? Was it easy or difficult to make new friends when you moved to the US? Do you feel closer to your family or your friends? Do you feel that you spend more or less time with your close friends now, as opposed to in your home country?
- Assign a journal prompt: 'I wish I had more \_\_\_\_\_ friends because. . . .' (For example, *I wish I had more Salvadoran friends/American friends/Muslim friends, etc.*)

### **Respect for Elders**

These activities can be used to explore differing cultural values regarding respect for parents and elders.

- Have students write or discuss with a partner: 'Is the way your children (or other children) treat you different from how you treated your parents when you were growing up? How? Why do you think this is true?'
- Have students write a drama/role play about ways they have observed young people interacting with older people here in the US. Discuss each scenario and whether students feel these interactions are appropriate or disrespectful.

- Have students work with a partner to make a list of rules that children should follow to show respect to adults. Discuss any disagreements as a class.
- Have students discuss with a partner, 'Do you feel comfortable calling an older person by their first name? What are some of the ways you address older people in your home country?'

### **Eye Contact**

The following activities can be used to raise students' awareness about the acceptable use of eye contact in the US.

- Show the class the video on eye contact at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uMzpIX93JU>. Have students respond by discussing or writing ways that these North American eye contact norms are different from those in their home culture.
- Model a dialogue with a student, displaying appropriate eye contact. Have students practice the same dialogue with a partner, then present the dialogue in front of the class. Ask students if the level of eye contact between them seemed appropriate according to US norms.

## References

Jackson, J. (2014). *Introducing language and intercultural communication*. New York, NY:

Routledge.

Katz Wilner, L. (2014, January 2). Eye contact—Successfully speaking. Retrieved from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uMzpIX93JU>.

## Appendix A

### Observation Field Notes

Liberian Church Service: November 12, 2017

Service in chapel across from main auditorium where service is being held concurrently

40 chairs

Greeted with smile and handshake by pastors (not firm)

Pastors dressed in suits, other men wore traditional embroidered shirts

Women wore traditional dresses, very colorful and ornate

Expecting lower turnout due to snow

Tambourine on seat next to one lady in congregation

Pastor commented to another pastor, "the weather is going to be a big excuse"

Leaders speak to each other in English

Chapel is quiet (no music) before start of service

Very few people (5 adults) present at start of service, people trickle in over next half hour

Service opens with prayer (in English)

Song: It is Raining (beautiful full harmony, clapping, drums- fast beat, no other instruments)

Women begin coming in carrying dishes of food

Some women wear headdresses matching their dress

Woman worship leader arrives late (bringing food) and comes to the front to take over leading songs

No lyrics are displayed, no song books

English is easily understandable

Time limit given for prayer request (1 min) and testimony (2 min) time

Children milling around in back of the room, or sitting in chairs playing games on phones

People (including pastors) turn around and look back when there are noises or people walk into the chapel, even when someone is speaking in front

Welcoming/greeting song in another language, everyone moves around the room singing the song and hugging each other in greeting, one woman plays bead maraca to the beat of the song

Offering- instructions are given on which isles to use to walk up and return to seat

Offering is taken for needs in Liberia

Offering song is sung in another language during offering, congregation sings along

Pastor's wife scolds kids using phones, makes them put phones away, organizes kids drawing/coloring at round tables in the back

Some of the kids come to the front to sing a song: "In the beginning" ("Satan came and pulled them apart"-unusual lyrics for a children's song?) and "Jesus, I got him on my mind"

Men and women were sitting on different sides of the isle (I didn't notice this until it was too late and I sat on the wrong side!)

More women (16) than men (10) present

Pastor: “sometimes the kids get a little out of hand, be patient with them”

Everyone stood and sang a song as the pastor got up to speak, sung in Liberian language,  
translation: “The coming of the Lord is already here; let us be awake”

Message: Exodus 12:1-12 Passover (same message across congregations in the church-Spanish,  
English, Liberian)

Nation of Liberia is 170 years old

10 years of war in Liberia

Children born in 1990 were raised in violence with lack of law and order

Pastor asked, “How many brought your Bible today? Can you imagine a soldier who goes into  
battle and forgets to bring his gun or knife?” (Pastor seems to have a fatherly role with  
congregation, not afraid to call people out or scold them: twice he said from the pulpit, “can  
someone please take that toy away from that kid” when there was distracting noise)

Pastor mentioned “juju” as something that was sometimes mixed with religion

Salad-“this food should be for goats!”

Baby dedication: “In African culture, one child has many mothers” Pastor asked congregation to  
promise to help raise the children in ways of God- raise these children like your own children

### **Questions:**

- What languages are spoken in Liberia? Which languages are represented in your congregation?

- Are there distinct tribal/people groups in Liberia? What is the relationship between these groups?
- Explain to me what problems led up to the civil war in Liberia and why it was necessary for many Liberians to flee the country.
- What was it like for you coming to the US? What was the adaptation process like for you?
- Did you come to the US as a refugee? How did that feel to have the label “refugee” then, and how does it feel now?
- What kind of trauma have Liberian refugees experienced before coming to the US? Do they talk to you about what their life was like before? How has trauma affected their ability to adapt to life in the US?
- When you are interacting with other Liberians, what kind of complaints do they have about life in the US? What cultural differences sometimes cause problems for Liberians?
- Imagine that I am a Liberian refugee who has just arrived in the US. What advice would you give me to help me with the transition process?
- Do most Liberians speak English when they arrive in the US? Is it frustrating to them that some US Americans are unable to understand their accent/variety of English?
- Is it normal for Liberians to turn around and look at people when they walk into a room?
- Do men and women typically sit on different sides of the room for church service? Are men and women separated for other activities in Liberia?

- Do you find it easier to get men or women involved in church activities? Is this the same in Liberia?
- Is witchcraft/superstitious practices (“juju”) common among Liberians? Are these common among Christians?
- What are some of the differences you notice between younger and older generations of Liberians here in the US?
- Is it common for women to help each other take care of children in Liberian culture?
- Have you noticed any difference in the use of eye contact between Liberian and US culture? For example, would it be respectful for Liberians to look down or look away when talking to certain people? Is this different for men and women?
- Have you noticed a difference between the use of silence in Liberian and US cultures? For example, is it polite for Liberians to pause before answering a question or wait before speaking at certain times in the conversation?

**Appendix B**

**Transcript of Interview**

1 Bethany: Um, so first of all, I don't know. . . a lot about the history of Liberia and the, the  
2 Civil War, so can you explain to me a little bit about what problems led up to the civil  
3 war in Liberia and why it was necessary for Liberians to flee the country, to leave  
4 Liberia?

5 Evelyn\*: Actually, um, the history of Liberia is in the, in the 1800s, in the, uh, in the 18s,  
6 yeah that was the 1800s, um, when the free slaves, when, when slaves were set free to  
7 America, and they were looking for place for them, Liberia was one of the countries that  
8 accepted the free slave and at the time it did not have the name Liberia, but when they  
9 took the free slaves from here and brought them along the sea coast, they settled there,  
10 and, um, they decided that that was their home and they wanted to declare independent  
11 nation. So, um, in 19- in 18- 1847 actually, they had their independence and the first  
12 president was born here in Virginia, he was a free slave called Joseph Jenkins Roberts.  
13 And that time, I think president Monroe, Monroe, James Monroe was the president, so  
14 the name the place they settled, the name is Monrovia after James Monroe.

