

# How My Family Lives in America

By Susan Kuklin

Sanu, Eric, and April are American children with families just like yours. They have parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles who love them and take care of them. Year after year, their families celebrate special days together in special ways. Because Sanu, Eric, and April each have at least one parent who did not grow up in the United States, their family heritage is an interesting mixture. Some traditions, remembered from a parent's childhood in another place, are kept alive in America. And sometimes, with the help of Sanu, Eric, and April, new traditions are started.

Here are their stories.

My name is Sanu. A long time ago, Sanu was a princess in Africa. My brother, Badu, was named after a famous warrior. He's glad about that.

We have these names because my daddy was born in Senegal, a country far away in West Africa. He moved to America to go to college. My maam bou djigen and maam bou gor, which means "daddy's mommy" and "daddy's daddy" in a language people speak in Senegal, still live there. When we visited them last year, I learned all about the Senegalese part of me. I learned to call Mommy Yay and Daddy Bay. Maam bou djigen and Maam bou gor gave Badu a drum and African clothing. He dresses African style every chance he gets.

I have an American grandmother too. She lives in a city called Baltimore, where my mother grew up. My mommy's mommy comes to visit us in New York City on weekends. Then she teaches me about good manners, about being neat and clean, about standing straight and tall.

Grandma sings to us the songs she taught Mommy. Our favorite are "Precious Lord Take My Hand" and "Hush Little Baby Don't You Cry." When Badu tries to play along on his African drum, it doesn't sound like Africa.

During the week, I go to Mommy's work after school to help out. The thing I like about my mommy's hairdressing shop is that it reminds me of how people look in Senegal. In my daddy's village, the girls weave a kind of cloth into their braid. This is called a Senegalese twist. I'm only five, so I'm still learning how to make a regular braid.

Sometimes Daddy picks me up after his work and takes me shopping for food. Daddy knows how to cook African style. Together we buy carrots, cabbage, eggplant, tomatoes, yams, and cassava, a vegetable that is like a potato.

Daddy likes to tease Mommy. "In Africa the wife gets the food and cooks it too."

"You're in America now," my mommy says, laughing.

For a special meal my daddy fixes tiebou dienn for lunch, just like his family has in Senegal. Tiebou dienn is rice and fish and vegetables. For this meal, we invite my daddy's relatives, Fifi, Sambo, and Hussane, to join us.

Before we eat, we all wash our hands the way we did in my father's village. I want everyone to hurry up.

"In Africa," my father says, "the children must be patient and wait their turn."

"You're in America now," I giggle.

At this meal, everyone dresses like people do in Senegal. We put a cloth on the floor, not on the table, since it is the custom to eat on the ground in Senegal. Everyone eats together from one big bowl. Here's the best part: we get to eat with our hands, not with forks and spoons.

Daddy shows us how to squeeze the oil out of the tiebou dienn. While we eat, we hear stories about our parents when they were little in Senegal and in Baltimore. Mommy says how lucky we are to African Americans.

My name is Eric. I live in a tall apartment building in New York City with my mommy and daddy and our pet parrot called Pepi.

My daddy and all my grandparents came to New York from Puerto Rico. Daddy showed me how to find Puerto Rico on a map. It is an island in the ocean not too far from Florida. Mommy, Pepi, and I were born in New York City.

When Daddy comes home from work we play our favorite sport, baseball. It's hard to catch the ball when I wear my heavy winter jacket. Last winter Mommy and Daddy took me to Puerto Rico for a vacation. I learned lots of things about my heritage.

Daddy grew up where there are palm trees, like in Florida. And it is warm every day in Puerto Rico, so warm that people can always play baseball without a jacket. Everyone in Puerto Rico speaks Spanish, just like my grandparents.

In our home we speak two languages, English and Spanish. Even Pepi speaks English and Spanish. My friends, Irma and Glen, speak Spanish too. They come from another island called the Dominican Republic. If you come from a place where people speak Spanish, you are called a Hispanic. We call ourselves Hispanic Americans because part of us is Spanish and part of us is American. In my city, there are lots of Hispanics from many different countries, but they all speak the same language, Spanish.

