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The Immigration Act of 1924 and the Limits of National Hospitality

A law that openly regulates hospitality in the United States is the Immigration Act of 1924; people also call it the Johnson-Reed Act. The initial text of the law says that the purpose is “to limit the immigration of aliens into the United States,” and it started a national quota system that determine how many people from each country could immigrate to the US each year (U.S. Statutes at Large, 1924). The law set immigration limit at 2 percent of the number of people from that nationality already living in the United States (U.S. Statutes at Large, 1924). Because immigration from southern and eastern Europe increased significantly after 1890, using their earlier census year dramatically reduced the number of immigrants allowed from those regions (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian). The law also stopped immigrants who were considered “ineligible for citizenship” from entering the country, which effectively forbid most Asian immigrants. The impact of the Immigration Act of 1924 was not just to reduce immigration overall. Instead, the law created a system that tiered immigrants based on nationality and race (Office of the Historian) By using the 1890 census as the basis for immigration quotas, the policy favored immigrants from northern and western Europe while severely stopping immigration from southern and eastern Europe and almost entirely banning immigration from Asia (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian). This means the law did more than control borders; it reflected specific beliefs about which groups were seen as needed members of American society. In practice, hospitality at the national level was drawn

unevenly. Some people were welcomed more easily, while others were treated as unwanted outsiders

In the class discussions we had about hospitality, we talked about how the idea of hospitality often moves between literal homes and the nation as a kind of “home.” The lecture says describe this idea as the nation deciding who gets “seated at the table” and who gets pushed to the margins. Immigration laws like the Immigration Act of 1924 clearly show this metaphor. The United States can be seen as a house with a door that the government controls. The law determines who can be invited inside, who is only allowed in limited numbers, and who is completely turned away. In this sense, immigration policy is viewed as a legal structure that defines who belongs and who remains an outsider.

This connection between hospitality and rules about entry also looks in James J. Brown’s *Ethical Programs*. Brown argues that systems often act like programmed forms of hospitality that decide who or what can enter a space. These systems may be seen as open, but they are structured by rules that filter arrivals and control access (Brown). Immigration laws operate in a similar way. The Immigration Act of 1924 created a system that looked like a neutral administrative process visas, quotas, and inspections but that system still made decisions about which people were allowed into the national “network.” (Brown) In other words, hospitality was not simply about generosity. It became a structured program that controlled access to the country.

Looking at this law from my perspective as a Nigerian American also changes how I understand hospitality in the United States. Growing up in an immigrant family, I often heard the United States viewed as a welcoming place where people from different backgrounds can build opportunities. That story of openness is a powerful part of American identity. Eventually after,

learning immigration laws like the Immigration Act of 1924 shows that hospitality has not always been equally drawn-out to everyone. Instead, the government has historically shaped immigration policies based on ideas about race, nationality, and cultural compatibility.

Although Nigerian immigrants were not the focus of the 1924 law, the policy shows broader patterns that still fuse immigration debates today (Office of the Historian). Laws like this show that national belonging has often been defined through political decisions about who should be included and who should remain outside. For someone like me, whose family roots are in Nigeria, but whose life has been shaped in the United States, this history highlights how access to opportunity can depend on immigration policy. If restrictive immigration systems like the 1924 quotas had remained in place permanently, many immigrant communities that exist in the United States today might never have been able to form or grow.

This law also has had long lasting consequences for immigrant communities and for how Americans understood national identity. By limiting immigration from certain countries and excluding others entirely, the act slowed the growth of many immigrant populations and shaped the demographic structure of the country for decades (National Archives) Based on the National Archives, restrictive immigration laws between the late nineteenth century and mid-twentieth century has influenced the growth of immigrant communities by off-putting family reunification and preventing many people from entering the country. As a result, immigration policy did not only affect individuals who wanted to migrate. It also shaped the size and development of entire cultural communities.

From the perspective of hospitality, the Immigration Act of 1924 gives an important tension between ideals and practice. The United States often promotes an image of itself as a welcoming nation built by immigrants. but laws like this demonstrate that hospitality has often

been selective and restrictive. Instead of simply welcoming newcomers, the government created rules that prioritized certain nationalities and excluded others. This suggests that hospitality at the national level is not only about generosity. It is also about power specifically, the power to decide who is allowed to belong

Overall, the Immigration Act of 1924 shows how legal systems can change the meaning of hospitality in a nation. The law defined who could enter the United States and who could not, and it did so in ways that reflected racial and cultural hierarchies. Even though the national-origins quota system was eventually abolished in 1965, the law remains an important example of how immigration policy can impact who is welcomed and who is excluded. For immigrants and their descendants, including Nigerian Americans like me, this history reminds us that the idea of a welcoming nation has often depended on political choices about who deserves to be included in the national community.

Works Cited

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