15 B: Ahh!

16 E: So Liberia carry a lot of history with America.

17 B: Huh.

18 E: Yeah.

19 B: Huh.

20 E: So that, that the background.

21 B: That's interesting.

22 E: But when they came from here as slaves and settled along the coast, where they begin to  
23 name this places after places in America, after people who were kind to them, and  
24 presidents and everything they. . .they. . . they met the the indigenous of the land--that  
25 was our own people--they were there before they came and so even the seal says "the  
26 love of liberty brought us here" so our first, um up to, maybe up to 15, 16 first presidents  
27 were all born in America here.

28 B: Really?

29 E: Yes. Those very first set of presidents were all born from here because they were part of  
30 this free, free slaves. And what happened at the time when their wives get pregnant they  
31 would come back to America and have their children so they could still carry the  
32 citizenship as both Americans and Liberians. And they called themselves the 'Americo-  
33 Liberians.' So after many years when the natives got educated--because when they came  
34 there was no education, our people did not know about school, they didn't know about  
35 anything. But when they came from here they started schools, they started churches. . .

36

*\*Names have been changed*

- 37 [pause] and everything else. And the first church they started was Providence Baptist  
38 Church and it still stands in Monrovia.
- 39 B: Hmm.
- 40 E: It was built since that time, it still stand in Monrovia, so they started school, they started  
41 everything and the natives began to go to school. But when they got to the place that they  
42 were educated, they felt that, "No! We were here! The 'love of liberty' did not bring us  
43 here!" And so that was the beginning of the conflict in Liberia, when the natives said,  
44 "No, you brought, you met us here, and everything you have done is like what is in  
45 America! And we were here, and this is our country, is not only your country. And that  
46 was the beginning of the conflict where they had coup, and they killed president William  
47 R. Tolbert, he was one of the presidents, almost the last Americo-Liberian that was born  
48 here and they overthrew him and a native became president, and since that time, the  
49 conflict started, the flight between the native and the nonnative until Charles Taylor after  
50 all the Americo-Liberian were wiped out and the natives began to rule the country, and  
51 Charles Taylor, he came with war, almost like a revenge for the Americo-Liberians but  
52 then he used the natives, so that was the biggest civil war that went on for very long time,  
53 like, it was almost like something for power greed. But those that were fighting, they  
54 didn't even know what they were fighting for! So they could, anybody that get in their  
55 way, they get rid of you.
- 56 B: Hmm.
- 57 E: That's why we all left the country.
- 58 B: Mmm.
- 59 E: Because, um, during this time. . . [pause] the natives were used, but the uneducated ones.  
60 So they had drugs, they had everything, and they were young, and the order is just kill  
61 anybody that won't be for you. So even if they ask you for something, like if you have  
62 food, and they ask you and you say no, they kill you.
- 63 B: Hmm.
- 64 E: So the killing was just like that and. . . that's why we all had to flee the country. It was  
65 nasty, it was bloody, and after the war we heard that over 250,000 people were killed.
- 66 B: Oh my.
- 67 E: Yeah.
- 68 B: Oh my.
- 69 E: So we all left the country and began to wander in neighboring countries: Guinea, Ivory  
70 Coast, Sierra Leone, they share border with Liberia and we were wandering there until  
71 America began to take refugees and if you didn't have the opportunity to come to  
72 America, it's difficult living in a refugee country, in a neighboring country. So you were  
73 in and out, and. . .

- 74 B: Mmm hmm. So what, when did you leave Liberia?
- 75 E: Well, actually, um, during the war, we were in Ivory Coast most of our time, we spent  
76 most of our time in Ivory Coast, and, um, when the war kinda ceased uh, a little bit, we  
77 went back to Liberia until my husband got a scholarship to come here in 2000.
- 78 B: Okay.
- 79 E: And he was here 2000, he went to Westminster Theological Seminary, that's why he was  
80 for, he was there 2000, and 2002, when another war broke out, then we had a chance to  
81 come, the children and I, came with four children and we joined him in Philadelphia, and  
82 shortly after that we moved to Chicago because there was an immigrant church there that  
83 ask him if he could help, so. . .
- 84 B: Mmm hmmm.
- 85 E: So we moved to the western suburb, Wheaton, in Chicago where we lived up til now, up  
86 til the time we moved here.
- 87 B: Okay. I men-, I mentioned to John\* [Evelyn's husband], I actually lived in Wheaton for a  
88 year. . .
- 89 E: Ahh!
- 90 B: Yeah, because I worked for World Relief. . .
- 91 E: [Excitedly] Oh! Okay! [laughs]
- 92 B: Yeah, I taught, I taught English for World Relief for two years in Aurora. . .
- 93 E: Ah, okay! [laughs]
- 94 B: So, yeah.
- 95 E: So you know Emily Gray.
- 96 B: No, I don't actually because, ah, he said she was with the DuPage World Relief, but I was  
97 with the Aurora office of World Relief, so, a different office.
- 98 E: Actually, now she's the director for both DuPage and Aurora.
- 99 B: Oh, okay. That was, when I was there was about. . . nine years ago? So. . .
- 100 E: Oh, that's a long time.
- 101 B: So, probably before, maybe before she was there.
- 102 E: Yeah, probably.
- 103 B: But, um, so you talked about the native people in Liberia--are there different groups of  
104 native people, or is there one native language and ethnicity, or are there different groups?

- 105 E: Well, we, we all speak different tribes in Liberia. We have, uh, roughly like 16 different  
106 dialects that we speak in Liberia.
- 107 B: Oh, okay.
- 108 E: But to go to school you have to learn to speak English.
- 109 B: Okay.
- 110 E: Even though it's like different from yours, but we do speak English that everybody will  
111 understand something, but different, different tribes or dialects that we speak in Liberia.
- 112 B: So before, before the civil war, was there any kind of conflict or difficulty between the  
113 different tribes or different, different native groups?
- 114 E: Uh, no, uh actually no.
- 115 B: No?
- 116 E: When, um. . . the native president, the first native president was president Samuel K.  
117 Doe, when he took over, his tribe and uh, the Gio tribe, they were really good friends but  
118 there was, um. . . there was like a hero for the Gio tribe that works for Samuel K. Doe,  
119 and Samuel K. Doe felt that this man wanted to overthrow him, so he kill him. So they  
120 went against each other. And because of the conflict between them, that was how Charles  
121 Taylor used the tribe against, that was, against Samuel K. Doe. Charles Taylor went  
122 through that tribe, which was actually my tribe, went through them to use them to fight  
123 against Samuel K. Doe who was the president then.
- 124 B: Mmm.
- 125 E: Yeah.
- 126 B: Mmm.
- 127 E: And they fought against each other until Samuel K. Doe was dead and Charles Taylor  
128 actually became president. So, yeah, that was the conflict. But before then, there was  
129 really no conflict between them until this time.
- 130 B: Okay.
- 131 E: [mumbled, undiscernible]
- 132 B: What, what did you say the name of your tribe was? What is it called?
- 133 E: Um, they called Gio, is called Dan, too. Dan, like the tribe of Israel, is called Dan, yeah.
- 134 B: Oh, Dan. Okay. [pause, writing] And do people, like the Americo-Liberians and different  
135 tribes, they get married, in between different people with no problem? Or do they stay in  
136 the same group when they marry?