Sometimes Irma and Glen stop by to help me with my chores. We clean beans, then set them in a pot of water overnight to make them soft. Then Mommy shows me how to crush garlic for sofrito, which is a mixture of Spanish spices that will go into the bean pot.

The next night, Mommy, Daddy, and I have our favorite dinner, arroz con pollo y habichuelas. It's rice with chicken and beans. Mommy and I are good cooks.

When my parents are at work, my mommy's mommy, Nana Carmen, takes me shopping at the carniceria, the Spanish meat market. I get to pay.

"Muchas gracias," the grocer says to thank me. To answer, I say, "De nada," which means "don't mention it."

My nana Carmen visits me every single day. At bedtime she comes to our home just to kiss me good night. Sometimes she shows me her tiny hurts so I can tell her my special Spanish healing poem:

Sana, sana, sana.

Si no te curas hoy,

Te curas manana.

Heal, heal, heal.

If you don't heal today,

You'll heal tomorrow.

When Mommy is home from work, she plays Spanish music on the stereo. Then my friends, Mommy, and I dance the merengue. When we hear the music, we shake our hips and move to the beat: one-two, one-two. In Spanish we count like this: uno, dos.

In my family, next to baseball, we love Spanish dances best. When my madrina, that's my godmother, stops in for visit, she dances with us. Sometimes Daddy, Nana Carmen, and my friends' mommy join in.

And Pepi sing, "¡MERENGUE!"

My name in America is April. I also have a Chinese name: Chin, which means "admire" and Lan, which means "orchid."

Both my parents are Chinese and were born in Taiwan. Taiwan is an island on the other side of the world. My papa came to New York without his parents to go to school, and my mama moved here with her family. Because Julius, my older brother, and May, my older sister, and I were born in America, we are called Chinese Americans.

There are many Chinese Americans. But we do not all speak the same Chinese language. The way my family speaks Chinese is called Mandarin.

In Mandarin, I call my daddy baba and my mommy mama. It sounds something like English, but when we write the words they look very different. Another thing that's different in Chinese is that words aren't made with letters. Each word has its own special marks.

During the week we go to public school, but on Saturday we go to Chinese school. There we learn how to speak and write in Chinese, like my parents learned in Taiwan. When I write English letters, I write from the left side of the page to the right. When I write in Chinese, I write from the right to the left. And I write in rows from the top of the page to the bottom. For us Chinese American kids, there are many things to remember.

In Chinese school we also learn a special kind of writing called calligraphy. We use a brush instead of a pen, black ink, and special paper made from stalks of rice. Our teacher shows us the right way to hold the brush.

My favorite part of Chinese school is snack time. Today, Mama made me cold sesame noodles, tsu ma liang mein. I eat them with a fork, but most Chinese people eat their noodles with chopsticks. I'm just learning to eat with chopsticks.

Papa told us that an Italian explorer name Marco Polo discovered noodles in china a long time ago and introduced them to his country.

When Mama brought home takeout, Julius asked if a Chinese explorer discovered pizza in Italy.

Mama and Papa laughed and said, "No."

While we eat our pizza we play a game to test our wits. Papa asks us to look for letters hidden in the picture on the pizza box. Julius sees a V in the pizza man's shoe. May find an L.

Oh, look! I can even see the Chinese letter Ba, in the pizza man's eyebrows. Ba means "eight" in Chinese.

At night when we have finished all our chores and all our homework, we play Chi chiao bang. In America some people call it Tangram. This is a popular game in Taiwan, like checkers is in America. My grandparents and even my great-grandparents played this game. To play, you move seven different shapes to build a new shape. I like to make a pussycat. It is very difficult, but I can do it. Papa says, "Go slowly and think about a cat. After a while your mind will start to run, and you will see the cat in the shapes." He's right.

There is an old Chinese saying, "The older you are, the wiser you become." When I become a grown-up, I will remember to tell this to my family.