

# visited 4/29/2008

- HOME PAGE
- MY TIMES
- TODAY'S PAPER
- VIDEO
- MOST POPULAR
- TIMES TOPICS

## The New York Times

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

# U.S.

- WORLD
- U.S.
- N.Y. / REGION
- BUSINESS
- TECHNOLOGY
- SCIENCE
- HEALTH
- SPORTS
- OPINION
- ARTS
- STYLE
- TRAVEL

AUTOS

PRINT

# 'African-American' Becomes a Term for Debate

By RACHEL L. SWARNS  
Published: August 29, 2004

For a moment, the Ethiopian-born activist seemed to melt into the crowd, blending into the sea of black professors, health experts and community leaders considering how to educate blacks about the dangers of prostate cancer. But when he piped up to suggest focusing some attention on African immigrants, the dividing lines were promptly and pointedly drawn.

The focus of the campaign, the activist, Abdulaziz Kamus, was told, would be strictly on African-Americans.

"I said, 'But I am African and I am an American citizen; am I not African-American?'" said Mr. Kamus, who is an advocate for African immigrants here, recalling his sense of bewilderment. "They said 'No, no, no, not you.'"

"The census is claiming me as an African-American," said Mr. Kamus, 47, who has lived in this country for 20 years. "If I walk down the streets, white people see me as an African-American. Yet African-Americans are saying, 'You are not one of us.' So I ask myself, in this country, how do I define myself?"

That prickly question is increasingly being raised as the growing number of

- 2. David Brooks: D
  - 3. Chinese Student Home
  - 4. Flite Korean Sch Sign up for trav premier adverti
  - 5. Asia's Stunne Woman
  - 6. Young Gay Rites
  - 7. William Kristol:
  - 8. Battle in Brookly Fall: Critics Cost Dream School
  - 9. Well: College's F Apply
  - 10. Mexico City Jou With 'Virtual Kic
- [Go to Complete List »](#)

visited 4/29/2008

foreign-born blacks in this Washington suburb and elsewhere inspires a quiet debate over who can claim the term "African-American," which has rapidly replaced "black" in much of the nation's political and cultural discourse.

In the 1990's, the number of blacks with recent roots in sub-Saharan Africa nearly tripled while the number of blacks with origins in the Caribbean grew by more than 60 percent, according to demographers at the State University of New York at Albany. By 2000, foreign-born blacks constituted 30 percent of the blacks in New York City, 28 percent of the blacks in Boston and about a quarter here in Montgomery County, Md., an analysis of census data conducted at Queens College shows.

In recent years, black immigrants and their children have become more visible in universities, the workplace and in politics, with Colin L. Powell, the son of Jamaican immigrants, serving as secretary of state, and Barack Obama, born to a Kenyan father and an American mother, leading the polls in the race for a United States Senate seat in Illinois and emerging as a rising star in the Democratic Party.

The demographic shifts, which gained strength in the 1960's after changes in federal immigration law led to increased migration from Africa and Latin America, have been accompanied in some places by fears that newcomers might eclipse native-born blacks. And they have touched off delicate musings about ethnic labels, identity and the often unspoken differences among people who share the same skin color.

This month, the debate spilled into public view when Alan Keyes, the black Republican challenger for the Senate seat in Illinois, questioned whether Mr. Obama, the keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention, should claim an African-American identity.

"Barack Obama claims an African-American heritage," Mr. Keyes said on the ABC program "This Week" with George Stenhanonoulos "Barack

The New York Times



How to stretch a d

Also in Travel:

[A weekend away in Lond](#)[A weekend away in Bolog](#)[A weekend away in Ibiza](#)

RELATED ADS

- » Iraq War Terrorism
- » Iraq Sunni Conflict
- » Pictures of War
- » Jobs in Iraq
- » Protest War

INSIDE NYTIMES.CO

# visited 4/29/2008

Obama and I have the same race -- that is, physical characteristics. We are not from the same heritage."

"My ancestors toiled in slavery in this country," Mr. Keyes said. "My consciousness, who I am as a person, has been shaped by my struggle, deeply emotional and deeply painful, with the reality of that heritage."

Some black Americans argue that black immigrants, like Mr. Kamus, and the children of immigrants, like Mr. Obama and Mr. Powell, are most certainly African-American. (Mr. Obama and Mr. Powell often use that term when describing themselves.) Yet some immigrants and their children prefer to be called African or Nigerian-American or Jamaican-American, depending on their countries of origin. Other people prefer the term black, which seems to include everyone, regardless of nationality.

Mr. Keyes's comments reflect the views of a number of black Americans, including those who challenged Mr. Kamus at the meeting on prostate cancer earlier this year. Many argued that the term African-American should refer to the descendents of slaves brought to the United States centuries ago, not to newcomers who have not inherited the legacy of bondage, segregation and legal discrimination.

1 | [2](#) | [3](#) | [4](#) | [NEXT PAGE >](#)

Ads by Google

[what's this?](#)

**[African American Grants](#)**

\$30,000 in African American Grants Never Repay - Get Your Free Kit.

[AfricanAmerican.FreeGrantKit.net](http://AfricanAmerican.FreeGrantKit.net)

**[Local Dermatologists](#)**

Looking For A Dermatologist? Search Local.com To Find One!

[Local.com](http://Local.com)

**[Illegals spread diseases](#)**

Free Report: M.D. proves illegal immigrants make you sick-Literally!

[douglassreport.com/illegal\\_imm](http://douglassreport.com/illegal_imm)

visited 4/29/2008

[Back to Top](#)

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Search](#)

[Corrections](#)  
[Site Map](#)

[RSS](#)

[First Look](#)

[Help](#)

[Contact Us](#)