- 137 E: No, you can marry anybody you want. Uh, any tribe, any Americo-Liberians, they can  
138 marry anyone they want to. Um. . . Marriage is a big traditional thing for us, for the  
139 traditional people, uh, our people, and uh, this is one thing that is very misinterpreted by a  
140 lot of foreign people, because we do the traditional thing that called 'dowry,' which of  
141 course our people, my mother want me to go through that way if I'm in Liberia getting  
142 married. Um, whether is an American, whether is an Americo-Liberian, whoever it is,  
143 they like you to go back the traditional way which of course is, um, John's entire family:  
144 his father, his uncles, would have to come to my people and say, "We like your  
145 daughter."
- 146 B: Ahhh.
- 147 E: Yeah. And, uh, when my people are giving me to John, they are not giving me to John as  
148 an individual, they are giving me to a family, especially to his father. So that in case  
149 anything happen to me, my people go to his father and say, "What happened to our  
150 daughter?" So John cannot just get up by himself and tell me, "Get out of my house!"  
151 because his father will say, "No, you are not the one who brought her. Her parents gave  
152 her to me." So when our people do the traditional thing, it kinda prevent uh, divorce.  
153 Yeah, it prevents, um, divorce, it protects the children, because if John dies, my people  
154 are going to come, they did that when John father died, because they actually gave me to  
155 John's father. So my brothers--my father is not alive, he is dead--and my younger  
156 brothers, I am older than them, but they went to Jacob,\* John older brother, who went to  
157 bury his father, and said, "Your father took our daughter--he took our sister, our father is  
158 not here, so he's not here. . . Who is going to take care of our sister?" So Jacob had to say,  
159 Jacob had to say, "I will take care of your sister."
- 160 B: Huh. Interesting.
- 161 E: Yeah.
- 162 B: So, so it's a family. . .
- 163 E: It's a whole family thing, is not an individual thing. And that's why, when John's father  
164 goes to my parents, that's when he gave a bride price, and the bride price is like a gift  
165 [with emphasis] like, "this is a gift to you to show you I love your daughter." Is not really  
166 buying the woman because they say that, uh, people interpret, "You pay money for your  
167 wife?" No! It's a gift of appreciation for this beautiful bride you gave our family.
- 168 B: Mmmm. Mmm. That's, that's neat. That's interesting to, to hear about [laughs]. I just  
169 wanna. . . yeah. Okay. I just wanted to check it was still recording. Um, when you, you  
170 said you came in 2000, no, John, John came, you both. . .
- 171 E: Yeah, John came, no John came in 2000 and I came in 2002.
- 172 B: Okay. So you did not come as refugees then, you came a different, a different way.
- 173 E: Yeah, John was here already, he came on a student visa and I came on. . . [pause] an F-2,  
174 like the student's spouse.

- 175 B: Okay. [pause, writing] So when you came to the US, what, what was the adaptation  
176 process like for you? What was it like for you to adjust to life in the US?
- 177 E: It was hard. It was hard. First of all, um, coming to the US, I knew a lot of people here  
178 but it was very lonely for me from the beginning [pause] because, uh, it was like stripping  
179 me out of everything. No family, I missed my family so much, and um, John would go,  
180 he would stay doing his school work like all [indistinguishable] we moved to Chicago  
181 and he would go to school, he would go to the library, and from the library he would go  
182 around to find some work to do to pay our rent, and the church things all day, and this is  
183 something that I wasn't used to. Back home, I was used to being outside, I was used to  
184 seeing my family, I was used to seeing friends, and moving around but just stay in the  
185 house? In Wheaton, like you know, and just look and you don't see people you know. . .
- 186 B: No! [Laughs]
- 187 E: It was very, very lonely.
- 188 B: No one outside!
- 189 E: [Laughs] Especially winter, I would cry and say, "Why? I really want to go back home,  
190 it's too lonely!"
- 191 B: Ohhh.
- 192 E: But it took some time to get adjusted to living here, but it's completely different from the  
193 life I lived.
- 194 B: Mmm hmmm. What, what helped you to adjust, do you think?
- 195 E: Well. . . I think I start [indistinguishable] but there was one friend from First Baptist, I  
196 went, there was a First Baptist that was close to us, so I, I walked there, and I tell John,  
197 "this is close to us, let's go there." And we went on a Sunday and they talk about their  
198 women's meeting on Tuesday which was like just walking distance from my house, and  
199 when I went to the first Tuesday meeting there was a girl there called Angie\*, uh, her  
200 husband used to work with World Relief, I've forgotten his last name, it was Bill\*, World  
201 Relief, I don't know which one he worked with, but he travels a lot. And I met her there  
202 and she asked me, "Are you new to town?" So we had a plan that every Tuesday she  
203 would pick me up and take me to her house for a bowl of soup, just to help me get out of  
204 the house, and then there are other friends who came and volunteer, if you want to go  
205 shop, if you want to go to places, they do that, and um, Justin\*, the boy that always spend  
206 time with us, his mom, she knew us before we got here because John older brother  
207 worked for her and she would volunteer once a month to take me to shopping, and take  
208 me to places, and show me what to do, show me a lot of things here, "You have a lot of  
209 kids, this is what you do when you have a lot of kids, this is what you do to save money."  
210 So she's been like a mentor and a big sister from the day I entered the country.
- 211 B: Hmm. Hmm. That's, that's really neat.

- 212 E: A lot of people came along, but she was there from the day I came til, up til now, she still  
213 stand by me.
- 214 B: So when, when you first moved to the US, did you know other Liberians?
- 215 E: Ehh, yes. In Philadelphia, we lived in, uh, John cousin place but we were there for just  
216 four months.
- 217 B: Okay.
- 218 E: Of course, they were all go to work, and I had Michael\* [son], he was a year old. He was,  
219 uh, 18 months old, and uh, we would be in the house for hours by ourself, but later they  
220 would come at night, John come from school very late. But when we moved Chicago, the  
221 Liberians I knew were all working, they work extra hours, and it was just hard to see  
222 them.
- 223 B: Hmm. Hmm. Yeah. . . [pause] Um, thinking about other Liberians and the Liberian  
224 community that, that you're working with now with the church, um, do they. . . do they  
225 talk to you about what kind of trauma they might have experienced in Liberia, or what  
226 their life was like before in Liberia?
- 227 E: Well, yeah, we do talk about that sometimes. We do. [Thoughtfully] Especially when you  
228 have death or something happening back home, or some family member call you, it  
229 brings back a lot of memories because you remember what you went through. And it's  
230 not possible to get a whole country out. So, yeah. Those, those are the times that we talk  
231 about what really happened to us, because you think about how much you and your  
232 family members suffer, and it's just hard to explain to anybody what you go through  
233 when there's a war. . . [trails off] unless somebody walk through it but, is, is difficult and  
234 it's a lot, and it's painful to overthink it.
- 235 B: Mmm hmm.
- 236 E: Or rethink it. It's painful.
- 237 B: Right. Do you, do you think that what people have experienced--if they've had painful  
238 experiences in their past--how do you think that maybe affects their life now in the US?  
239 Or, or do you think it, it affects their life now?
- 240 E: It does. It affect their life, it affect us a lot. It does. It does affect your life. It change you  
241 from being different, and, uh, I know, I grew up knowing myself as a different person and  
242 felt I was different but after everything we walk through, is like, I became a complete  
243 different person. Things that you value, things that were so important to you, you come to  
244 a place like, you don't care for that anymore. And is just one focus in life is make  
245 yourself happy and you know, love the Lord, because life actually  
246 like [indistinguishable] become meaningless in so many ways. And is, is funny that,  
247 where if we have a chance, we would send almost everything back home and you at work  
248 and you find a pair of slippers, you want to wrap it in a basket and send it back home!  
249 And [laughs] I was talking to your mom who visit the other day somebody gave me some

250 old shoes and I was wondering, like, "I have to send it home because there are people  
251 there that don't even have this to wear! And [laughs] you know, you find in the street and  
252 you remember, "Oh! I [indistinguishable] to wear, and is, is difficult, especially with all  
253 our family members back home we have a government that does not provide job for most  
254 of our people, is like, right now, Liberia is, the last statistic was like 80% unemployment.  
255 So what do you do with such a country?"

256 B: Oh my.

257 E: Yeah, what do you do with such a country? When you have so many family members  
258 that don't have job, not that they can't work, they all have to go on a farm, and the farm is  
259 not enough to provide both food and the needs for the people. So the war has taken us far  
260 back [with emphasis] that, you know, it affect your whole life, what you do, how you  
261 live, it affect it a lot.

262 B: Mmm hmm. You mentioned [pause] your relationship with God becoming the most  
263 important thing--do you think that people's faith grew stronger through the experiences  
264 that they've had, or that they've focused more on their faith than, than they did before?

265 E: Well, there are two ways. Some people got weaker and some people got stronger. But  
266 during the war, I promise you, everybody in Liberia faith grew strong. I mean, especially  
267 the women, people everywhere were praying and crying and for some people over there,  
268 they came to a land where there's a lot of opportunities and they forgot, and for many of  
269 them, just imagine where God took you from, that's always the sign of being grateful to  
270 God and just holding onto your faith, for me, that's what it did for me.

271

272 B: Mmm hmm.

273 E: And for a lot of people. But for some, no. Not everybody.

274 B: Mmm hmm. You said especially for women. . . do you see that pattern in the Liberian  
275 community that the women take more leadership with faith, or why do you say 'especially  
276 for women'?

277 E: Uh, during the war, it was actually the women, there were women prayer group all over  
278 Liberia. Here, is different because there's a lot of demand for work. So, the Liberian  
279 women are hard workers. [Laughs] That's what everybody say, that Liberian women  
280 work hard. Maybe it's the African thing that the women have more work to do than the  
281 men. But there's so much focus on their work that you don't really see that because some  
282 of them is [unintelligible] and if you're working five days a week, six days a week, to pay  
283 your bills, you know, most of the people that live here, they work for two people! They  
284 paying bills and they're taking care of mom and dad home. Or you're taking care of  
285 brothers and sisters home. Or you have to help somebody go to school. So, if they have  
286 full time work here, is hard to come together as a group. But individually, I know they all  
287 hold onto God, remembering that was our only hope during the war.

- 288 B: Mmm hmm, mmm hmm. [pause] Um, thinking about the transition process and the  
289 adaptation process for, for refugees, if you can just imagine that I was a Liberian refugee  
290 who had just arrived here in the US, what advice would you give me to help me with the  
291 transition process?
- 292 E: Well. . . [chuckles]. What advice would I give you? First of all, if you come as a refugee,  
293 what is most important is for somebody to listen to your story.
- 294 B: Hmm.
- 295 E: Because there's so much in the refugee that wanna pour out. And, uh, I would first of all  
296 give the refugee time to pour out all his hurts and everything that he has gone through.  
297 And, uh, the next thing, if there's a way to maybe go through, uh, some psychological  
298 thing to advise them, like go for counseling or things like that. Because that through that,  
299 they help them pour the st- story out, and, uh most times you come, you don't think it's  
300 important, and. . . when we got to Wheaton, there was this, uh community outreach and,  
301 uh, they made a search, they felt that my two boys, because they were older, they needed  
302 to go there, my daughter was seven when we came. And, and I said, "I don't think they  
303 need it!" I'm like, "they're doing well in school, making good choices." She said, "they  
304 came from the war! They need to go, both of them!" And I said, "okay, I'll let them go".  
305 And there were things that they said that, when the counselor called me, and I was  
306 shocked that they remember those things.
- 307 B: Really.
- 308 E: I didn't know they even remember them. And my daughter went to a church somebody,  
309 uh, invited her and the Sunday School teacher asked her and she explained some things  
310 that she was only seven when we came! And I'm like, "I didn't know that she remember  
311 all of this!" And I refuse to go. But later, later three, four years after my stay in America,  
312 I regretted why I did not go through the counseling, too, like my children.
- 313 B: Hmm.
- 314 E: Because I think, uh, is good to find somebody, cultural counseling, and they pour out  
315 their heart and they can relieve some of the stress and the hurts, and then you can start,  
316 then I can start to tell you, "this is a new place. Life is going to be different." But pour  
317 yourself out first. So I think listening to the refugee story is the number one thing. I did  
318 not come as a refugee but I live as a refugee in Africa, and I'm here as a refugee because  
319 this is not my home, and I think that is something that I really think each person need.  
320 There's so much inside you that you need to pour out.
- 321 B: Mmmm. Why, why do you think at the time, you didn't want to go through counseling?
- 322 E: I was in denial. I thought I was okay. Until after three, four years, and I saw myself, the  
323 choices I made, things that I did, and I remember that, "Oh. This is because of what  
324 happened, what I saw."
- 325 B: Mmm.

- 326 E: So. . . [pause] now I, I suffer it a little bit, I suffer it a long time, and I regretted not going,  
327 but. . . .
- 328 B: Mmm hmm.
- 329 E: Yeah. Sometimes you don't know that you need it, but we do need it when you come. I  
330 [unintelligible] there should be a place open where you can go through some counseling  
331 that helps the refugee a lot.
- 332 B: Mmm hmm. Um, you mentioned that most Liberians speak English, they, they learn  
333 English in school or they already speak English, um, but I know that some Americans  
334 have difficulty understanding the accent, or the variety of English. . . is, how do, how do  
335 Liberians feel about that communication difficulty?
- 336 E: Well, they don't feel good, but they know it's a complete different way you speak here  
337 than how we speak home. Because what we learn, the slave that came, the way they learn  
338 it is taught, is taught in the cities, and is taken from the cities to the villages. So most of  
339 the refugees here are not children of the free slaves, because the free slaves wanted to  
340 maintain their relationship with America, so most of them, their wives would come back  
341 here to have their children. So during the war, they didn't go through what we went  
342 through, they would just come and "Oh, I was born in America," and they uh, got  
343 airlifted.
- 344 B: Ahhh.
- 345 E: So by the time your English have come from Monrovia through another person who learn  
346 through you and get to the interior, is completely different from what you say there.  
347 [coughs] And most people did not go to school to learn it, if you go to school, you will go  
348 a little bit higher, but most of the people here did not go to school because it's like a  
349 whole generation of not going to school in our country. A whole generation!
- 350 B: Because of the war?
- 351 E: Because of the war, yeah. Is the ten years, maybe like the first five years of the war  
352 there's completely no school in the whole nation. And then after that, we came back, my  
353 husband and I, we were refugees in Ivory Coast, and then the church call us back, and he  
354 came and open a little school and--overcrowded, you don't even have the [unintelligible]  
355 stuff, nothing-- and so lotta places there was just no school. Like ten years you have no  
356 school in most part of the country. So that's a whole generation there without school. So  
357 many of the people that. . . the war came in '89. So if somebody was born close to those  
358 years, to 19- to 2000, is like school was out of there. So they learn the English but  
359 [unintelligible] some of them from Ivory Coast, so is hard for them. Unless they were our  
360 older generation that went to school. But the generation after ours did not go to school.  
361 And that was one reason why we could not go back home because we won't take our kids  
362 back when there's no school.

- 363 B: Mmm hmm. What is, what is the situation like right now in Liberia as far as school and  
364 security and that kind of thing?
- 365 E: Well, it's been a rough thing, it's been like eight years of peace and calmness, it's been  
366 calm, it's been peaceful, school has been going on and we hoping that it continue. There's  
367 been, there's been school open in a lot of places but. . . [sighs] it's not up to what you  
368 would really call a standard, standard school. But now the children are in school. Yeah,  
369 and health is coming up slowly, because that was one of the worst things that went down  
370 to the drain [with emphasis] during the war, and that is why, that was why when the  
371 Ebola came, it wiped so many people away! Because there was no good health, sy- ah,  
372 system.
- 373 B: So that's slowly improving?
- 374 E: Slowly, yeah. School is much, much better than health right now.
- 375 B: Have you gone back?
- 376 E: No. [quietly] Sadly, I haven't been able to go back. I'm hoping to.
- 377 B: Um, when you're talking with other Liberians, what kinds of, what kinds of things cause  
378 problems for them here in the US, or what, what kind of difficulties do they have?
- 379 E: Ummm. . . like you said, the English is a problem for most Liberians. . . because is  
380 different from how they learn it, and like I told you, most of the people here did not go to  
381 school--that generation that came in the '80s, mid '80s down, and that's most of them  
382 here. . . to during the war, so that whole generation there was really no school in Liberia,  
383 so it's difficult for them to understand English. And, um, another thing is, um, discipline;  
384 life with our kids and our parents is different from what we do here. . . especially when it  
385 come to discipline, child abuse, everything. That's completely different from what we do  
386 home. I mean, home is what you guys call 'old school' here is what we still have there.  
387 Um, our idea with my mother if you ask who [unintelligible] and she calls me on the  
388 phone and she's telling me something that I don't like, I have to say in a real decent and  
389 nice way. I'm not going to be telling her, "No, Mom! That's not right!" That is very  
390 disrespectful for our people. So, and when our parents treat us like that, and our kids are  
391 not understanding us, it's hard for us. And yeah, so. . . um, the way we do our kids, if I  
392 like [unintelligible] my husband was talking at Calvary [their church] he said for example  
393 here, a love for a child is be with them everywhere they go, their games and everything.  
394 And he said, no! Africa, our, if we love our children, we provide their needs! We don't  
395 have to be running to your game and everything! [laughs]
- 396 B: [Laughs]
- 397 E: I say- he said, "I carry everybody laughing!" he said. That's the way Liberian look at it!  
398 So yeah, it's difficult. Time is another thing that is difficult for us here. . . because if you  
399 invite them to your program, as a Liberian back home, all I worry about is to show up to  
400 your program, doesn't matter the time! [Laughs]

- 401 B: Ahhh!
- 402 E: I can say, "Oh, I went to the program." Everybody, "Were you there?" "Yeah!" Nobody's  
403 going to ask you what time did you get there! [Laughs]
- 404 B: [Laughs]
- 405 E: Those are just few of the things I can think of that we struggle with when we, when we  
406 come here. We have to learn it the hard way. [Laughs]
- 407 B: Mmm hmm. Um, talking about relationship between parents and kids, what kind of  
408 differences can you see between generations, like children of Liberian refugees or  
409 immigrants who are growing up now, um, what kind of cultural differences do you see?
- 410 E: Our children actually adopt the American culture. . . [pause] um, my, my three oldest  
411 children, they are very different because they have half of the Liberian thing in them.  
412 And my two last kids, they are Americans! [Laughs] They talk to me like an American  
413 talking, but my other older kids will speak to me like Liberians. My son, even though he's  
414 married now, but there are things that I can tell him, I say, "can you do this for your  
415 mom?" And he can do that easily, and tell wife, "Oh, mom wants me to do this." Rather  
416 than my son Michael, who was just one when I came, he will say, "you act too  
417 demanding!" [Laughs] "Mom, you just tell people what you want!" [Laughs] That's a big  
418 difference in the younger generation, just here than the ones that grew up home. Because  
419 they know home, you know, mom and dad you never get old. They will always tell you  
420 what they like for you to do for them. [chuckles]
- 421 B: So, so there's a difference in respect, like the level of respect that's shown to parents?
- 422 E: Yes. Yes. But for them, it's not disrespect, it's just expressing yourself, they don't care  
423 how you do it! Um, for Liberian African parent, there are ways that you express yourself!  
424 You don't just say it any way you want to say it! [Chuckles]
- 425 B: So may- maybe, like not as direct. . .
- 426 E: Yeah.
- 427 B: Say it, like, in a nicer way or a softer way or something?
- 428 E: And, uh, it's hard to even say no to your parents.
- 429 B: Hmm.
- 430 E: Yeah. They, that respect that the Bible says, 'obey your parents' is part of the African  
431 rule. [chuckles] It's hard to tell your parents no if they ask you to do something. You want  
432 to do it at all costs. [Laughs] But, uh, this generation will not do it, they would tell you,  
433 "No. I don't think I can do that." [Laughs]
- 434 B: Oh. Well, I think maybe it would be good for our kids to go to Africa and learn some  
435 lessons! [laughs]

- 436 E: A lot of Liberians do that when their kids are really giving trouble, they take them home,  
437 and it helps them. They come back and, there was a video I was watching for a girl who  
438 grew up here and she came back, and she's, she just, her father put it on Face- uh, on,  
439 Messenger and she's just like, "I, I have learned that, you know, I have so much, and I  
440 mean, I can't imagine what I saw back in Liberia." She was a baby when she came here  
441 so her parents wanted her to see what they feel, and they took her in the villages and to  
442 see how the children look, and see what they do, and she, they put her face all on  
443 Messenger, and she was like, "it was just a good thing to go home and learn how to treat  
444 my parents and how to appreciate the things I have."
- 445 B: Wow.
- 446 E: They have so much. They have so much here! They even have so much, everybody is  
447 giving you something! My son, um, he went last year, November, and there were clothes  
448 that, every time I pack the clothes, I send it and [unintelligible] clothes, they're not using,  
449 I will just wash it and send it, and then send those things home. And he called me and,  
450 "Mom, guess what?" I said, "What?" He said, my old pants that I didn't want, somebody  
451 was wearing them, and they say, "your mom send it!" [Laughs] And he goes, "Mom, just  
452 keep sending them." [Laughs] Yeah, he couldn't believe that somebody was so happy to  
453 use his old pants! He like, Mom never threw anything away, I say, "there are people who  
454 use it! It's not very expensive sending it! So why not? "Oh Mom, you still- these, these  
455 are too old!" and he was just so shocked that some of the very old clothes people were so  
456 happy wearing it.
- 457 B: Hmm. It's, it's a good, it's a good thing for kids to understand. . .
- 458 E: Yeah.
- 459 B: Kids here in this culture, it's difficult for them to understand that.
- 460 E: They never appreciate how much they have until you take them out of this country,  
461 maybe they go other places and then they see, "Oh! Wow!" Yeah, I just went to  
462 [unintelligible] yesterday I collected some old dolls, so bad they can't go, before  
463 Christmas last year I sent a few dolls there before Christmas and then my, my mom took  
464 and divided in a few girls in the church and they were so happy. [laughs] Is so happy!  
465 "Ohh! We got a doll!" And then my son took their pictures and he said, "You don't know  
466 how excited they were for those old Barbies! Somebody use it already, they so happy for  
467 it!" [Laughs]
- 468 B: [Laughs] Wow.
- 469 E: But it's very good to carry the kids to see what other kids go through in this world.
- 470 B: Mmm hmm. Um, what, what differences in Liberian culture are there between men, men  
471 and women's roles? Is that, is that different than you see here in American culture?

- 472 E: Mmm. Yeah, there is a lot of difference, yeah. One of the things is there are certain jobs  
473 that men don't normally do in Africa. And you do and people think that, it's not good for  
474 you. Like for example, men would not really do dishes.
- 475 B: Ah.
- 476 E: Men would not cook. That's a woman job. [Laughs] I say "share" with a man, "Oh, that's  
477 a woman's job!" [Laughs] And well, men don't really do much with their children. The  
478 women do most of the things with the children like taking care of the kids, so, yeah, but  
479 here, men and women do almost equal and men can cook, men can do the dishes with  
480 their wives. Those are different things. And when it comes to family, there's a whole part  
481 of the family, most of it is the women's job. And men just got few part of the farm things  
482 to do, they do the brushing, they do, they fell the tree in the rest of the forest so the  
483 woman, so yeah, when it comes to household work, and other things, there are specific  
484 things that men don't do.
- 485 B: Mmm hmm. Um, I noticed that in the church service, most of the men were sitting on one  
486 side. . .
- 487 E: [Laughs]
- 488 B: . . .and most of the women were sitting on the other side; is, is that traditional in, in  
489 church services in Liberia?
- 490 E: That is a bit traditional in a church that we came from. I didn't come from them, my  
491 husband came from them but I've been part of them for a long time. So we call it  
492 [unintelligible] church. [laughs] Uh, they used to do that, but now for this generation  
493 now, even in Liberia, they don't do it anymore.
- 494 B: Okay.
- 495 E: Is just, it just happen unconsciously. I think that's what happen, yeah, women used to sit  
496 one side, men sit one side, that was introduced to them by the missionaries! British  
497 missionaries brought that style. They don't really do it again, if we do it, is just  
498 unconscious.
- 499 B: Mmm. Probably their friends are sitting there so they want to sit with their friends. Uh  
500 huh. Um, also on Sunday at the baby dedication, John mentioned that in African culture,  
501 it's traditional for many women to help raise the children. How does that work in Liberian  
502 culture?
- 503 E: Well, if I live in this neighborhood, if Andrew\* [their youngest son] is doing anything  
504 that he shouldn't do and your dad [who lives next door] see him out there, your dad  
505 would discipline him without telling me. So it don't have to be, "I'm not your mom!" You  
506 don't say that. That's- so, if the discipline for Andrew is whipping him, when he do  
507 anything or take somebody thing, and your dad see him out there to the school and they  
508 say, "Andrew took my thing," he would just say, "oh, that's my neighbor's son" and he  
509 would discipline him there before he would come and tell us. That's [unintelligible] 'it

- 510 takes a village to raise a child' that's how we say in Africa. So, I mean, you, you, because  
511 of that, you are careful because you are not only afraid of your parents but you're afraid  
512 of anyone who know you around there can discipline you.
- 513 B: Mmm mmm. And do, do women like neighbors or family like help to take care of other  
514 people's kids?
- 515 E: Yeah.
- 516 B: Yeah?
- 517 E: We don't do child care, and that was one of the blessing for me, when I came to Chicago,  
518 and when I went to register Michael at the preschool, I- I was working in the morning. So  
519 when I went to register him at the preschool, the lady at the preschool, she was from  
520 another country, she's from. . . Vietnam, and she told me, "Oh! There's another lady from  
521 Sierra Leone, neighboring to your country, who just registered her child here. So, this is  
522 her number if you can call her and you guys can work together." And that was good for  
523 me because then I call this lady and I said, "I'm registering my child but I go to school- I  
524 go to work in the morning." And she said, "Oh! You can drop your child to me because I  
525 go to work 3:00 and when you got home when you can pick them up, I go too." So we  
526 did that for the whole year. And that's the kinda way we do it. So I dropped Michael  
527 there, uh, at the time, Andrew wasn't born, I go to work 6:30 and I drop Michael at her  
528 place with all his stuff, his lunch and thing, and she drop him at the school, they go to  
529 school, they used to go like around 11:30 and then they come at 3:30, so I pick them up  
530 3:30, and keep them, her husband comes from work 6:00 and he comes and takes his  
531 child. So we, we babysit, back home you don't need babysitter, your neighbor, anybody  
532 can babysit your child.
- 533 B: Mmm. And you just do it to help each other out, you don't pay or anything like that? It's  
534 just. . .
- 535 E: [Laughs] No, just we do it to help out.
- 536 B: . . . just to help out.
- 537 E: Yeah. Especially if you have a relative there. If they have a relative in the neighborhood,  
538 they won't even stay home. That's why we're used to being outside because I would go to  
539 my aunt place, and I would play with her kids and you know, all I have to do, let my  
540 mom know that I'm going to my aunt place, I'm going to this place, and. . . the doors are  
541 always open.
- 542 B: Hmm.
- 543 E: [Laughs] Yeah.
- 544 B: Um, oh, also, um your husband, John mentioned on Sunday in his sermon, something  
545 about juju? Like, he said something about, like mixing religion with something else.

- 546 E: Well, there are, there are juju people and you cannot deny it because the devil is real and  
547 there are these people who like how you call them medium and spiritists here, those are  
548 the same type of people who for them are going to dress themselves all fearful, put all  
549 kinds of junk on them and be fearful and they, claim to talk to the dead, and they can tell  
550 you about your future, and they can tell you somebody want to harm you and if you want  
551 to protect somebody too they can do that for you, and you pay them. So there are these  
552 people around, and, and, uh, in Liberia and every part of Africa. But here, say mix with  
553 the church because there's some people that will come in the name of God, too, to do that,  
554 and tell you, "Oh, I, I'm gonna pray for you and when I pray I see vision about you!" And  
555 this, this kind of religion is just over all Africa now. That they see vision, and they see  
556 your enemy coming, and they can pray against your enemy, so I think that's what he was  
557 talking about to be careful for that.
- 558 B: Okay.
- 559 E: They are actually false teachers. But there are juju people, and some of them turn their  
560 own to church.
- 561 B: Okay. Mmm. Um, have you noticed a difference between eye contact between Americans  
562 and Liberian culture? Like, is there a difference between, like, how much you look  
563 directly at somebody in Liberian culture?
- 564 E: We don't look directly at somebody. You look directly in somebody's eyes is almost like  
565 a disrespect and that was one of the things we have to learn when we came here. When  
566 you're talking to somebody, look in their face but we don't, we don't. Especially for  
567 somebody older than you, looking directly in their eyes is more of a disrespect, you  
568 know. We don't do that. But here, how they say, "Look directly in their eyes!" [Laughs]
- 569 B: Was that difficult for you to, to learn?
- 570 E: Uh, that wasn't difficult as calling an older person with their name. That was the most  
571 difficult thing, um, for me because for all my aunts, all the ones that are older than my  
572 mother, I will call them 'Mom' too.
- 573 B: Mmm.
- 574 E: Only the ones that are younger and I call them sister and anybody that is of my mother's  
575 age in Africa, we never call them by their name.
- 576 B: Hmm.
- 577 [phone rings]
- 578 E: So, any of my children. . . let's see. . . [gets up to check on phone] [inaudible] So, um. .
- 579 B: So you call everybody 'Mom'?
- 580 E: Uh, not everyone 'Mom', we call somebody 'sister' if there's a, a teacher, if there's a  
581 teacher I would say Miss Jan\*, like your mom I would say 'Miss Jan' and, but I would

582 have to put some handle to it instead of just call you with your name, that right there, that  
583 is so much of a disrespect for us. And, uh, there was an older lady who my brother-in-law  
584 in Minnesota and his wife has taught over there, called Joyce, they used to be in Wheaton  
585 there, and she have talked with them, to help write our affidavit to help us come here.  
586 And they did that, and we brought the children and she- her children are my age, and for  
587 my children to call her by her name, that was difficult for them, and was difficult for me,  
588 and I, "they not ever to call your name. . ." "Just call me Joyce!" I don't want my children  
589 being- calling people like that! Older people, you know! You can say Mrs. Smith or  
590 something, and she said, "No, I like to be called Joyce." [Laughs] So yeah. Calling people  
591 with their name. I mean, looking into their eyes while [unintelligible] while calling really  
592 old people by their name, is hard.

593 B: Mmmm.

594 E: We have a missionary in, uh, Wheaton called Margaret Erickson\* uh, they were  
595 missionaries in Liberia for long, long time, for so many years. And they moved, they  
596 retired and moved here. They have five children and they have four in Liberia and have  
597 only one of their children here. So they lived most of their life there. And all of the  
598 Liberians go to her house like, it was like our second house. She goes in the community  
599 to find out if any new Liberian in town, and she would say, "Come, this is your house."  
600 And so everybody call her 'Aunt Margaret' and that how she love to be called because  
601 that's how they call her in Liberia.

602 B: Mmm.

603 E: So, I will tell Joyce about it, "If you would call Margaret 'Aunt Margaret' not that she's  
604 our auntie, but it's like we have to put some handle to her name." "Oh," she started, "can  
605 still call me Joyce!" [Laughs]

606 B: That's funny! You know, that's interesting because in the South of the United States, in  
607 the Southern states, it's a different culture, and that's common in the South to, like in  
608 Georgia, you know, those states in the southern United States, they, they say 'Miss' like,  
609 like you said, Miss Jan, they would say 'Miss' in front of an older woman's name.

610 E: Yes! [Laughs]

611 B: But here in the Midwest, no. [Laughs]

612 E: Another- little kids call people with their name and, it's hard. [Laughs] My daughter is  
613 married to an American, um, they will be here Sunday, and I was like, "Should I tell him  
614 our culture?" I say, "I live here, so. . ." anyway, he lost his mother in 2015. So, uh, one  
615 day he asked me, said, "Can I call you Mom?" I said, "That's how I like to be called by  
616 my son-in-law!" [Laughs] He said, "Oh! Okay!" He, he said, "I wanted to call you like  
617 that but I'm afraid." I'm- "Yes! That's how our in-laws- because I would call John parents  
618 the way he will call his parents, and he will call my parents the way I call my parents. So  
619 when we dowry, when his parents marry me, now my parents are saying, "These are your

- 620 new parents. Treat them the same way you treat us. Call them the same way you call us."  
621 [Laughs] So, that was nice that my son-in-law just adopted our system! [Laughs]
- 622 B: [Laughs] That's neat. Um, what about, have you noticed a difference between the use of  
623 silence in conversations between American and Liberian culture, um, for example, is it  
624 polite to pause or wait before answering a question, or at certain times in a conversation?  
625 Or have you noticed any difference like that?
- 626 E: Culturally for us, it's good to listen before you talk. It's good to pause and hear what  
627 the person's going to say.
- 628 B: Mmm.
- 629 E: And then you answer. So for us, I- I don't really notice the difference between the  
630 American, but our people taught us that it's always good to just wait and listen before you  
631 can say something!
- 632 B: Mmm.
- 633 E: Especially if somebody invited you, they want to hear what you have to say first, so, we  
634 would be silent. Sometimes, the silence is you didn't understand it and you don't want to  
635 ask, that happen too, but most times is good to just wait and hear what they have to tell  
636 you.
- 637 B: Hmm. Is, is there anything else that, that you would like to talk about that you've noticed  
638 culturally, differences, or difficulties, or anything else that you would like to mention?
- 639 E: The one thing my husband told the church here and I would talk that we have problem  
640 with here too is like, is that in Liberia, overpromising is, to us is not a lie, but to an  
641 American is a lie that they get disappointed, and he gave an example [Laughs] he say,  
642 like for example if I'm going to a party, Liberians we love goat. That's our favorite meat.  
643 Every Liberian love goat. And he say, for example if I'm planning a party here, like  
644 Thanksgiving, we're coming together, my family is coming together, and uh, I promise,  
645 "I'm going to buy you guys a goat." And that time come, I don't have a goat! I can bring  
646 \$20, or a leg of a goat and say, "I promised a goat, I don't have goat but I- I promise a  
647 goat, I don't have a whole one but this is a leg of a goat." And everybody will be happy  
648 that I remember my promise, and I fulfill my promise! Whereas, the American were like,  
649 "You promise a whole goat, not a leg!" [Laughs]
- 650 B: [Laughs]
- 651 E: So we call that overpromising, is like breaking promise, but once they do part [with  
652 emphasis] of it, it mean they have done it. But an American will expect you to fulfill your  
653 promise to the fullest! [Laughs]
- 654 B: [Laughs]
- 655 E: So, just a little bit of culture difference because our parents would do it and say, "This is  
656 what I give for what I said."

- 657 B: Mmm hmm.
- 658 E: [Laughs] [Unintelligible] . . . but I got something." And everybody will be happy that at  
659 least he remember the promise and did something! [Chuckles]
- 660 B: [Laughs] What, what is maybe an example of something that you experienced, like a  
661 misunderstanding or something that happened to you when you first moved to the US?
- 662 E: Mmm. . . [sighs] Uhhh. . . cannot think of an example now. . . [laughs] it's been awhile!  
663 [laughs] I know the biggest thing was my loneliness was the biggest thing that I  
664 experienced. I was really, really lonely then. And wonder, just like, [quietly] "I'd rather  
665 go back to the war home than to be so lonely with no family, no friend and then stay in  
666 the house the TV is your only friend. No!"
- 667 B: Mmm.
- 668 E: I'm used to being outside, and visiting, and playing around, and talking to people and  
669 doing lot of things. Uh, that- that was a tough experience for me. Is hard, and that is why  
670 most our older people stay alone here, cause most their life they live under the sun! We  
671 don't have snow! We don't have this kinda cold! And they can't stay in the house! So they  
672 used to, if my mom would come here, she would be gardening throughout, she would be  
673 in the garden, she would be [unintelligible], she would be doing this, she would be  
674 outside there in the field! And for you to just confine her to a- a place, and the cold, too  
675 was something that I've never experienced, the cold was. . . the year we came it was so  
676 cold! It was so cold! [Laughs] I mean, I want to be out there but I'm freezing!
- 677 B: [Laughs]
- 678 E: It was cold! [Chuckles] I would double the clothes, double the clothes, wear long john,  
679 wear stockings, wear long john, wear everything, and still be cold! [Laughs]
- 680 B: [Laughs] Oh, I'm sure.
- 681 E: Oh, was so cold!
- 682 B: Oh. . . Yeah, that's, that's something that's difficult- even for us and we were born here--  
683 but the winter, it's hard. . . because people- have you heard of 'cabin fever'? They call it  
684 cabin fever. Like when you're in the house, and maybe because of the weather you can't  
685 go outside, then you get so restless, and in a bad mood because you're just closed inside  
686 the house. [Laughs]
- 687 E: Yeah, I think I was. [Laughs] Sometime I would literally cry, John coming around  
688 [unintelligible] "I'm so lonely!" [Laughs] Yeah.
- 689 B: Ah, I can't- I can't even imagine. Yeah. Is- can you think of any examples where you saw  
690 something that some Americans were doing or saying, and you thought, "Why, why are  
691 you doing this?" Or it didn't make sense to you?

- 692 E: Well, um. . . [pause] [sighs] I- I don't know, um. . . [pause] I don't really think about any  
693 example now like I said, the men work. . . We had a friend who was a lawyer and we go  
694 to, he invited us, he and his wife and we went to their house and he's like, and the wife,  
695 we were all sitting in the living room and the wife, he said, "My wife is going to entertain  
696 you guys while I go to cook." An African? Oh. . . that's a taboo. [Laughs]
- 697 B: [Laughs]
- 698 E: And you tell everybody, "And she was comfortable sitting there?" [Laughs]
- 699 B: [Laughs]
- 700 E: The kitchen is for the woman, is not for the man. [Chuckles] But what happen for me,  
701 and the good thing with both John and I was that because his father worked with the  
702 church and worked with the translation, so his father work with missionaries, and they  
703 grew up among missionaries who came from here, so they learn a lot of things from here.  
704 And, uh, my mother work in the city, and, in the city with a concessioner area where we  
705 had Americans and, uh, Swedish people, there were both Swedish and American, a- a  
706 company but we had a lot of Americans there, so I got to see some Americans. Even the  
707 pastor from my church was an American, he came from Louisiana, he just died this year--  
708 the pastor that baptized me--
- 709 B: Hmm.
- 710 E: So, I kind of, uh, know a little bit about them, live among them, not with them but live  
711 among them and I would go to their houses and feel free, so we, we both are from the  
712 native tribe in the interior, but we grew up in a place where there were Americans too.  
713 So, it wasn't too bad of an adjustment for us.
- 714 B: Mmm hmm. You were somewhat familiar already with, with the culture.
- 715 E: Yeah, with some things. We used to go to our American pastor, his daughter was my  
716 friend, we would go to their house, play, spend the day, they were very kind. And John  
717 father work with couple of missionaries, not one, like three, four missionaries doing the  
718 translation with his father. So, um, so all their kids were there, so they, John they would  
719 play and so we were somehow, yeah, familiar with Americans already.
- 720 B: Mmm hmm. Well, thank you so much, Evelyn, I think that's, we can wrap it up there if  
721 you, if you don't have anything else you want to say?
- 722 E: Uh, I don't think I have anything else.
- 723 B: I- I really appreciate it, I- I feel like I learned so much from you!
- 724 E: [Laughs] Especially our history. Did you know Liberia were part of America?
- 725 B: You know, I did know a little bit about that, just because, um, before I've had some  
726 Liberian students. . .
- 727 E: Oh!

- 728 B: . . . in my classes, so they explained a little bit about that, but I didn't understand the  
729 whole history with the, with the US-born presidents and everything like that, I didn't, I  
730 didn't know about that.
- 731 E: Even our flags, the [unintelligible] lady that did our Liberian flag was from here,  
732 America, and so they did exactly the same flag you have, except we have one star. They  
733 have the same 11 stripe, everything. And they have reason for it, was like, "They just  
734 photocopy it!" [Laughs]
- 735 B: [Laughs]
- 736 E: And took off part of the stars and just put one star! [Laughs] And then they, even the  
737 Pledge of Allegiance is almost like what you say here. . .
- 738 B: Really?
- 739 E: Yeah, is almost, just one or two words are, is the same thing. [Laughs] And then they  
740 have Buchanan [name of city in Liberia] they have all, uh, uh those areas just like what  
741 you- [Laughs] all the names like what you have here.
- 742 B: Huh. No, that's- that's very interesting for me. I enjoyed learning about it. So, thank you!
- 743 E: You're welcome! Thanks for coming.
- 744 [shuffling noises on recording as we stand up, I press buttons on phone to stop recording]
- 745 E: John is just coming in.

